THREE

Difference Becomes Antigone

Ungeheuer ist viel. Doch nichts
Ungeheuerer, als der Mensch. (FA 16: 299)

Much is monstrous. Yet nothing
More monstrous than the human.

Though few are like Hölderlin, as Susette Gontard noted, and even fewer like solitary Oedipus, still we all are, unsettling as it is, like Antigone. With a judicious word choice, Hölderlin makes his Chorus of Theban elders suggest as much: as monstrous as she may appear to man in her singular determination, she cannot exceed him in this regard, for nothing is more monstrous than the human.¹ Though Hölderlin had already attempted a translation of the Choral ode in 1800, rendering these lines as “Vieles Gewaltige giebt’s. Doch nichts / Ist gewaltiger als der Mensch” (FA 16: 56: There is much that is powerful. But nothing / Is more powerful than the human), his published translation of 1804 marks a radical shift that forms one of the most striking passages in the entire play: the word that in the remarks on Oedipus had described the monstrous link between human and divine—das Ungeheure, the monstrous—now confirms our uncomfortable likeness to Antigone.² And if we seem eternally tempted to identify with

¹. Modern commentators on Sophocles’ tragedy seem in general to agree with this assessment of Antigone as strange or uncanny. Besides Heidegger, whose reading will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, Luce Irigaray describes her act of burying her brother against the decree of the state as “a perversity,” linking it to her femininity and her relationship to the gods of the underworld; Lacan, arguing more closely along Hölderlin’s line of reasoning (as we shall see), discusses the extent to which that act appears “inhuman” to us. Irigaray, “The Eternal Irony of the Community,” trans. Gillian C. Gill, rpt. in Feminist Interpretations of Hegel (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1996), 49; Lacan 263.

². For a comparison of the two translations of the passage, see Louth 159–67.
Antigone’s plight, if much of the modern history of her tragedy’s reception reflects that effort, this may turn out to be the resemblance that drives the temptation in a most fundamental sense. A resemblance colored by shades of both universality and particularity—though we are all “ungeheuer,” Antigone’s own haunting justification for burying her brother Polynices insists upon a distance at its very ground—that monstrosity marks a cipher that will soon reveal itself in Hölderlin’s translation and reading to be strangely familiar. While our fascination with Hölderlin’s Oedipus has everything to do with his particular solitude, coded as a distance from that which can be grasped as exemplarily or timelessly human, the unique solitude with which Antigone moves toward her chosen death is exposed by Hölderlin’s Chorus to inhabit each and every subject.3

Although they were conceived as part of a larger project and cannot easily be separated within his body of work, it is nonetheless productive to consider what makes this text distinct from the translation and remarks on Oedipus. (In his translation of the translations, Constantine reflects on the greater difficulty of Hölderlin’s Oedipus compared with his Antigone.) Because this second translation shifts our focus from the exposure of pure difference in language and figure to a register that involves the modern subject more intimately in the tragic situation, the question of transitions comes into play: How does the confrontation with ancient text affect a modern subject? To what extent can the translation itself reflect the conflicts inherent in that temporal and conceptual crossing? On the whole, despite being involved in translating from the Greek throughout most of his productive life, Hölderlin made few comments on the practice in his theoretical writings; in this text, however—starting with the passage above—it becomes possible to map out a theory of how the significance of Greek tragedy in a modern register might be inseparable from the effects of its translation. Ultimately Hölderlin’s translation achieves something of a performance of transition as such, not only as a problem of translation but as an exposure of the radical instability of modern subjectivity.

Antigone of Thebes, the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, sister of Eteocles, Polynices, and Ismene, acknowledges only one task at the beginning of her tragedy, one that she is determined to meet regardless of the consequences. In the aftermath of the battle waged by her brothers against one

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3. Lacan’s reading of the tragedy also takes note of this disquietude mixed with familiarity brought on by the figure of Antigone, but underlines at the same time the power of undeniable attraction that the discomfort engenders: “… it is Antigone herself who fascinates us, Antigone in her unbearable splendor. She has a quality that both attracts and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us [nous interdit]; this terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us” (Lacan 247).
another, one protecting the city and the other attacking it, both have fallen. Creon, as acting ruler of Thebes, decrees that one brother, Eteocles, will be honored in death for his heroism while the other, Polynices, will be punished for his betrayal of the city; rather than being buried within the community, his body will be left to wild dogs and birds. Yet Antigone is determined to offer Polynices a proper burial, even though that act disobeys Creon’s law; plainly unconcerned with the fact of that disobedience, she acts even as she prepares to face the inevitable repercussions for that action. Even after Creon has sentenced her to her own death for doing so, she makes it clear that she had no other choice.

No other figure on the stage claims to agree with Antigone’s decision, and no one else is a party to it. Though Karl Reinhardt has taken note of the special solitude characterizing all of Sophocles’ heroes—the abandonment that all are ultimately forced to recognize⁴—that Antigone’s solitude may be most special of all. To be sure, her situation presents a compelling ethical dilemma, a universally felt tension, perhaps, between being good, if “the Good is what the Law says,”⁵ and being loyal to a brother who otherwise has no one to defend his position. Yet a closer look at her moving words upon entering the tomb reveal not universality but something strangely other, for they form an elegy to that brother alone:

Nun, Polynikes,

Indem ich deke deinen Leib, erlang’ ich diß,
Obgleich ich dich geehrt, vor Wohlgesinnten.
Nie nemlich, weder, wenn ich Mutter
Von Kindern wäre, oder ein Gemahl
Im Tode sich verzehret, häß’ ich mit Gewalt,
Als wolt’ ich einen Aufstand, dies errungen.
Und welchem Geseze sag’ ich diß zu Dank?
Wär’ ein Gemahl gestorben, gäb’ es andre,
Und auch ein Kind von einem andern Manne,
Wenn diesen ich umarmt. Wenn aber Mutter
Und Vater schläft, im Ort der Todten beides,
Stehts nicht, als wüchs’ ein ander Bruder wieder.
Nach solchem Geseze hab’ ich dich geehrt . . . (FA 16: 359: 936–49)

⁴. For Reinhardt, the “Sophoclean situation”—the conflict that develops on multiple levels within the tragedy—involves above all the hero’s recognition of his own utter solitude. Reinhardt 1947, 10.

⁵. Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, x. Lacan has pointed out the similarity between Creon’s position as arbiter of the law and Kant’s articulation of the forms of practical reason (259).
Now, Polynices,
Covering your corpse I have come to this,
Though in well-minded eyes I honoured you.
For never had I either been a mother
Of children or if in death a husband
Had lain rotting would I with force,
As though wanting revolt, have brought this off.
And to what law do I say thanks for this?
A husband dying there would be other husbands
And even children by another man,
If I embraced that man. But when the mother
And father sleep both in the place of death
It cannot be another brother will grow.
According to that law I honoured you. (Constantine 98)

Here is the claim that shocked Goethe, that Lacan declared a “scandal,” that in its stark simplicity resists so much of what is held dear in the community of humans organized around Christian declarations of universal love and charity: Antigone values her brother, this brother, above all others, because unlike all others she regards his particularity as irreplaceable and his ethical position as otherwise indefensible. In justifying her actions before the Theban community she invokes no other law than this one, which applies to their relationship alone. At no point in her tragedy does Antigone claim to stand for anyone but herself and her own, particular, fallen brother. Not even Ismene, who offers her advice to Antigone in their exchange in the very first scene, may take part in the relationship that her sister defends, and Hölderlin’s translation underscores this insistent solitude:

Magst du so etwas sagen, hass’ ich dich,
Hasst auch dich der Gestorbene mit Recht.
Laß mich aber und meinen irren Rat
Das Gewaltige leiden. (FA 16: 273: 95–98)

If you can say that and the like, I hate you,
Also the dead man hates you and is right to.
But let me and my errant counsel
Suffer the violent/the powerful.

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Yet to leave Antigone to suffer her fate alone has hardly ever been as self-evident as she would wish here, as countless revisions of her tragedy and invocations of her character in every conceivable context evince. Nor was Hölderlin any less susceptible to her allure; his first attempt at translating the second choral ode goes back five years previous to the publication of the Sophocles project, to 1799. However, the particular attraction of this “most Greek of tragedies,” as Lacoue-Labarthe calls Antigone in contrast to Oedipus, must have lain for Hölderlin in its sheer conceptual distance from modernity, its status as “not ‘reconstitutable’—if not wholly untransposable” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 220). While Oedipus acts excessively in his reliance upon logos—a point of departure more recognizable to a modern audience—Antigone calls upon laws ancient and unwritten even in Sophocles’s time. And Hölderlin, to a far greater extent than many contemporary readers, seems to have understood the importance of maintaining this distinction. Rather than coaxing Antigone into a form that would resonate with the experience of modern subjectivity, Hölderlin’s translation and remarks preserve in their central figure a difference that remains unquestionably alone, thwarting readers who would seek to make an example of her—that is, until Antigone exposes difference itself to be oddly exemplary, even as she continues to claim it as her very own.

Indeed, it is precisely within this exposure of exemplarity in difference that Hölderlin locates the special resonance of Antigone’s tragedy for modernity: on one hand in what one critic has called its enactment of the “tragedy of being human,” but at the same time in its strict particularity, its insistence that the pivotal act to which her tragedy bears witness has in its essence nothing to do with anyone else. This sentiment already emerges in the passage cited at the start of this chapter, drawn from one of the most discussed passages in any Greek tragedy. While most translators fashion out of the second choral ode a paean to the magnitude of humankind in the face of adversity, Hölderlin’s rendering guides the proceedings of the tragedy in

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8. Hölderlin first reflects upon Antigone as an exemplary figure in his philosophical fragments on religion at approximately the same time.

