Tragic Effects

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IN 1806, just two years after publishing the Sophocles translations, Hölderlin was institutionalized at the Autenrieth clinic in Tübingen. A year later he was released into the care of the Zimmer family and spent the next thirty-seven years—half of his life—in a small tower overlooking the Neckar river. Until his death in 1843 he remained an object of considerable fascination and sentimentalization among fellow poets and thinkers of his age (to whom he often introduced himself as “Scardanelli”). As poetic and cultural phenomenon, then, Hölderlin hardly spent the nineteenth century in an enchanted sleep. The later decades of the nineteenth century saw the publication of several editions of his poetry, and he came to be regarded as one of the major poets in the German literary tradition, the so-called “Werther of the Greeks,” tragically brought low at the height of his creative powers. The Sophocles project, however, did languish in obscurity as the German penchant for all things Greek moved on to other discussions and controversies, notably the excavation program promoted by the archaeologist Ernst Curtius, Heinrich Schliemann’s discovery of the lost city of Troy, and academic disputes initiated by the classical philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf with Nietzsche and Wagner.

1. Hölderlin attracted numerous prominent visitors to the tower, including Achim and Bettina von Arnim, the young Eduard Mörike, and the editor Christoph Theodor Schwab. On the history of Hölderlin reception see Lawrence Ryan, Friedrich Hölderlin (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1962), 1–4. Today the Hölderlin tower in Tübingen is the seat of the Hölderlin-Gesellschaft, the literary society founded on the hundredth anniversary of his death in 1943. See http://www.hoelderlin-gesellschaft.info.

2. For a fascinating and detailed discussion of these developments, see Marchand’s chapter 4, “Trouble in Olympus” (116–51).
Indeed, Hölderlin’s translations and late poetry garnered little attention until the start of the next century, when the reception of his work was marked by a genuine turning of fortune. Critical and popular interest blossomed after the Munich doctoral student Friedrich Norbert von Hellingrath published a dissertation on the previously unpublished Pindar translations in 1910. A celebrated critical edition followed, including a volume of the late poetry (also heretofore unpublished), which was popular reading material among the troops stationed at the front in the Great War. Hellingrath edited two other volumes, one containing Hölderlin’s earliest writings and the other his translations from the Greek, before falling at Verdun in 1916. This critical edition (completed by Friedrich Seebass and Ludwig von Pigenot after Hellingrath’s death) has had considerable cultural resonance, and considering the progression of thinkers that has engaged with Hölderlin in direct and measurable response to Hellingrath’s edition, it is fair to say that there would be no twentieth-century Hölderlin without him. One of the primary thrusts of Hölderlin scholarship in the twentieth century, the examination of his engagement with the Greeks and its influence on the composition and revision of his late poetry, is particularly indebted to the framework of Hellingrath’s doctoral thesis.

One of the earliest respondents to Hellingrath’s critical reintroduction has also proved, in belated fashion, to be one of the most noteworthy: in 1914 a 22-year-old philosophy student in Berlin named Walter Benjamin took up a direct challenge from the pages of Hellingrath’s dissertation. Reflecting on the potentially rich vein of poetic development contained in Hölderlin’s habitual revisions of earlier poems, Hellingrath writes: “One has only to compare ‘Timidity’ with the first version of ‘The Poet’s Courage’ to see that each passage acquires a fullness of being only as a result of these changes.” The product of Benjamin’s acceptance of this assignment is the essay “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” (Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin), at once a close and often exemplary reading of the two poems mentioned by Hellingrath and a primer for a concept of literary criticism

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that informs Benjamin’s thought in a much larger sense.\(^6\) Unpublished in
his lifetime, the essay represents a kind of youthful exuberance of expression
that is both impulsive and derivative in its approach to the material; the
sometimes breathless characterization of the poet as purveyor of a higher
truth marks the influence of Stefan George’s reception of Hölderlin, for
example, and also looks forward, as critics have pointed out, to Heidegger’s
“elucidations” (Erläuterungen) on the poet.\(^7\) Yet despite its stylistic shortcom-
ings—Stanley Corngold describes the essay as “in places written in a German
whose tortuousness defies deciphering” (Corngold 1988, 152)—Benjamin
himself saw the essay as more than the relic of an youthful phase, later deem-
ing his reflections there as one of the “magnificent foundations” (herrliche
Grundlagen) of his thought.\(^8\)