9. Kathleen Wright, “Heidegger’s Hölderlin and the Mo(u)rning of History,” Philosophy Today 37: 4 (Winter 1993): 430. Wright adds “among the Greeks,” which will become unnecessary in a discussion of _das Unheimliche_ as Heidegger poses it with respect to Hölderlin; the translation from Greece to modernity even doubles the experience of this notion of monstrosity.

10. Compare, for example the Loeb edition, translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones: “Many things are formidable, and none more formidable than man!” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994):35. In the introduction to his translation of Antigone, Robert Fagles describes the ode as “celebrat[ing] Man’s progress and powers” (Fagles 42); meanwhile, his translation captures some of the


12. See also Darien Shanske’s discussion of the concept of deinon from its pretragic manifestations in Homer to its role in the historical writings of Thucydides. Shanske argues that for Sophocles, the relation of the human to deinon is “not just a question but a leitmotiv, that is, a question that must be answered.” Thucydides and the Philosophical Origins of History (Cambridge 2006), 85.

strosity. If by valuing her brother uniquely and refusing any other earthly contingency Antigone approaches the limits of what is commonly understood to be human nature, this statement’s open appeal to the monstrosity of humankind indicates that the rest of us might share her taste for transgression. Indeed, Hölderlin’s adjectival phrases throughout the passage emphasize the disturbance caused by the actions of humankind, continually marking contrasts between the untouched, raw status of nature and the ambition and industry of humans:

Und der Himmlischen erhabene Erde,
Die unverderbliche, unermüdete,
Reibt er auf; mit dem strebenden Pfluge,
Von Jahr zu Jahr.

And the noble earth of the gods in heaven
The unspoilable, unweary,
He rips up with the striving plough
From year to year. (Constantine 81; trans. modified)

Hölderlin’s use of the term *aufreiben* for the Greek *apotribo* points up with intense physicality the negative repercussions of human ambition; *aufreiben*, to tear up or ream out, implies the annihilation of its object, here the “unperishable” earth. The form of the passage redoubles this destructive intensity, as Hölderlin modifies the tonal continuity of the passage in Greek (*aphthitoton, akamatan apotruetai*) in favor of a visual and acoustic disruption: he begins with a pattern similar to the Greek (*unverderblich, unermüdet*), only to break it with the phrase “reibet er auf,” in which a verb with a separable prefix (*aufreiben*) is itself literally torn in two.

Hölderlin’s rendering certainly demonstrates his unusually keen comprehension of the ambiguities inherent in both the language and the worldview of the ancient Greeks, yet there is more at stake here than a “correct” translation. *Deinon*, which Hölderlin translates elsewhere and at other times as “das Gewaltige” (signifying, more univocally, the powerful or the great) now disturbs in the very act of signifying; its translation into the ambiguous

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14. Hölderlin begins here as well, translating the passage in 1799 as “Vieles Gewaltige giebt’s. Doch nichts Gewaltiger, als der Mensch” (There is much that is powerful. Yet nothing as powerful as the human being). Compare K. W. F. Solger’s translation from 1824: “Vieles Gewalt’ge lebt, und doch / Nichts gewaltiger, denn der Mensch . . . ” (Des Sophokles Tragodien [Berlin 1808], 159).

15. Griffith and others point out the oxymoron of this passage in Greek, in which man wears out the unwearying earth (Griffith 186; see also Joan O’Brien, *Guide to Sophocles’ Antigone* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978], 54).
“ungeheuer” produces an effect of foreignness in the same gesture that ought to render it comprehensible. At the same time, Greek wordplay (the oxymoron of man wearing out the unwearying earth) gives way to a translation that performs visually and aurally what it also represents conceptually. In a striking enactment of what his remarks will ultimately explore, translation begins to take action here, to speak its own name even as it stands in for an other that will not be silenced; for rather than approximating (and thereby flattening) the Greek text in terms unproblematic to a modern context, the translation maintains and even intensifies the disquieting movement, staged in tragedy, through which man will become unrecognizable to himself: Much is monstrous, but nothing is more monstrous than the human.

To be sure, this choral passage is not the first place where Hölderlin articulates the problem of accounting for an unrecognizable element within the self. As a host of Hölderlin scholars have noted, his December 1801 letter to friend Böhlendorff already invokes the imperative of approaching that which is one’s own, a lesson that is an infinitely greater challenge than the encounter with the foreign: “But that which is one’s own must be learned just as well as the foreign. . . . The free use of that which is one’s own is the most difficult” (FA 16: 16). However, the remarks on Antigone, completed nearly three years later, extend this point to an unsettling (and unsettled) conclusion, indicating that the shock of exposure to one’s own “character” may reveal the consequence of this difficult lesson in the simple discovery that one is not at all “one” with oneself.

Der kühnste Moment eines Taglaufs oder Kunstwerks ist, wo der Geist der Zeit und Natur, das Himmlische, was den Menschen ergreift, und der Gegenstand, für welchen er sich interessirt, am wildesten gegeneinander stehen [. . .] In diesem Momente muß der Mensch sich am meisten festhalten, deswegen steht er auch da am offensten in seinem Charakter. (FA 16: 412).

The boldest moment in the course of a day or a work of art comes when the spirit of time and nature, the divine/heavenly that seizes hold of the human being, and the object in which he is interested are most wildly opposed to one another. [. . .] At that moment the human being must keep the firmest hold on himself, for which reason he also stands most openly there in his character. (Constantine 114; trans. modified)

Whether it happens in the work of art or the course of an ordinary day, Hölderlin’s subject finds herself not only isolated but suspended in a gap between her own experience of the phenomenal world (“the object in which he is interested”) and the divine spirit of time and space that frames that experience (“the spirit of time and nature”). However, while the former represents the subject’s “interest”—the object that she herself has determined, “her” other—the force of the latter guarantees that this appropriative gesture is eternally accompanied by a disruption that seizes the subject and shows her, otherwise, the extent to which that other exceeds her.

Hölderlin’s Antigone, precisely insofar as it is at once tragedy and translation, proposes to make that event happen; exposing the subject’s character will demand the effects of both separate dynamics. Although the remarks on Oedipus Tyrannus similarly emphasize the hero’s solitude in the context of the tragedy, they leave aside the crucial question of how translation itself may become involved in that process of exposure. In effect, the formidable temporal lag between Sophocles’ text and Hölderlin’s age itself becomes a player, as characters’ words mark not a form of privileged access but a glimpse into the experience of transition as such. While Hölderlin’s friend and classmate, G. W. F. Hegel, produces an account which places Antigone on one side of an ethical impasse in the ascent towards universal Spirit, then, Hölderlin’s version of the tragedy (published three years before Hegel’s Phenomenology) anticipates a different ethics that tragedy and translation together have the potential to enact. In this model difference becomes Antigone; that is, the interplay between familiar and foreign that the heroine embodies in the text—not coincidentally, the exchange that also describes the relationship between original and translation—defines, suits, and illuminates her as a source of potentially limitless fascination. And as a final consequence, it becomes the modern subject as well.

Long before Hölderlin’s remarks begin to sketch the outline of this difference expressed in translation, she is there. And some of the most compelling moments of the translation actively nourish a lasting fascination with her, the mysterious girl who has for so long brought this tragedy to life. Unlike the necessary distancing that informed the reading of Oedipus, however, Antigone’s allure is meant directly to engage the subject who makes contact with it, seizing him with the force of an ancient passion returning—perhaps, as Hölderlin will soon specify, through nothing more than the utterance of a single word. Just as it seizes the Chorus, which soon enough has little choice but to look on, through tears aroused from a distant and forgotten source, as a figure roams its field of vision like a wandering spirit.
Jezt aber komm’ ich, eben, selber, aus
Dem Gesetz. Denn ansehen muß ich diß, und halten kann ich
Nicht mehr die Quelle der Tränen,
Da in das alles schweigende Bett
Ich seh’ Antigonä wandeln. (FA 16: 349: 830–34)

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.

Early in the remarks on Antigone, Hölderlin reiterates a crucial element of his argument from the remarks on Oedipus by insisting that the “lawful calculus” (gesezlicher Kalkul) fundamental to tragic form must be reproduced in modern terms, culminating in the caesura that marks the balance between two irreconcilable halves. In this passage from the translation, however, we seem to have reached a space in which laws no longer apply. Before the vision recognized by my very own eye—for I must look at this—even I myself am brought outside of the system of laws through which I constitute myself, and hence I myself am shattered. In fact, I do it to myself, ich, eben, selber; echoed in the jagged rhythm of the Chorus’s lines, culminating in the visually and aurally arresting “aus / Dem Gesetz,” the disturbance emerges not from without but from within the subject who sees Antigone enter her tomb. This production of an internal “outside” is clearly distant from Lessing’s influential reformulation of tragic catharsis, in which the viewing subject identifies with the figure onstage through pity and its self-reflexive component, fear. If the possibility of identifying with the tragic heroine in Lessing’s view is contingent upon our recognition of her likeness to us (and even the extent to which we “like” her), the attraction that the Chorus describes here does not replicate that movement into the sphere of familiarity. Rather, a process is initiated in the opposite direction: because it is

17. “Die Regel, das kalkulable Gesetz der Antigonä verhält sich zu dem des Ödipus, wie _/___ zum ___/___, so daß sich das Gleichgewicht mehr vom Anfang gegen das Ende, als vom Ende gegen den Anfang zu neigt” (FA 16: 411) (The rule, the calculable law of the Antigone relates to that of Oedipus as __/___ to ___/___, so that the balance leans more from the beginning towards the end than from the end towards the beginning).

18. In his 1948 adaptation of Hölderlin’s Antigonä, Bertolt Brecht accentuates the rhythmic caesura of these lines—“Jetzt aber komm ich, eben, selber/Aus dem Takte” (Now even I myself am put off the rhythm)—while inexplicably failing to retain the formal line break that performs it. See Brecht, Die Antigone des Sophokles, 44.
impossible to tear one’s eyes from the sight of her, we must follow Antigone, like the Chorus, “outside of the law.” Something other than identification brings one outside of the comprehensible here, and not only as an effect of tragic form and poetic language, where one would expect to find it after his remarks on *Oedipus*. To be sure, that resonance of form is again essential to the tragedy’s potential for affirming an uncrossable distance between subject and world, self and other; however, an equally powerful kind of difference comes to be expressed directly by the fascinating and haunting figure we see before us: *Ich seh’ Antigonä wandeln*. The German word “wandeln” refers here to her movement into the tomb, but it also denotes change, thus evoking the idea of a crossing from life into the “all-silent bed” of death. What brings one “outside of the law” here—hence beyond the potential for understanding or “grasping” (*begreifen*) that underlies the speculative effort—is precisely this captivating vision confronting the Chorus, the vision of a wandering, changing Antigone. Thus it cannot wrench its tearful eyes from the sight of her, despite that sight’s evocation of something almost chilling, something so marked by the allure of its difference that Heidegger will eventually describe it as “unheimlich”: *For I must look at this*. The Chorus is not alone in its bewilderment, for the reader of Hölderlin’s remarks on the tragedy cannot help but find herself similarly unsettled in facing the density of these articulations. In this sense, translation and interpretation also initiate a movement “outside of the law” in the challenging language of this *Antigone*. While in *Oedipus* Hölderlin allows text to decenter itself through translation and form, disrupting and endlessly deferring the dialectical resolution that other modern readers would wish to give it, here the word and its form affect the subject directly, with translation as the vehicle of that effect. As Hölderlin theorizes it in the remarks, it is ultimately the word that seizes (“ergreift”) the subject, compelling it to murder, instigating tragedy; and the experience through translation of this word’s force and its proximity to death both undermines the solid ground on which the subject believes itself to be standing and establishes that vertiginous difference itself as constitutive. Thus every subject becomes at once as particular, as exemplary and as monstrous as Antigone.\(^{19}\) This, as we will see, brings

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\(^{19}\) Derrida’s discussion of the singular and the universal is significant in this context, see for example “Passages—from Traumatism to Promise” (in *Points... Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. E. Weber, trans. P. Kamuf [Stanford University Press, 1995], 378). In his discussion of the date here as well as in *Shibboleth*, singularity is both kept and lost by virtue of the fact that a unique moment repeated, made readable is no longer entirely unique; a similar structure would correspond to the figure of Antigone here, except that in this case what is readable and iterable must stand alongside that which cannot be read but imposes itself onto the text nevertheless. Derrida also treats this element of unreadability in the same interview by introducing—like Hölderlin—the figure of the monster (385ff.).
the whole operation all the more proximate to that space between life and death in which Antigone will choose to linger.

Strictly speaking, the chronology of my discussion of Hölderlin’s reflections on tragedy is both right and wrong; although the translation of Oedipus appears first in print in 1804, Antigone makes her first entrance into Hölderlin’s writings several years earlier. She enters the scene, like the Oedipus figure of “In lovely blueness . . .,” not yet in the specific context of Sophoclean tragedy but rather as a disruption within a moment of philosophical posturing by the poet, again with respect to the nature of speculative reflection.

This initial link to Antigone appears in a period in which Hölderlin, first studying with Fichte in Jena and then living in close proximity to Hegel in Frankfurt, was concerned not only with poetic production but also the very current problem of accounting for a fundamental self-recognition. As he describes a new set of philosophical letters to Niethammer early in 1796, he intends to coax the conflictual tones of reflective subjectivity into pulling a disappearing act.

In the philosophical letters I wish to find the principle that will explain for me the separations in which we think and exist, that however is also capable of making the conflict vanish, that conflict between subject and object, between our self and the world, yes even between reason and revelation.

The unlikely image of conflict being made to vanish into thin air suggests that even at this early juncture, Hölderlin poses these questions with more desire than conviction; not only must the principle he seeks elucidate the nature of division but must also, in order to repair that division, perform something like a feat of magic. The desire to formulate a philosophical system thus continues to be irritated by his awareness of an ineffaceable distance defining self-consciousness. As a result, in the philosophical letters he mentions to Niethammer, Hölderlin resorts to a bizarre grammar of

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20. Hölderlin first confronts that unsettling choral ode from the Antigone (“Ungeheuer ist viel . . .”) in 1800. At that time, his translation is closer to the traditional one: “Vieles gewaltige gibt's. Doch nichts / Ist gewaltiger, als der Mensch” (FA 16, 56).


relativity in which a subject’s approach to the unreflected absolute is never
defined by what it is or is not, but rather by that which it is constantly
becoming: “then there exists, in every sphere that is proper to him, a more
than necessity-based, higher life, thus a more than necessity-based, a more
infinite satisfaction (Pfau 1988, 90; trans. modified) (so gibt es für ihn,
in jeder ihm eigentümlichen Sphäre, ein mehr als nothdürftiges, ein höheres
Leben, also eine mehr als nothdürftige, eine unendlichere Befriedigung [StA
IV: 275]). As such this approach is not different from a rigorously dialecti-
cal structure of patient ascension toward absolute “satisfaction.” However,
while for Hölderlin aesthetic representation had previously formed, at least
in his direct address of the problem, the means to enable the disappearance
of conflict, in this text that same work of art—specifically, tragedy—will
exemplify conflict’s permanence. Within this context, Antigone appears as
a foreign entity, wholly unassimilable to the thinking subject who is con-
fronted with her.

... those infinite, more than necessary relations of life can be thought, to
be sure, but not merely thought; thought does not exhaust them ... and if
there exist unwritten divine laws of which Antigone speaks, ... then they
are insufficient insofar as they are grasped, represented only by themselves
and not in life because ... the law and the particular world in which it
is enacted interrelate more infinitely; and because the law, even if it were
universal for civilized people, could never be conceived of abstractly with-
out a particular case unless one were to take away from it its peculiarity, its
intimate relation with the sphere in which it is enacted. (Pfau 1988, 91;
trans. modified)23

In Hölderlin’s view, Antigone’s unwritten laws cannot be grasped or
even thought in the abstract, outside of their own lost particularity; mod-
ern thought and religion simply cannot account for what emerges in this
representation of a tragic hero, for a difference that cannot be known in the
terms constituting a speculative approach to knowledge, even knowledge of

23. “… jene unendlicheren mehr als nothwendigen Beziehungen des Lebens können zwar auch
gedacht, aber nur nicht blos gedacht werden; der Gedanke erschöpft sie nicht ... und wenn es un-
geschriebene göttliche Gesetze gibt, von denen Antigóná spricht, ... so sind sie, in so fern sie blos
für sich und nicht im Leben begriffen werden, vorgestellt werden, unzulänglich, einmal weil ... das
Gesetz, und die besondere Welt in der es ausgeübt wird, unendlicher verbunden ist und eben deswegen
das Gesetz, wenn es auch gleich ein für gesittete Menschen allgemeines wäre, doch niemals ohne einen
besonderen Fall, niemals abstract gedacht werden könnte, wenn man ihm nicht seine Eigentümlich-
keit, seine innige Verbundenheit mit der Sphäre in der es ausgeübt wird, nehmen wollte” (StA IV:
277).
“difference.” Understanding her law as universally legitimate thus becomes impossible, her experience too particular to be grasped as fuel for the dialectical force of history. Tragedy reveals not proximity but rather the formidable presence of a barrier to the absolute in the structure of thought itself. The dynamics of endless approach, already familiar in Hölderlin’s reflections by this time, are replicated in the text of Antigone by the permanent division between us and her, between familiar self and a radically foreign other.

This view of the inaccessible laws that govern Antigone’s actions remains largely unchanged for Hölderlin, even as his approach to tragedy continues to evolve from philosophical reflection to translation. Despite his emphasis on “lawful calculus” in the remarks on Oedipus, Hölderlin’s Antigone demonstrates that this evolution will remain distant from the question of legitimacy in any conventional sense. It is with respect to this question that the differences between his and Hegel’s accounts come to a distinct point. While Hegel lets Antigone and Creon exemplify the ethical divide between the equally legitimate duties of family and community, the divine and human laws embodied by woman and man, Hölderlin manages to call into question the demand of legitimacy as such.

In the sixth chapter of the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel situates the tragic universe as a vital step within the dialectical advance toward universal spirit, where the ethical conflicts that both define and divide the community are confronted in stark and brutal terms. Every human being within the tragic universe has a legitimate duty upon which he or she, of necessity upholding one or the other aspect of the ethical order, must act without reservation; the human law of the community and state is consciously maintained by man, whereas the divine law, that of the family, is intuitively, unconsciously preserved by the woman.24 The guardian of the divine law—for Hegel, the sister—has as her only responsibility precisely that which Antigone is compelled to perform: in the name of an individual helplessly facing the threat of a return to pure universality in death, she must see to it that this death become an act of consciousness, that the very destruction of the body not be left to nature but be transformed into “something done” (ein Getanes).25 Although in carrying out this duty the sister violates the human law, this in no way alleviates its necessity. Indeed, as in Antigone’s case,

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24. Hegel’s structure of opposing laws is, however, far from simple division. The two sides of the law and the groups they represent cannot be seen as mutually exclusive in the lives of individuals but rather intersect necessarily and constantly, that law which constitutes the positive side for each individual determines his or her fundamental duty. See Chanter, “Antigone’s Dilemma,” 138.