Like so much of Benjamin’s work today, the “Two Poems” essay has been
exceptionally well covered by many of the lions of literary scholarship.\(^9\) My
aim here is not to add to that rich collection of commentary on the essay as
a textual whole. Rather, I wish to follow a delicate thread, interlaced within
the complex web of associations in Benjamin’s thought here and yet clearly
central to it, implicit within the lines of poetry that Benjamin cites yet also,
clearly, extending beyond them. Benjamin demonstrates in the essay that
he has read more of Hölderlin than just the two poems that anchor his dis-
cussion, and this peripheral reading illuminates connections that otherwise
remain obscure within the text’s stated motives. At the same time, by taking
a closer look at a few briefer and apparently more spontaneous references
to Hölderlin’s work in Benjamin’s later writing I hope to show how the
texts at the center of this book project—the translations and remarks on
Sophocles—form a crucial link among several of Benjamin’s key concepts
in his theory of the work of art.

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\(^6\) Speth cites a letter to Ernst Schön in which Benjamin states that he intended to send the
essay to Hellingrath before learning that he had been killed (9).

\(^7\) See Lacoue-Labarthe, “Poetry’s Courage,” in which he compares Benjamin’s discussion of
the poet’s courage with Heidegger’s “arche-ethical” quality of courage as outlined in his “Letter on
Humanism.” While Heidegger’s definition of the poet’s courage relies on a theological-political model
that reinforces the mythological basis of fascism, Benjamin’s theological-poetical project posits the
failure of the theological in poetry and the “conquest of objectivity and the concrete” (88). In Fioretos
88–93.

\(^8\) Michael W. Jennings, “Benjamin as a Reader of Hölderlin: The Origins of Benjamin’s Theory
of Literary Criticism,” German Quarterly 56:4 (Nov. 1983): 545. Corngold speculates that the timing
of the essay, composed when “only an ultimately high seriousness could make a contribution suited
to . . . world war” (153), indicates its author’s desire to “secure the very idea of a foundation” (154).

\(^9\) See, for example, Corngold, Complex Pleasure; Lacoue-Labarthe, “Poetry’s Courage”; Mi-
cro W. Jennings, “Benjamin as a Reader of Hölderlin”; Rainer Nägele, “Benjamin’s Ground”; David
Wellbery, “Benjamin’s Theory of the Lyric”; Beatrice Hanssen, “‘Dichtermut’ and ‘Blödigkeit’: Two
also devotes a chapter to the essay in Dialectical Images.
Little would indicate at the start of “Two Poems” that Benjamin intends to engage with Hölderlin’s writings on tragedy at all, let alone with the Sophocles project. In fact, he distances himself from tragedy in the very first lines of the essay, stipulating that the type of aesthetic commentary he is about to attempt more typically applies to the “great works of classical literature,” such as tragedy, but that he will apply it instead to Hölderlin’s lyric. In the pages that follow, Benjamin outlines the emergence, within each of the poems and between the lines of their development, of what he calls “das Gedichtete” (only awkwardly translatable as “the poetized”), a term meant to describe the a priori truth content contained within, but not openly expressed by, poetic language: the poem’s “task (Aufgabe) and precondition.”

The basic thrust of his very complex argument is that the second, revised poem, “Blödigkeit,” succeeds in revealing the truth content that the first poem represents only in a limited sense, the “poet’s courage” (Dichtermut). Toward the end of the essay, however, he makes the allusion that is most interesting for our purposes here. Reflecting on how the development of the poem from the first to the final version represents a more nuanced relation to the forms of classical Greece, he writes:

Dies Leben [i.e., the life traced out in the second version of the poem] ist in Formen des griechischen Mythos gebildet, aber—das ist entscheidend—nicht in ihnen allein; gerade das griechische Element ist in der letzten Fassung aufgehoben und ausgeglichen gegen ein andres, das (zwar ohne ausdrückliche Rechtfertigung) das orientalische genannt war. Fast alle Änderungen der spätern Fassung streben in dieser Richtung . . . (GS II:1,126)

This life is shaped in the forms of Greek myth, but—this is crucial—not in them alone; the Greek element is sublated in the last version and balanced against another element that (without express justification, to be sure) was called the Oriental. Almost all the changes in the later version strive in this direction . . . (SW 1: 35).