25. G. W. F. Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952), 321. Subsequent page number references will be given in parentheses directly after citations.
precisely when her brother is excluded from the community and denied a public funeral before the state, it is the duty of the sister alone, made necessary by bonds of blood, to make death into an act of consciousness, to ensure that her brother's singular place will be maintained at least in memory.26

Ostensibly at least, these two divisions of the law remain equally legitimate for Hegel, because they represent the two equally necessary elements of the ethical order: family and community, woman and man, singularity and universality. What is more, though Antigone may be guilty of violating the law of the state, that guilt is inevitable; in the Hegelian system, pure innocence only equals inertia, in the manner of nothing but a stone.27 In fact, as it turns out the crime itself is unavoidable, irreversible in any case; as Derrida asserts in Glas, by the very nature of the Hegelian system that introduces sexual difference as intrinsic conflict, the crime constitutes a “fatal necessity.”28 There is no other means to act within the ethical world but through crime. Thus Creon, too, must act criminally, and even if Hegel does not discuss this prospect explicitly, the tragedy itself supports it; in the end, he, too, will acknowledge his guilt and bear his punishment in the loss of his entire family. Merely by acting, both man and woman are guilty by definition; meanwhile, ethical consciousness benefits dialectically from the eventual restoration of an equilibrium which Hegel calls “justice” (Gerechtigkeit).29

 Yet even as Hegel insists that the two sides are equal in their culpability as well as their legitimacy, his conception of that guilt takes on various forms in his use of tragic material. In fact, one man and one woman in particular, Oedipus and his daughter Antigone, embody the limits of those forms in a manner that curiously seems to contradict his previously universal distinctions of gender. Citing a passage from Antigone’s final lament before she enters the tomb out of which she will never return, Hegel argues that her guilt is purer (“reiner”) than her father’s, insofar as she is fully aware at the

26. The other possibility in death, a “dishonoring” operation of unconscious desires, would constitute, as Derrida points out in Glas, desecration and decomposition “at the mercy of every lower individuality and the forces of abstract material elements,” an expression that would destroy the dead one in his being für sich, would leave him an “empty singular”; this desire is suppressed by the act of the sister for her brother [145]. Derrida also links this “dishonoring operation” to what he calls a “probably cannibal desire” that the family must suppress by taking on this duty.

27. Hegel, Phänomenologie, 334: “Unschuldig ist daher nur das Nichttun wie das Sein eines Steines, nicht einmal eines Kindes.”


29. Lacan openly questions this possibility of reconciliation, echoing the critical voice of Erwin Rohde, who argues against the view that the outcome of tragedy is “ennobling”; in disagreement with what he calls “conventional literary interpretation.” Rohde, Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 431. See also Lacan 249ff.
Because she can acknowledge the certainty of her crime, yet still proceeds with her duty under the divine law, Antigone represents a higher level of self-consciousness than her father Oedipus, who remained blind to the possibility that his actions, which in this model appear “right” according to his duty to the human law, might inscribe into him a terrible, unavoidable guilt: 30 “the ethical consciousness is more complete, its guilt more inexcusable, if it knows beforehand the law and the power which it opposes, if it takes them to be violence and wrong, to be ethical merely by accident, and, like Antigone, knowingly commits the crime” (Miller 284). 31

Miller’s translation poses a semantic problem for nonreaders of German here by presenting Antigone’s “reinere Schuld” (literally, purer guilt) as “more inexcusable.” The question of “excuse” does not actually arise in Hegel’s account. What is clear in the German text is that Antigone’s act represents a more complete ethical consciousness than her father Oedipus, to whom Hegel obviously alludes here. Since in Hegel’s system one is guilty as soon as one acts, acting with awareness is more productive, for then one may turn a temporary, personal loss into a gain in the universal direction of Spirit. 32

Her guilt involves two independent movements: on the one hand, she acts without question in the name of the divine law, which she has (been) chosen to represent; on the other hand, she recognizes that another (in this system, equally just) side exists, a law of the state that she grasps but nevertheless must violate for the sake of the laws of the family. 33 Still, Derrida emphasizes

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30. This sharply contrasts Hegel’s view of effective tragedy with Aristotle's; while it is clear, of course, that for Hegel the question of guilt extends far beyond the scope of Aristotle’s poetics, still it is interesting to note the exact reversal of Aristotle’s view of Oedipus as the most successful tragedy precisely because the hero remains until the end completely unaware of his guilt.

31. “... das sittliche Bewußtsein ist vollständiger, seine Schuld reiner, wenn es das Gesetz und die Macht vorher kennt, der es gegenüber tritt, sie für Gewalt und Unrecht, für eine sittliche Zufälligkeit nimmt, und wissentlich, wie Antigone, das Verbrechen begeht” [336]).

32. Antigone’s act thus illuminates, in Derrida’s words, an opposition between two laws that is of the order of universality, even if the crime is committed in the name of singularity (Glas, 173). Within Hegel’s logic of sexual difference, as Judith Butler notes, she thus acts more like a man. See Butler 8f.

33. Binder, by contrast, valorizes Antigone’s act as divinely inspired and condemns Creon’s as excessive, thus curiously naming him as the hero whose hubris leads to his ruin. “Ein gotterfüllter und
that Antigone remains “in the middle of the ascent,” that her act does not yet constitute “ethical plenitude”; while her recognition for itself represents an advance toward self-conscious understanding of the ethical system as evolving unity of opposing factors, she herself remains only the “figure of the fall”—the individual who disobeys even as she obeys, who even as she performs this advance also ensures that the subsequent fall on both sides of the law will restore equilibrium through justice (Glas 174f.). Nevertheless, for Hegel the consequences of both her act and her acknowledgment of it offer signs that, in its advancement toward universal Spirit, the ethical realm of community and individual is certainly getting somewhere.

To be sure, Antigone’s acknowledgment of her own guilt here does not exonerate her, since her act still reflects the disruptive status of woman-kind—Hegel’s famous internal enemy, the “eternal irony of the community”—that unsettles the community’s stability from within. One might wonder, however, if another force of irony doesn’t play havoc with Hegel’s own approach to the universal conflict of laws he presents; for precisely in this turn to the tragedy that ought to exemplify a crucial step in his progression, the structure of his argument begins likewise to unravel. That single reference to Antigone’s recognition of her guilt is taken badly out of context, while Hölderlin’s translation of the passage emphasizes that context as crucial to any inquiry into Antigone’s relation to the law. Citing a passage from Antigone’s final lament (his only direct reference to Sophocles’ text in translation), Hegel notes her recognition that an act of obedience to her “intuition” of the divine law would at the same time violate the human law that governs the community, a recognition brought on by the suffering she endures: “because we suffer we acknowledge that we have erred” (Miller 284). In contrast to the apparent clarity of Hegelian oppositions, however, for Hölderlin Antigone’s statement expresses neither intuitive conviction nor acceptance of inevitable guilt, but rather bitter frustration with the gods and their power to force their laws arbitrarily upon the acts of individuals.

Was soll ich Arme noch zu himmlischen
Gewalten schaun? Wen singen der Waffengenossen?
Da ich Gottlosigkeit aus Frömmigkeit empfangen.
Doch wenn nun dieses schön ist vor den Göttern,
So leiden wir und bitten ab, was wir
Gesündiget . . . (359: 958–963; emphasis added)

sein selbstherrlicher Mensch stehen sich gegenüber und also nicht mehr Wille gegen Wille, sondern Wissen gegen Ichsucht, religio gegen Hybris” (Hölderlin und Sophokles: Turmvorträge [Tübingen: Hölderlin-Gesellschaft, 1992], 151).
Poor girl, why look henceforth
To heavenly powers? What comrade sing for help?
Since I from piety got godlessness.
But if this thing is lovely to the gods
*We suffer it and beg forgiveness for*
*How we have sinned.* (Constantine 99; emphasis added)

As we saw in the previous chapter, an inquiry into the problem of exercising free will shapes Hölderlin’s reading and translation of the oracle in *Oedipus*; for Hölderlin, it is not the force of fate or the will of the gods but Oedipus’ own unfortunate interpretation of the oracle that places him on the path of despair. But while Oedipus’ downfall comes with his excessive drive to interpret what ought to have remained general, Antigone is trapped finally by her refusal of the arbitrary exercise of law and punishment: her act is neither sanctioned by the state nor “beautiful to the gods,” and yet still she makes her choice, like Oedipus, without that permission. If her action were beautiful to the gods, circumstances would be simpler, the outcome more conventionally acceptable; she could atone for her sins by suffering and be excused for them. The passage that Hegel cites to establish Antigone’s conscious guilt therefore signifies in Hölderlin’s reading nothing more than her assurance that suffering in a manner pleasing to the gods would constitute (and encompass) atonement; meanwhile, she also recognizes that her own suffering will be far more abysmal. Indeed, Hölderlin locates the foundation of Antigone’s law neither in intuitive adherence nor in strict opposition to *any* law, whether just or arbitrary, human or divine. Rather, his translation points the question of legitimacy in quite another direction.

**Kreon:** Was wagtest du, ein solch Gesetz zu brechen?
**Antigone:** Darum. Mein Zeus berichtete mirs nicht;
Noch hier im Haus das Recht der Todesgötter,
Die unter Menschen das Gesetz begränzet . . . (309: 466–69)

**Creon:** Why did you dare to break a law like that?
**Antigone:** Because. *My* Zeus did not tell it to me;
Nor did the justice of the gods of death,
Here in the house who limit human laws. (Constantine 84; trans. modified)

These lines have inspired some controversy among Hölderlin’s critics, for Antigone’s justification for her action may be understood in different ways.
Neither Zeus nor the gods of the underworld instructed her to follow Creon's law; that much is clear. (This is consistent with the prevalence of negatives in the Greek original [Griffith counts nine negatives in the passage, 200]). However, her position here is not a mere conflation of the laws of “her own” Zeus and those of Hades, as some critics have unproblematically stipulated in citing Hölderlin’s proximity to Hegel’s model on this point.  