The formulation is peculiar: this expression of life was called the Oriental, and Benjamin himself is only relaying the news. His use of the passive voice here is consistent with a stylistic tendency within the essay, perhaps reflective of Benjamin’s attempt to sound academic in response to Hellingrath’s challenge.10 However, the passive construction also removes the speaker from responsibility for a naming that took place “without express justification”; as

10. As Corngold writes, to “go one better than the academic source of his ‘assignment,’” Hellingrath (153).
Benjamin clearly states here, the term “Oriental” is not of his own invention. The one who did the naming is, of course, Hölderlin, in a letter to his publisher Friedrich Wilmans from September 1803; what is named is a particular quality that he attempted to lend to his translations of Sophocles. The letter appears in the volume of Hellingrath’s edition devoted to the translations from the Greek, and in light of Benjamin’s obvious interest in Hellingrath’s work, his familiarity with this particular letter is not only possible but likely:

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 Orientalische, das sie verläugnet hat, mehr heraushebe, und ihren Kunstfehler, wo er vorkommt, verbessere. (FA 16: 19)

I hope to represent Greek art, which is foreign to us through the conformity to the native and the flaws to which it has always resorted, as more alive than usual to the public by bringing out the Oriental element that it has disavowed and by correcting its artistic flaw where it occurs.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the prominence of the Oriental as an organizing principle in Benjamin’s essay, this letter to Wilmans is the only place in his body of work where Hölderlin calls that term by its name. Benjamin has a point, moreover, in stating that he names it “without express justification,” as Hölderlin does not offer any further explanation for his use of the term. In other letters and essays Hölderlin constructs similar oppositions, such as in the letter to Böhlandorff, where he compares the Greeks’ “fire from heaven” with our “Junonian sobriety,” or in the discussion of Greek vs. Hesperian “modes of representation” (Vorstellungsarten) in the remarks on Antigone. At no other point, however, does Hölderlin invoke the exact term “Oriental,” which indicates that already in 1914, Benjamin was not only familiar with the apparatus surrounding the translations of Sophocles but considered it a key to understanding the logic and process of Hölderlin’s late poetic production. From the start of his engagement with Hölderlin, then, Benjamin regards him not merely as a poet but also, always, as a translator. By placing the Oriental alongside the Greek as an organizing principle of Hölderlin’s process of revision, he casts the poet, in a sense, as translator of his own poem.12

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12. Lacoue-Labarthe calls Hölderlin’s process of revision as Benjamin describes it “internal trans-
Benjamin’s introduction of the term “Oriental” warrants closer examination here, as it plays a subtle role at several points in the essay. He brings it into the discussion literally at surface level, as surface, in his reading of Hölderlin’s revision of the second line of the poem, from “Does not the Parca herself nourish you for service?” (first version, Dichtermut) to “Does not your foot stride upon what is true, as upon carpets?” (in the final version, Blödigkeit). Throughout the essay Benjamin aims to demonstrate that the poem in its initial version, with its primarily Greek imagery and static, mythic quality, needs the transition to a less form-giving, more independent poetic language in order to allow for the emergence of its truth, das Gedichtete. The first version of the poem is limited by its dependence on Greece as a model, since the principle that underlies Greek beauty and mythology cannot become fully manifest in the modern world. The final version, on the other hand, accomplishes (as Corngold discusses) a transition from the mythic world of Greece to the “myth of modernity,” “to a modernity that reflects on Greece . . . [and] whose essential shape must be produced by poetry . . .” (Corngold 161; my italics).

That transition as Benjamin theorizes it is already apparent in the first lines of the poem; he points out the telling shift from dependency (being nourished) to positing (striding) and the image, “with a vastness evoking the oriental” (SW 1: 26) (an Orientalisches gemahnender Weitläufigkeit [GS II:1, 113]), of a carpet spreading out beneath the feet of the poet, connecting the living as “. . . the extension of space, the plane spread out, in which . . . destiny extends itself” (SW 1: 26) (die Erstreckung des Raumes, der gebreitete Plan, in dem sich das Schicksal erstreckt [GS II:1, 113]). The exemplarity of the image of the carpet (its Musterhaftigkeit, a term that also plays on the idea of its woven pattern) also reflects for Benjamin “a great deal, a very great deal, of Hölderlin’s cosmos . . . once again foreign-sounding, as if from the world of the East, and yet much more primordial than the Parca . . .” (SW 1: 26) (viel, sehr viel über den Kosmos Hölderlins . . . wieder fremd wie aus östlicher Welt und doch wieviel ursprünglicher als die griechische Parze . . . [GS II:1, 114]). The same stanza continues its representation of the poet’s striding forth in the final version: “Therefore, my genius, only step / Naked into life and have no care!” (Drum, mein Genius, tritt nur / Bar ins Leben und sorge nicht!) As the poet strides forward and enters naked, vulnerable, into life, he also acknowledges for Benjamin an underlying sense of connection, of interweaving, with the living. This, too, is the legacy of the Oriental carpet:

13. In the original, “Nährt zum Dienste denn nicht selber die Parze dich?” becomes “Geht auf Wärem dein Fuß nicht, wie auf Teppichen?” (GS II:1, 114)
“...it [life] is not the precondition but the object of a movement accomplished with a mighty freedom: the poet *enters into* life; he does not wander forth in it,” revealing “connectedness, in destiny, between the living and the poet” (SW 1: 28). The Oriental, as a tone emerging in balance with the Greek, form-giving gesture, thus makes it possible to grasp the essential relation between this poem and its “life-context” (*Lebenszusammenhang*) (SW 1: 20). In a sense crucial for Benjamin’s way of thinking, this life-context is not determined by the “individual life-mood (*Lebensbestimmung*) of the artist” (SW 1: 20) but rather marks the poem as an effect of historical experience. The courage named in the first poem’s title, then, emerges in the second poem as a willingness to allow this connectedness—the “innermost identity of the poet with the world” (SW 1: 34)—to appear without intervention.

This mode of reading, which Benjamin here calls “aesthetic commentary,” is not only a fine example of literary criticism in its own right but also underscores the role of criticism for the fulfillment of the poetic task. For Benjamin, criticism allows relationships to unfold that are only implicit in the original text, shedding light where the poetic text only testifies to its relation to the poetized; it reveals a “life-context” that the text bears silently within itself. But this belated unfolding of something intrinsic yet unarticulated within the work of art is also the fundamental logic of Hölderlin’s “Oriental” as he applies it to his translations. His letter to Wilmants contains its own references to the “life” contained within poetic texts, for by incorporating the Oriental in his translations he hopes to render the Greek text “more alive than usual.” His line of argumentation is strikingly similar to Benjamin’s: Greek art is foreign to us, and when we try to make it conform to our mode of representation (making mistakes “durch Nationalkonvenienz,” for the sake of the native), we only highlight the flaws that this process creates. By bringing out what he perceives as the “Oriental”—

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15. Jennings thus describes the essay as “Benjamin’s first attempt to formulate an anti-subjective position” (Jennings 1983, 553).

16. Although he does not use the term *Kritik* in the essay on Hölderlin, there is ample evidence that the “aesthetic commentary” he describes here represents an early formulation of that concept. For a discussion of Hölderlin’s influence on Benjamin’s theory of literary criticism (*Kritik*), see Jennings 1983, 550f.

17. On the other hand, Benjamin’s comparison of tragedy and *Trauerspiel* follows something of a reverse trajectory in the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*: modern readers of tragedy have tried for too long to understand the Baroque and modern mourning play as the heirs of classical Greece, whereas Benjamin regards each form as the product of the specific historical moment in which it emerges. When we attempt to make sense of tragedy as a primordial form of modern drama and a representa-
mode disavowed by the Greeks, but nevertheless persistent as an undertone within the Greek text—he means to let the text become more relevant, hence “more alive,” to a modern audience. Although Hölderlin speaks nowhere of what Benjamin calls the balance between Greek and Oriental registers, the idea of a balance is implicitly necessary; the Greek text will appear (to us) more authentic, more alive, more Greek, if a foreign element is introduced into it, making the text not just objectively foreign to us moderns but also foreign to itself, in its very linguistic essence.