Given the dramatic quality of Hölderlin’s punctuation in this passage, in fact, it is possible to read Antigone’s response here in direct defiance of her image in Hegelian eyes: by insisting that she trangressed the law “Darum” (followed by a striking full stop); she refuses to appeal to any formal law at all, only to the “Satzungen,” the unwritten customs or principles that the gods represent and that the law of the state keeps at bay.  

If she is beholden to anything, it is only to rights which remain forever unwritten and untraceable.

In the remarks on Antigone Hölderlin elaborates further in comparing the tragedy’s two protagonists, describing the conflict between Creon and Antigone more precisely as the perception of the law and its absence.

First in what characterises the antitheos, where one, after God’s own mind, acts, as it seems, against god and recognises the spirit of the highest with-
out laws. Then, the pious fear of fate, and with it the honouring of God as something set in law . . . Antigone acting more in the first sense. Creon in the second. (Constantine 116; trans. modified)

Even if Hölderlin’s translation of the relevant passage in the tragedy remains ambiguous, then, here he responds directly to those who would legitimize Antigone’s act as divinely ordained, by introducing a “pious” (fromm) fear that is not Antigone’s impulse but rather Creon’s: he views the divine as gesetzt, grounded both in law and in a sense of destiny. Meanwhile, Antigone embodies an outlaw recognition (gesezlos). (Thus she also leaves the chorus no choice but to follow her “outside of the law.”) She asserts her position in the absence of law, and that position does not claim conventional legitimacy any more than it can contribute to the dialectical advancement of Spirit’s ethical substance. Antigone’s conviction, at least as Hölderlin presents it, leads her elsewhere.

Having moved beyond questions of legitimacy, then, we are left with an empty space at the very heart of this model: while it is evident that the human is equated with the “monstrous” in Hölderlin’s account just as tragic experience is aligned with the experience of being “outside of the law,” that double experience is thus far discernible only in a negative sense, only as that which it is not—the Un-geheuer of the human as un-recognizable, ex-centric, un-speakable. In Hölderlin’s translation both Antigone and her act of defiance are at first couched in words that defy signification, for the messenger bearing the news of Polynices’ burial is clearly at a loss to say anything at all about her:

**Der Bote:** Ich sag’ es dir. Es hat den Todten eben
   Begraben eines, das entkam, die Haut zweimal
   Mit Staub bestreut, und, wies geziemt, gefeiert.
**Kreon:** Was meinst du? Wer hat diß sich unterfangen?
**Der Bote:** Undenklich. Nirgend war von einem Karst
   Ein Schlag; und nicht der Stoß von einer Schaufel,
   Und dicht das Land; der Boden ungegraben;
   Von Rädern nicht befahren. Zeichenlos war
   Der Meister, und wie das der erste Tagesblick
   Anzeigte, kams unhold uns all’ an, wie ein Wunder. (FA 16: 289: 255–64)

**Messenger:** I’ll tell you. Just now something which escaped
   Has buried the dead man, twice sprinkled the skin
With dust, and in the fit way honoured him.

Creon: What do you mean? Who was it dared do this?

Messenger: Unthinkable. Nowhere had any mattock
Gone in or any shovel thrust, the land
Was solid, the earth nowhere dug up;
Not ridden over by wheels. Without sign was
The master, and when the day’s first glimpse denounced it
It seemed monstrous [unhold] to us, like a miracle. (Constantine 78; trans. modified)

Thus Antigone’s act is “unthinkable” from the start. Not only is the messenger at a loss to identify for Creon the one who has done the deed, but that “something” (eines) which has acted is itself inconceivable. And that is not all. The prominent absence of any trace, already so striking in the images of untouched ground, extends to the “master” herself; Antigone does not only leave no sign in this translation, she literally is no sign (“Without sign [Zeichenlos] was / The master”]). The messenger describes her lack of sign or trace as unhold, fiendish or monstrous where the Greek duscheres signifies something that is difficult to handle or manage. The valence of both terms is more unequivocally negative than deinon and Ungeheuer were in the earlier choral passage, but Hölderlin’s choice of unhold here—along with the messenger’s judgment of the events as undenklich, unthinkable—establishes more plainly a relationship between this passage and the earlier reference to monstrosity. Ungeheuer, un-denklich, un-hold: Antigone is pressed firmly into the service of the negative even before she is identified as the one who has left no trace. Just what does Antigone reach? When she finally does appear before Creon and the Chorus, what does her vision inspire? Hölderlin attempts to theorize it, again with a negative signifier: Sophocles’ language, he writes, brings human understanding to wander “amidst the unthinkable” (unter Undenkbarem wandelnd [FA 16: 413]).

As we shall see, it is the responsibility of the translation to sustain that inconceivable moment, that trace of nothing that is visible in Antigone yet monstrous (unhold) to all.

37. The tendency to translate this phrase as “wandering beneath/below the unthinkable” (cf. Pfau 110, and Schmidt 2001, 153) obscures Hölderlin’s image unnecessarily, since “unter” can denote “amongst” or “amidst” as well as “under” or “beneath.”

38. In his reflections on the role of Eros in and for the translated text, Nägele discusses how Antigone is first presented in the text in a “curious mixture of an appeasing familiarity (hê pais) and disconcerting strangeness (ornythos oyn phthoggon).” When she does finally appear to the Chorus, she is described as a “demonic sign” (es daimonion tenai); Hölderlin, in fact, elides that direct description of Antigone as sign by translating the passage as “wie Gottesversuchung” (like a temptation of the gods) (Echoes of Translation, 106).
But what does it mean to produce such a trace in intelligible form? We have seen how Antigone’s act of burying her brother attains universal significance for Hegel, translated into an operation representative of familial duty and legitimized as tacit intuition. By contrast, Hölderlin is more apt to leave Antigone in peace to do what she must.

Laß aber mich und meinen irren Rath
Das Gewaltige leiden. (FA 16: 273: 97–98)

But leave me and my errant counsel
To suffer the powerful/violent.

As we already know, Hölderlin’s Antigone speaks these words in the opening dialogue with Ismene, in which she reveals her determination to disobey Creon’s edict. This time deinon, Hölderlin’s Ungeheuer, is translated as Gewaltiges (the powerful), and even if elsewhere it describes the human being as such, here Antigone states unequivocally that she intends to suffer it alone. But she will not suffer passively. Rather, her suffering is the result of a certain choice (although not exactly of a free will, since Antigone asserts from the start that she has no other choice): leave me to suffer the powerful. Antigone asks for a suffering, asks to endure it, and thus takes it actively upon herself.

The sensible Ismene already knows that her sister’s plan is impossible, and she tells her so: “Gleich Anfangs muß niemand Unthunliches jagen” (FA 16: 273, No one need pursue the impossible from the start). And while every indication is that Antigone knows it as well, that knowledge does not stop her. Nor does the certainty that by pursuing the impossible—by taking on a suffering that no one else will assume—she is acting improperly, against the law of the state and solely in the name of a brother whose identity, as she also knows, might otherwise crumble to dust. Suffering the powerful and the violent implies being exposed to that impossibility, recognizing it as such and taking it on nonetheless.

Nein, denke du, wie dir’s gefällt; doch ihn
Begrab’ ich. Schön ist es hernach, zu sterben.
Lieb werd’ ich bei ihm liegen, bei dem Lieben,
Wenn Heiligs ich vollbracht. (FA 16; 271)

No, you think as you like; but I
Will bury him. To die after is beautiful then
And lovely to lie by him then, my loved one,  
When I’ve done what is holy. (Constantine 73)

While it is arguably possible to discern an erotic tone to this passage in German—which would stand in stark contrast to Hegel’s central assertion that the relation of sister to brother is devoid of desire, hence pure in its ethical obligation—it is perhaps even more striking that the desire expressed by the figure of Antigone here is linked to her suffering (“To die after is beautiful then”). Her desire is to suffer deinon in the name of her brother, and nothing else. And if the Chorus follows her “outside of the law,” once it is captivated, as Lacan emphasized, by “the powerful plea on the eyelid of the bridal girl” (das Mächtigbittende am Augenliede der hochzeitlichen Jungfrau), it already finds itself implicated in that suffering as well.39

For Hölderlin, then, the tragedy of Antigone stages the confrontation with an impossibility beyond limits and “outside of the law”; it is this confrontation that Antigone fiercely desires and for which she “powerfully begs.” Hölderlin describes the effects of this confrontation in terms of time. In a single eventful moment—the deinon moment in which Antigone begs and we have no choice but to follow—the subject finds itself implicated in the flow of time, in which it has only to hang on, powerless, for dear life. In this moment of “wildest opposition,” the subject is utterly decentered, in the first place insofar as she is not even active in the struggle that engulfs her; the “spirit of time and nature” contends with the object, while the subject is seized by that same spirit.

However, the opposition Hölderlin posits here no longer has solely the character of an insurmountable distance between subject and world, as it did in his reading of a solitary Oedipus. In the remarks on Antigone, the most compelling threat to the self-posited unity of the subject takes the form of what Hölderlin will call the “tearing spirit of time” (der reißende Zeitgeist). Where the “lawful calculus” of tragedy required a careful evaluation of the order and timing of oppositions between nature and culture, Greek and Hesperian worlds, the tearing spirit of time introduces the chaos of a close encounter with the untamed wilderness of death: “not, like a ghost in daylight, sparing man at all, but quite pitiless, as the spirit of the always alive, unwritten wilderness and the world of the dead” (Constantine 114: nicht, dass er die Menschen schonte, wie ein Geist am Tage, sondern er ist schonungslos,

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39. See Lacan 281: “And it is from the same place that the image of Antigone appears before us as something that causes the Chorus to lose its head, as it tells us itself, makes the just appear unjust, and makes the Chorus transgress all limits. . . . Nothing is more moving than the himeros enereges, than the desire that visibly emanates from the eyelids of this admirable girl.”
als Geist der ewig lebenden ungeschriebenen Wildnis und der Todtenwelt [FA 16: 266]).

Unwritten, unsparing, infinite: the world of the dead and of its “Geist,” the conceptually unthinkable world to which Antigone opens herself in performing the forbidden funeral rites for her brother, can only be represented oppositionally, as darkness in contrast to daylight, obscurity to clarity. And yet its effects are most sharply felt not in this simple opposition of dark and light, but rather in the mysteries of the movement that encompasses both, that of time. The most uncompromising expression of this “tearing spirit of time”—onrushing like an angry river, but also tearing, as through a single piece of cloth—is that moment of wildest opposition in which the subject is revealed “in his character.” Like the caesura in the remarks on Oedipus, which interrupted the flow of “tragic transport” with the exposure of “representation itself,” wild opposition interrupts the dramatic order with the unsettling proximity of the limit zone between life and death.

The “wilderness” represented by both formal interruption and conceptual liminality is also expressed in dramatic language. The structural point of caesura itself for Hölderlin—the scene in which Tiresias berates Creon for his failure to understand the importance of maintaining the separate registers of life and death—contains as its dominant image the beasts that enable the blind man to “see” by means of a signification that scorns representation by either word or image.

Du weist es; hörst die Zeichen meiner Kunst.
Denn auf dem alten Stuhle, Vögel schauend,
Saß ich, wo vor mir war ein Hafen aller Vögel,
Da hör’ ich unbekannt von denen ein Geschrei,
Mit üblem Wüthen schrien sie und wild,
Und zerrten mit den Klauen sich einander,
In Mord, das merkt’ ich, denn nicht unverständlich war
Der Flügel Sausen. (FA 16: 369: 1034–42)

You know it, you hear the signings of my art.
I sat in the ancient chair, scrying the birds
And had before me a haven of all the birds
And heard an unknown screaming out of them,
Wildly in an evil raging they were screaming
And tearing at one another with their claws
In murder, I marked that, for the rush of the wings
Were not incomprehensible (Constantine 102; trans. modified)
With its description of the birds’ cry and their untamed, violent behavior, Tiresias’ speech enacts its own disruption; the birds’ wail, the center of his reading of “signings,” is both “unknown” (unbekannt) and “not incomprehensible” (nicht unverständlich), outside of the limits of language and yet still signifying. Once again, Hölderlin employs negative (and even double negative) terminology to evoke an otherwise unattainable “outside.” However, the reverberations set off by the intrusion of a beastly sound here also contribute in a different way to the events of the tragedy. They form a layer over an earlier scene in which Antigone herself signifies in the same doubled tone as Tiresias’ birds, both “unknown” and “not incomprehensible.”

Thus a chorus of beastly cries does not only disrupt the otherwise uneventful movement of time, revealing the ruptures inherent in representation; by evoking the plaintive wail and mournful countenance of the girl as she pursues the impossible, this event approaches not only the limits of language but also—foreshadowing her later banishment to the tomb—the very margin of life and death.

Yet the solitude of Antigone’s pursuit of that limit zone need not imply that her inscription in the movement of time, and that of her tragedy, are likewise solitary. If Hölderlin insists upon the singularity of Antigone’s
suffering, that is not to say that he refuses to translate it, only that his translation aims to convey what remains of that solitude. As a result, Antigone’s unflinching movement toward the impossible will expose a curious communion among subjects, both in spite of and because of the act of translation. In spite of translation we are nothing like Antigone, and yet because of translation we follow her; and in the process, something is disclosed to us even as we find nothing. To be sure, the modern subject discovers something in viewing Antigone; condemned to a live burial, she stands between life and death, facing the inevitability of this end with open eyes: “I, poor girl! Not among mortals, not among the dead” (Ich Arme! Nicht unter Sterblichen, nicht unter Todten [353: 880–81]). Advancing without question towards the liminal space of her tomb, she lends credence to the words of Hölderlin’s Chorus in the second choral ode, in which the human, perhaps revealing the monstrosity at its heart, is indelibly marked by its own relation to death: “Only the future place of the dead / He does not know how to flee” (Constantine 81: Der Töten künftigen Ort nur / Zu fliehen weiß er nicht [301: 377–78]). The Chorus already makes it clear: human beings cannot escape the encounter with their own finitude, no matter what crafts they employ to avert its inevitability—not as long as the “tearing spirit of time” holds dominion over subjective experience.

However, even as Antigone leads us to an end that takes the form of something, death, in this translation she also defies any merely teleological description. The Chorus’s reference to human beings’ inability to escape “the place of the dead” is followed closely by a call to a different register: “All-traveled, untraveled. He comes to nothing” (Allbewandert, unbewandert. Zu nichts kommt er [301: 376]). Strictly speaking, this translation is, once again, inaccurate; the logic and syntax of the Greek passage suggest a separation or pause between pantoporos and aporos, not a pairing as Hölderlin would have it here, and most modern translators recognize this, resulting in a more stable reading: “He meets nothing in the future without resource” (Lloyd-Jones 37; see also Solger 159, Fagles 77).

The logic underlying Hölderlin’s incorrect syntax resonates with his overall reading of the Choral passage, however, leaving the parallel terms allbewandert, unbewandert to encapsulate

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40. Stathis Gourgouris notes this translation error in Heidegger’s discussion of the same passage in his lecture on “Der Ister,” a reading which was almost certainly inspired by Hölderlin’s translation. In both cases the incorrect juxtaposition of pantoporos aporos, rather than its separation, implies an echo effect with the phrase hypsipolis; apolis (high in the city; cast out of the city). Gourgouris emphasizes in convincing fashion the productivity of this error for Heidegger’s reading of deinon as ontological condition; I would merely argue that although it clearly represents a misreading of Sophocles’ Antigone, it responds directly to Hölderlin’s Antigone. Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era (Stanford University Press, 2003), 138.
the ambiguity that describes human beings, who have traveled much but nevertheless must reach the conclusion that they have arrived nowhere at all.

Even more revealing in the context of Hölderlin’s view of the tragic is the second part of that descriptive phrase: “He comes to nothing.” While the expression \textit{zu etwas kommen} signals an arrival at a destination, a conclusive “getting somewhere” (and the reflexive \textit{zu sich kommen} implies a moment of self-conscious realization) the human’s only destination here is nowhere—or more precisely, nothing.\footnote{On the semantic implications of \textit{zu sich kommen} within the discourse of tragedy and classical drama see Nägele 1991, 11.} Advancing towards nothing as she faces her inevitable death in the tomb, Antigone confronts that impossible, unthinkable suffering that she chose at the very start. She takes a step that the Chorus attributes to the human being as such, a step “to nothing” that brings a subject to the precipice of meaning, to a limit that can only be represented as death. All fascination aside, it seems that Antigone’s suffering means “nothing” to us after all.

Yet it is a nothing that is not meaningless, far from it. It is inseparable from a tragic experience made possible in translation alone. In fact, for Hölderlin it is only because of this particular experience of translation that the tragedy can be “\textit{vaterländische Sache},” of concern at all to his time and place. Translation, like Antigone’s tragedy, brings the subject to arrive at no place—at nothing; translation will both trace and intensify a movement that Antigone already enacts. Whatever may be “lost” in translation in a conventional sense, therefore, pales in comparison to what may be gained.

\textbf{THIS INTENSIFYING MOVEMENT} of translation is delineated in some of the most challenging passages of the remarks; in fact, reading these reflections often demands something of a translation in its own right. Nevertheless they remain crucial to any understanding of the project’s model of tragic experience. Its movement is based on an exchange of structural generality and material specificity, and in this sense follows logically from Hölderlin’s slightly more legible remarks on \textit{Oedipus}, where, as we have already seen, he takes a similar point of departure. Arguing in those remarks for a rigidity of form, a “\textit{lawful calculus}” that would permit the modern poet, artisan-like, to create beauty with the tools of antiquity, Hölderlin resists (or at least re-thinks) the lure of imitation to which his contemporaries often succumbed.\footnote{Lacoue-Labarthe has shown this convincingly in “Hölderlin and the Greeks,” 237–38.} For although the mathematical markings of tragic form bear repeating in a modern era, the words that give life to that form remain necessarily specific,
a “living sense that cannot be calculated”; from age to age the content of a text cannot bear the same resonance. A tension thus arises between form and content, and the moments in which the translated text conveys this distinction shed light from another angle—as we will see, from an “askew perspective”—on that which brings tragedy to “life” for a modern audience.