The complexity of the relationship between languages and the reawakened “life” of the text in Hölderlin’s model once again evokes the interwoven threads of the Oriental carpet, the “life-context determined by art” (durch die Kunst bestimmter Lebenszusammenhang [GS II:1, 107]) at the heart of Benjamin’s reflections here. Languages, modes of representation, the passage of time—all must interact dynamically for the text to come alive in a given moment, and the text must bear the traces of that interaction. The weaving of an imagined past and present, of Greek and Hesperian and “Oriental,” is the life of the text, and only a translator who recognizes this and brings it to bear upon the process of translation can render a text “more alive” to a modern audience. Conventional measures of a translation’s quality since the age of Luther—its rendering of the sense of the original, or its lyrical beauty—thus become irrelevant, as the key task of the translator, at least in Hölderlin’s model, involves the rejuvenation of the text through the careful retention—even restoration—of its polyvalence as an object of history. Translation (in Hölderlin’s sense) and aesthetic commentary (in Benjamin’s sense) may have the potential, therefore, to achieve a similar goal. Moreover, if we return to the initial point that Benjamin regards Hölderlin’s final revision of Dichtermut as likewise Oriental in tone, then the pieces fall together: revision, criticism, and translation all appear as facets of the same stone.

Given its fleeting appearance in the essay, it is not entirely certain whether his reference to Hölderlin’s concept of the “Oriental” only functions for Benjamin as an offhand allusion, a convenient point of departure, or if he means for the term to underlie his commentary as a foundation of something “universally human,” he argues, we lose sight of the separate logics underlying both tragedy and Trauerspiel. See Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 53–54 and 100–101; Gesammelte Schriften I:1, 234–35 and 279–80.

18. Critics have noted the circularity of Benjamin’s argumentation here, that in the end he conveniently achieves what he has just defined at the start of the essay as the poetological “task” at hand, namely, the constitution of das Gedichtete as the truth of poetry through the work of aesthetic commentary (see, for example, Corngold 157). In a slightly different vein, Wellbery discusses Benjamin’s “strategy of displacement,” his habit of invoking classical technique to create a foundation for his own argument and at the same time to break out of its limits. “Benjamin’s Theory of the Lyric,” 42.
Hölderlin’s poetic project. (To be sure, there is little reason to believe that the “Oriental” even plays this role for Hölderlin, since he only uses the term once, as we have seen, and with reference to the Sophocles translation rather than a poetic text.) If Benjamin’s interest is based on the latter, however—if the Oriental represents a fundamental term in his reading of “Hölderlin’s cosmos,” as his language here would indicate—then there is ample justification for asking about the larger significance of Hölderlin’s Sophocles translations for Benjamin’s thought. For there is no doubt that Benjamin frequently taps into Hölderlin’s Sophocles when he is in need of exemplary material. Upon closer consideration it reveals itself as something of a shadow text, lending substance to and revealing connections among key concepts: the life of the work of art, history, criticism, translation.

Benjamin, of course, had more explicit thoughts of his own about the status of translations and their role in the life of texts, and those remarks again bear a heavy debt to Hölderlin, though they also venture further. His 1921 essay “The Task of the Translator” (Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers), published in 1923 as a foreword to his own translations of Baudelaire’s Tableaux Parisiens, may already represent in its form an homage to Hölderlin’s esoteric remarks. It also contains several direct references to the Sophocles project, and its theoretical justification of translation bears unmistakable echoes of Hölderlin’s thoughts on rendering a text “more alive than usual.” However, already at the start of the essay, Benjamin draws a fundamental distinction between his train of thought and Hölderlin’s idea of the text come “alive” for its audience, for in Benjamin’s estimation the translation’s quality of being “alive” has little to do with its audience or, for that matter, the poet or the translator.\(^19\) Any translation concerned with the quality of communicating to its audience represents in his estimation “the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content” (SW 1: 253) (eine ungenaue Übermittlung eines unwesentlichen Inhalts [GS IV:1, 9]). Instead, translation itself marks a text’s “stage of continued life” (SW 1: 254), if a life can be conceived in terms of the history of a thing rather than its status as organic matter. In the case of translations produced in the historical moment of a text’s “fame,” “the life of the original attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding” (SW 1: 255) (das Leben des Originals erreicht seine stets erneute späteste und umfassendste Entfaltung [GS IV:1, 11]) in the form of an “afterlife” (Fortleben, literally “living on”) that reinscribes a text’s contemporary relevance.\(^20\) For Benjamin translation as Fortleben marks not

\(^19\) See Carol Jacobs, “Letters from Walter Benjamin”: “The translator is given up and abandoned as a matter of course ...” In the Language of Walter Benjamin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1999), 13.

\(^20\) This concept of “fame” is reminiscent of what Franz Rosenzweig called the “miraculous” mo-
only the passage from one language to another but also the passage of time, effecting for the original text the expansion of its significance within a new historical context. Although he will state later that translations themselves cannot be re-translated, the possibility of continual renewal inheres in the production of new translations that extend a text’s lifespan.