At its heart, this model of linguistic and discursive exchange is a theory of tragic experience, of how ancient tragedy may “translate” into a modern context. Hölderlin specifies that the effects of tragedy change with the introduction of language that moves the modern subject differently, bringing facets to light that were only implicit in the Greek text. In the passage from antiquity to modernity, Hölderlin asserts that something has solidified “in the course of events, in the grouping of characters against one another” (*in die Art des Hergangs, in der Gruppierung der Personen gegeneinander [419]*)

Vorzüglich aber bestehet die tragische Darstellung in dem factischen Worte, das, mehr Zusammenhang, als ausgesprochen, schiksaalsweise, vom Anfang bis zum Ende gehet; in die Art des Hergangs, in der Gruppierung der Personen gegeneinander; in der Vernunftform, die sich in der furchtbaren Muße einer tragischen Zeit bildet, und so wie sie in Gegensätzen sich darstellte, in ihrer wilden Entstehung, nachher, in humaner Zeit, als feste aus göttlichem Schicksal geborene Meinung gilt. (FA 16: 419)

However, tragic representation principally consists of the factual word which, being more a relation than something that is stated explicitly, moves by means of fate from beginning to end; in the specific course of events, in the grouping of characters against one another; in the form of reason that constitutes itself in the dreadful idleness of tragic time, and just as at its wild origin it represented itself in oppositions, afterwards, in human time, it counts as a firm opinion born of divine fate. (Pfau 1988, 114; trans. modified)

If what was formed (*gebildet*) in a “tragic time”—Antigone’s solitary suffering unto death, here the “dreadful idleness of tragic time”—is solidified into a “firm opinion” that counts (*gilt*) only in *our* time, then that experience must logically make itself felt as a consequence of not only tragedy but also translation. Translation has the potential to expose the subject to the very effect of difference upon which Antigone’s tragedy always already insists. Familiarity gives way to foreignness, and vice versa, in a most radical sense
when the subject’s own representative mode (Vorstellungsart) confronts him with an experience that is profoundly other.

This experience lies at the core of Hölderlin’s distinction of the “Greek” word from the “Hesperian,” and given the stakes of Antigone’s own pursuit, it is perhaps fitting that the distinction on the level of words takes shape with respect to the representation of death. Where once the Chorus was seized by the haunting vision of a wandering Antigone, now the viewing subject is likewise seized simply by a word—and here, the context of that seizure, whether Greek or modern, makes all the difference. In the “Greek” sense, words seize the physical body in a mediated way, bringing that body to kill: “The Greek-tragic word is deadly-factual, because the body that it seizes actually kills” (Pfau 116; trans. modified: Das griechischtragische Wort ist tödtlichfaktisch, weil der Leib, den es ergreift, wirklich tödtet [FA 16: 417f.]). Meanwhile, in “our” time and mode of representation, words seize the spirit immediately, so that the word itself kills by seizing the “more spiritual body.” Admittedly, this train of thought is extremely opaque, but upon reflection it becomes clearer. In the “more Greek” sense, words always bring a body to kill on the tragic stage, always mediate the theatrical representation of murder, insofar as killings are never actually shown on stage but rather described by a messenger. Particularly the deaths of women in Sophocles, including Jocasta, Eurydice, and Antigone, remain fiercely private scenes only “visible” to an audience through description. When the word itself kills, however, it has a more immediate effect on the tragic heroine as well as the viewing subject:

Eine vaterländische mag . . . mehr tödtendfaktisches, als tödtlichfaktisches Wort sein; nicht eigentlich mit Mord oder Tod endigen, weil doch hieran das Tragische muß gefaßt werden, sondern mehr im Geschmacke des Oedipus auf Kolonos, so daß das Wort aus begeistertem Munde schrecklich ist, und tödtet, nicht griechisch faßlich, in athletischem und plastischem Geiste, wo das Wort den Körper ergreift, daß dieser tödtet.

Such an art of our homeland . . . may be a language that is killingly-factual rather than deadly-factual; so not actually ending with murder or death as that through which tragedy must be apprehended, but more in the manner of Oedipus at Colonus, where the words spoken by a mouth inspired

43. Hölderlin confronts this tension between the “Vorstellungsarten” of different ages in other texts as well, particularly the letter to Böhlendorff discussed in the last section and the 1799 essay “Der Gesichtspunct, aus dem wir das Altertum anzusehen haben” (FA 14: 95–96).

44. In this context, see in particular Nicole Loraux’s detailed and interesting study, Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman.
are terrible, and kill, but not in a graspable Greek way, in an athletic and plastic spirit, where the words seize the body so that it kills. (Constantine 117; trans. modified)

In modern tragic experience, initiated as thinking spirit is seized by a word that kills when “spoken by a mouth,” words lead one in thought along a certain trajectory that ends in death. That ends, perhaps, in nothing but the space of the unthinkable that houses Antigone’s suffering. As the Chorus concludes, “Thinking is more, much more / Than happiness” (Um vieles ist das Denken mehr, denn / Glükeeligkeit [FA 16: 405: 1397–98]).

If, however, the disclosure of this tragic movement unto death is to become particularly evident “in human time,” in what form does it reveal itself to the modern subject? For if Hölderlin is justified in suggesting that our experience of Antigone’s suffering is intensified through something which only counts (gilt) in this time, “standing as we do under a Zeus more our own” (Constantine 116; da wir unter dem eigentlicheren Zeus stehen), then the form of that experience must make itself felt as a consequence of not only tragedy but also translation. In these remarks, that trajectory takes the form of what he calls “infinite reversal” (unendlicher Umkehr).

Reversal here does not refer, as it did in other contexts in Hölderlin’s age, to the return to Greek ideals or to a mythic national origin. As Hölderlin already explains in the remarks on Oedipus, the reversal characteristic of tragedy in translation cannot possibly resolve itself in a return to an origin, if only for the epidemic of forgetting that accompanies it.

In dieser (i.e. der äußersten Grenze des Leidens) vergißt sich der Mensch, weil er ganz im Moment ist; der Gott, weil er nichts als Zeit ist; und beides ist untreu, die Zeit, weil sie in solchem Momente sich kategorisch wendet, und Anfang und Ende sich in ihr schlechterdings nicht reimen läßt; der Mensch, weil er in diesem Momente der kategorischen Umkehr folgen muß, hiermit im Folgenden schlechterdings nicht dem Anfänglichen gleichen kann. (FA 16: 258)

45. Reversal or “Umkehr” frequently appears in Hölderlin’s writings as “patriotic” reversal (vaterländische Umkehr), which as Szondi discusses often construed in the earlier part of this century to refer to the German ability to supercede the legacy of antiquity (“Überwindung des Klassizismus,” 89ff.) Henning Bothe points out in contrast that George and his school celebrated in Hölderlin the German proximity to the greatness of Greece, the “heilige Heirat” of Nüchternheit (sobriety) and Heiterkeit (exhilaration). “Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos. . . .” die Rezeption Hölderlins von ihren Anfängen bis zu Stefan George (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992), 108ff.

46. For Heidegger in “Der Ister,” this notion of forgetting becomes significant, since it describes the human in relation to Sein. However, while Hölderlin demonstrates here that the hero and the god
At that limit the human being forgets himself, because he is wholly in the moment; and the god forgets himself, because he is nothing but time; and both are unfaithful, time because in such a moment it is a categorical turning-point in which beginning and end cannot rhyme at all; the human being, because at that moment he must follow the categorical moment of turning but in what follows he cannot at all match what was there in the beginning. (Constantine 68; trans. modified)

While the process of reversal in this tragic context is a must—it is our only concern, “vaterländische Sache”—its destination remains unknown; the subject has forgotten itself in the force of the moment, the god in the rush of time, and thus neither has the possibility of returning to anything familiar. No origin remains to which reversal could refer here; what remains is only the movement that reversal generates, only the recognition that in and through this movement everything has changed, irrevocably: “For patriotic reversal is the reversal of all modes and forms of representation” (Constantine 117; trans. modified: *Denn vaterländische Umkehr ist die Umkehr aller Vorstellungsarten und Formen* [FA 16: 419]).

How, then, is this movement of reversal directed, if not to a conceptual origin? Perhaps it leads to nowhere but that space of nothingness which Antigone already occupies, to the possibility that the subject somehow partakes of her final, solitary confrontation with impossibility. For as it turns out, it is a space that she shares with another. While at the moment of her death the god is already present “in the figure (Gestalt) of death,” another human literally shares Antigone’s tomb; and he is also one prototype for the man who, forgetting himself in the event, finds himself moving suddenly and inexplicably in reverse. In the remarks on *Oedipus*, Hölderlin describes the moment of *Umkehr* as personified by two characters in particular: “Hämon stands thus in *Antigone*, and Oedipus himself thus in the centre of the tragedy of *Oedipus*” (Constantine 68; *So stehet Hämon in der Antigonä. So Oedipus selbst in der Mitte der Tragödie von Oedipus* [FA 16: 258]).

both “forget,” Heidegger suggests that Antigone represents a relation to Being that the rest of humanity has forgotten (para. 18, “Das Herd als das Sein,” 134ff.).

47. In a discussion of the ode “Patmos,” Warminski addresses the notion of “wiederkehren” in Hölderlin as a nonsymmetrical relation, arguing that the verb “wiederkommen” would more clearly communicate absolute return: “But for that which is human such a coming back would be mere identity, sterile onedness; only the God can come back: ‘Denn wiederkommen sollt es / Zu rechter Zeit” (StA II:168). The poem’s wiederkehren is a re-turning: a going over and a turning again. . . . The asymmetry of ‘hinüberzugehen’ and ‘wiederzukehren’ is a loss of identity and a gain of meaning” (Warminski 89). “Umkehren” is an even more ambiguous, less symmetrical action than “wiederkehren,” for it signifies only a turning “around” without any implication of an absolute reversal.
The prospect of reversal as the exposure of the impossible is perhaps more intuitively at hand in *Oedipus*, since the process of unveiling information in his tragedy clearly turns the proceedings in a previously inconceivable direction. Within this context it is also more clearly related to Aristotelian *peripateia*, which generates its effect through the development of plot structure. In *Antigone*, however, reversal is less evident. Only her betrothed, the son of Creon—only Haemon, whose name occurs neither before nor after this point in any of Hölderlin’s remarks—follows its trajectory. What status does Haemon take on in the tomb, what direction is he compelled to follow that will also concern Hölderlin’s age? And what does his reversal have to do with Antigone, who after all maintains her solitude to the end?

A messenger’s description of Haemon’s confrontation with his father in the tomb—the Greeks’ “real” killing through speech that will soon drive Eurydice to suicide—begins to shed light upon these questions, which finally lead to a reversal even more shattering than that of *Oedipus the King*.