In this sense translation is once again a gesture akin to criticism within his theory of the work of art as bearer of its own history; both are not simply a reaction to a text but a continued exploration of, even a crystallization of, its relation to an abstract notion of truth. Just as criticism (and revision, in Hölderlin’s case) bear the potential of unlocking the relationship to das Gedichtete, the poem’s fundamental connection to its particular “life-context,” so too a translation can begin to illuminate the source text’s fundamental connection to what Benjamin calls “pure” language. Pure language is that which all individual languages “want to express” (SW 1: 255) but cannot quite achieve as individual languages, because each single language, being alive, is in a “constant state of flux” (SW 1: 256) that changes its relation to the ideas it means to express. Even the words of dead languages undergo a process of change as they emerge into the light of the present day. Translation, “of all literary forms,” is “the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (SW 1: 256); it bears responsibility not only for the transfer of a text’s meaning to another language but for marking the space between languages, for illuminating the fact that language exists at all. Pure language makes itself heard most distinctly here, in the looser relation between language and content that a translation represents—in place of the organic connection of language to content in the original (“like a fruit and its skin”), we find in translation the “royal robes” that envelop content “with ample folds” (SW 1: 258, GS IV:1, 15).

The task of translation is of a piece, then, with the role of criticism, which opens a path from the poem to the poetized: whereas in criticism the poem itself is displaced by “the world beyond the poem,” the “meta-

21. In a similar vein, De Man notes the resemblance between translation and philosophy “in the sense that it is critical, in the same way that philosophy is critical, of a simple notion of imitation . . .” (The Resistance to Theory, 81). Both translation and philosophy, De Man claims, fulfill Benjamin’s notion of the ironic gesture, undoing the stability of the original that would otherwise go unnoticed.

22. “. . . daß gerade unter allen Formen ihr als Eigenstes es zufällt, auf jene Nachteile des fremden Wortes, auf die Wehen des eigenen zu merken” (GS IV:1, 13).
physical substructure upon which the poem is based” (Jennings 1987, 192), translation as the transfer from one language to another reveals the interdependence among languages and their various ways of expressing the same thing: “the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language” (SW 1: 257). 23 Both forms point in their internal logic toward the obliteration of the artist (and the audience) in favor of a concept of the work as “organ of history”; 24 both suggest that the unfolding that takes place in the engagement with a literary work is as much a part of the life of that work as the original composition. Criticism and translation, far from diluting or complicating the work’s access to its own truth content, offer another way of looking (what Hölderlin called an “askew perspective,” ein linkischer Gesichtspunkt) that can render that truth more evident, if only fleetingly. 25

In each case, to be sure, this access to truth remains a theoretical construct, “a purely methodological, ideal goal” (SW 1: 21) (das rein methodische, ideelle Ziel [GS II:1, 108]). Not unlike Hölderlin’s characterization of intellectual intuition as “infinite approximation,” the project of both the critic and the translator is a task in the true sense of the German word Aufgabe, which implies both the imposition of duty and resignation (aufgeben, to give up). 26 Any tentative step in the direction of truth is fleeting, fragmentary; nevertheless, there is no possibility of access other than by means of such fragments. 27

In contrast to criticism, however, Benjamin’s mode of translation allows this relation to truth to unfold not by way of meaningful engagement but by a radical fidelity to individual words at the expense of meaning. Because “ripening the seed of pure language in a translation” (SW 1: 259) has noth-

23. “... dass dennoch keiner einzelnen von ihnen, sondern nur der Allheit ihrer einander ergänzenden Intentionen erreichbar ist: die reine Sprache” (GS IV:1, 13). Benjamin describes the Romantics’ concept of criticism as “another, if lesser factor in the continued life of literary works” compared with translation (SW 1: 258). He justly points out as well that the Romantics, though not explicitly concerned with translation in their theoretical writings, produced great translations that “testify to their sense of the essential nature and the dignity of this literary mode” [SW 1: 258].

24. Benjamin’s formulation in the 1931 essay “Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft,” cited in Jennings 1987, 142. The entire passage is instructive: “Works must be considered quite as much according to the totality of their afterlife and reception as according to the history of their composition. We must interest ourselves in their destiny, their contemporary reception, their translations, their fame. Only thus does the work form itself internally into a microcosm, or rather, into a microaeon. . . . Literature in this way becomes an organ of history.”