Schnöd blickend, nichts entgegensagend, starrt
Mit wilden Augen gegen ihn der Sohn;
Und zieht das Schwert, zweisehneidig, gegen ihn erst.
Und da der Vater, aufgeschroekt, zur Flucht
Sich wandte, fehlt’ er. Grimmig dann im Geiste,
Der Unglückliche sties, so wie er ausgestreckt stand,
Die Spize mitten sich in seine Seite.
Den feuchten Arm, bei Sinnen noch, küßt er
Der Jungfrau . . .
Das Todte liegt beim Todten, bräutliche
Erfüllung trifft es schüchtern in den Häußern
Der Todtenwelt, und zeigt der Menschen rathlos Wesen,
Und wie als größtes Übel diß der Mann hat. (FA 16: 393–95: 1285–98)

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48. Aristotle’s introduction of the term _peripateia_ in the *Poetics* appears together with that of recognition (_anagnorisis_) in the section dealing with “simple and complex plots” (Aristotle 2322–27). In general, Aristotle argues that plot should be just long enough to show “the hero passing by a series of probable or necessary stages from bad fortune to good, or from good to bad . . . ”[2322]; however, a peripatetic shift comes about when an action has an effect opposite to what was expected, thus taking both the hero and the audience by surprise. Combined with the effect of recognition—a “change from ignorance to knowledge” (36)—_peripateia_ will excite feelings of pity and fear in the spectator. The difference from Hölderlin’s notion of reversal, as we will see soon, is that “recognition” in Hölderlin’s sense takes place with regard to a different register of knowledge; the question is no longer one of identification with the hero in his misfortune, which would excite pity and fear in the spectator, but rather of an experience of isolation that seizes the viewer directly, not through the mediation of plot, and with the same force that it enacts a reversal for the hero.
With baleful eyes and saying nothing in return
Wildly the son stared back at him
And drew his two-edged sword against him first.
But when the father, frightened into flight,
Turned, he failed. Then savage-mindedly,
Outstretched, standing there, the unhappy man
Thrust with the point of it full in his side.
Before his senses went he kissed the girl’s
Moist arm, on her white cheek he frothed
Sharp breaths of bloody droplets out.
The dead one lies by the dead one, shyly they came to
Their wedding’s consummation in the houses in
The world of the dead and show how lost for counsel
Humans are and how the man has this as greatest ill (Constantine 109; trans. modified)

The messenger’s monologue forms one of the most affecting passages in Sophocles’ text as well as Hölderlin’s translation, insofar as it bears witness to a transformation unprecedented in a text that relies otherwise on the stony resolve of its central figures. After bitterly raising his sword against his terrified father, Haemon demonstrates concretely why he may occupy the place of infinite reversal for Hölderlin. Now sharing the tomb with his bride Antigone is the son who had once sought to achieve a balance, to quell through words of persuasion his father’s fatal obsession; from his proclamation that “Father, I’m yours” (Constantine 90; Vater, dein bin ich) in his first line of the play, Haemon has literally reversed his allegiance. And consequently, a marriage is consummated in the world of the dead rather than of the living, a tardy union of bride and groom being one result of this double suicide. Just as this union hints at a moment of reconciliation, however, the linguistic neutralization of gender in the very next line stands as a stark reminder of the death’s anonymity: “the dead one lies by the dead one” (das Tödte liegt beim Todten). Given that both the Greek word for corpse, ho nekròs, and the German term, der Leichnam, are masculine, Hölderlin’s choice of the neuter term das Tödte is surely not coincidental; rather, it represents a striking transformation of gendered beings into neutral bodies.

Hölderlin’s play with gender in his rendition of the messenger’s words also complicates the reversal that Haemon enacts in another way, by virtue of an astute choice in the disclosure of “how lost for counsel (rathlos) humans are and how the man has this as greatest ill.” For in contrast to the un-gendering of the dead in the tomb, here Hölderlin maintains the
gender specificity of Sophocles’ language, naming the bearer of greatest ill as masculine: *der Mann*. Allowing the other, more universal masculine term for humankind, *der Mensch*, to stand in for the Greek *ho anēr* here would link the passage to the second Choral ode (where, however, the human is not *anēr* but *anthropos*) as part of a larger statement about the status of humankind. (For example, the translator for the Loeb edition, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, uses “mortals” [117].) *Ho anēr* refers specifically to a man, however, and for Hölderlin this point was important enough not to elide; *der Mann* can only refer to a man or husband, never a woman or wife. What this implies for his rendition of the line is that of the three human beings in the tomb, only Antigone is exempt from the greatest ill of being “lost for counsel.” While Sophocles’ language seems to refer to Haemon here, Hölderlin’s version maintains a more ambiguous stance, so that it is not entirely clear which man is called to recognize how “lost for counsel” he is. Is it the would-be husband Haemon? the man, father, and king Creon?

If it is the man’s greatest ill that he is at a loss at this limit, that the prospect of facing the “wilderness” that Antigone confronts leaves him despairing of his next move, as Hölderlin’s translation implies with the word *rathlos*, then this tragic uncertainty must characterize Creon in particular, for it stands in stark contrast to the determination with which Antigone—and now Haemon—act. Evident from the first scene has been Antigone’s own certainty that she must take on and pursue the impossible without question; this is what makes her appear solitary, unsettling, monstrous to a modern audience. However, in the reversal enacted by Haemon, precisely this tension between acting decisively and being at a loss comes to light, along with the direction that reversal must take as a consequence, even if it does not know its destination. If Antigone unsettles us for reasons we do not entirely grasp, therefore, Haemon demonstrates the *process* of this destabilization for the subject, the shocking reversal that also succeeded in unsettling and unseating Oedipus the King. Indeed, by unveiling this process of destabilization Haemon also demonstrates that the trope of reversal as Hölderlin describes it may itself be a radical form of translation. That the movement of translation, in a fundamental sense, thus generates the essence of tragic effect from the very start.

The reversal that represents “our” concern in tragedy, therefore, involves nothing less than the discovery of an abysmal form of thinking—call it “thinking in translation”—that not only preserves an irreducible difference with which the translated other refuses to part but also reveals a monstrous aspect at the very heart of both subject and text that is itself, in effect, untranslatable—and signifies precisely as the untranslatable. In our time
and in translation as Hölderlin conceives of it, the word kills in tragedy by compelling us to think this process that seizes and shocks us, to be shaken by that recognition, to be led along the same trajectory that Antigone traces and Haemon follows unto death, into an infinite nothing that bears no other name, no other sign. It compels us to experience radically, in other words, tragedy’s particular form of rebellion:

Die Art des Hergangs in der Antigonä ist die bei einem Aufruhr, wo es, so fern es vaterländische Sache ist, darauf ankommt, daß jedes, als von unendlicher Umkehr ergriffen, und erschüttert, in unendlicher Form sich fühlt, in der es erschüttert ist. (FA 16: 419)

The course of events in the Antigone has the form of an unrest/rebellion where, so far as it is a matter for the nation, it is essential that every thing, caught up in infinite reversal and shattered by it, feels itself in the infinite form in which it is shattered. (Constantine 117; trans. modified)

Had Antigone moved alone in the direction of death, one could almost have left her to her solitude. With Haemon joining her in that sheer determination, however, and with the emergence of the word’s potential to compel spirit to conceive of the limit between life and death through the introduction of translation, the link to the human being in general can no longer be denied. If the Greek subject in Hölderlin’s model suffered this course of events along with the figures on the stage, a subject “in human time” has the potential to think through that suffering in its own infinite relation to itself. This is vaterländische Sache, of concern to Hölderlin’s time and place; it is the “established opinion, born of a divine fate,” the ethical experience that counts in Hölderlin’s presentation of tragedy in translation: May the subject’s “character,” its “highest consciousness” be awakened at the moment in which it is confronted with the infinity both outside and within; may it call attention to the impossible, unthinkable movement “to nothing” to which Antigone, and with her the human being as such, is always subject, “this most steadfast abiding in the passage of time” (Constantine 115). Translation presents the modern subject with a glimpse into the infinite from another perspective, not unlike the perspective that allows one to view the intensity of the sun in eclipse: “For us such a form is exactly suitable, because the infinite, like the spirit of states and of the world, can in any case only be grasped from an askew perspective [aus linkischem Gesichtspunkt]” (Constantine 118; trans. modified).49

49. Für uns ist eine solche Form gerade tauglich, weil das Unendliche, wie der Geist der Staaten und der Welt, ohnehin nicht anders, als aus linkischem Gesichtspunkt kann gefaßt werden. (FA 16: 421)
Only when implicated in this peculiar dynamics of translation can the modern subject come to recognize this unsettling communion with each and every subject, because any other vantage point would leave it beyond our grasp. The limits of translatability, laid bare in both the awkward spaces in which translation speaks and the idiosyncratic beauty of Hölderlin’s “mistakes,” do not place this recognition into doubt; indeed, they set it in motion. Through Hölderlin’s model of translation, a strange and solitary girl escapes the status of Hegel’s internal enemy, exceeds the visceral fascination that attracts us inexplicably to her strange plight, to expose the slippage fundamental to the human as such. Acting “outside of the law,” she embodies a relation to the other that exists alongside the experience of selfhood as it is posited within speculative thought. As we recognize through the lens of translation, Antigone performs the impossible movement “to nothing” for us, and yet we must also acknowledge the responsibility we bear for her solitude, for a common thread of untranslatable difference that both isolates and sustains, that penetrates subject and text alike, that no act of interpretation can entirely bridge and yet no dialectics can fully dismiss. Difference becomes Antigone, to be sure, but in her solitude she proves to be anything but alone.