25. Contemporary translation theory tends to embrace Benjamin’s point about the displacement of origins; see Bachmann-Medick 2009 and Buden and Novotny, Translation Studies Forum 2009.


27. In a sense this is the basis of Jennings’s whole book-length argument: “His [Benjamin’s] entire project can be read as the attempt to recognize these revelatory shards and, in particular, to exploit their revolutionary potential” (Jennings 1987, 128).
ing to do with the reproduction of a text’s meaning, moreover, the translator need not aim at achieving sense, for revelation occurs on a level other than the semantic.\(^{28}\) On the contrary, what is essential is what happens when a word-for-word translation, divorced from the demands of making sense, allows language to speak. Fidelity to the literal word (*Wörtlichkeit*), rather than to the “sense” of a text at the sentence level, brings a transparency to the translation that lets the spaces between languages shine through instead of smoothing over those gaps. The fragments that represent the potential access to truth are directly related to this fragmentation of sense in translations, for only by breaking up the coherence of language and content in the source text is it possible to discern the interaction among the elements that make up pure language. This attitude allows Benjamin to recast the translator’s traditional categories of fidelity and freedom as operating in concert with one another rather than as conflicting tendencies; while fidelity conveys a connection to pure language through literalness, freedom is associated with the liberation of one’s own language from within its “decayed barriers.” Benjamin’s well-known image of a collection of fragments (*Scherben*) that makes both original and translation “recognizable as fragments of a greater language” (SW 1: 260) thus describes a radical form of fidelity as literalness, which finds its highest expression in the translation of Holy Writ, where “meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation” (SW 1: 262) (*in dem der Sinn aufgehört hat, die Wasserscheide für die strömende Sprache und die strömende Offenbarung zu sein*, GS IV: 1, 21). At the same time, however, the imperative that these broken pieces somehow fit together—like “fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together” (SW 1: 260)\(^{29}\)—also underscores the significance of freedom, of relaxing the boundaries of the receiving language to allow the breathing room necessary to “release . . . that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of a work” (SW 1: 261).\(^{30}\)

Benjamin’s reconsideration of the categories of fidelity and freedom at this point—as both divorced from the limitations of making sense and

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\(^{29}\) Carol Jacobs is rigorously literal in claiming that Benjamin’s twin notions of a) fragments as the broken part of a vessel (*Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes [18]*) and b) translation and original as the broken part of a greater language (*Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache*) suggest together that language remains broken, incomplete in the passage from original to translation. “The Monstrosity of Translation,” 84f.

\(^{30}\) “Jene reine Sprache, die in fremde gebannt ist, in der eigenen zu erlösen, ist die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (GS IV:1, 19).
pressed into the service of releasing pure language—also opens up more space for his reading of Hölderlin’s translations, which now represent an extreme example of the linguistic fragmentation that Benjamin names as essential to the “task of the translator.” Early in the essay he relates how in the nineteenth century the Sophocles translations were characterized as “monstrous examples” of the literalness that leads to incomprehensibility, apparently casting them as an intriguing yet failed project. Yet near the end of the essay he refines this description to complement his own theory of translation:

Hierfür wie in jeder andern wesentlichen Hinsicht stellen sich Hölderlins Übertragungen, besonders die der beiden Sophokleischen Tragödien, bestätigend dar. In ihnen ist die Harmonie der Sprachen so tief, daß der Sinn nur noch wie eine Äolsharfe vom Winde von der Sprache berührt wird. Hölderlins Übersetzungen sind Urbilder ihrer Form; sie verhalten sich auch zu den vollkommensten Übertragungen ihrer Texte als das Urbild zum Vorbild . . . (GS IV:1, 20f.)

Confirmation of this as well as every other important aspect is supplied by Hölderlin’s translations, particularly those of the two tragedies by Sophocles. In them the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind. Hölderlin’s translations are originary images/prototypes (Urbilder) of their form; they are to even the most perfect renderings of their texts as an originary image/prototype is to a model . . . (SW 1: 262)

As Urbilder, originary images or prototypes, the translations take on a very different status from that of the “monstrous”: they become both representative and inimitable. All other translations of Sophocles—even those that are “most perfect”—are mere approximations of the Urbild that is Hölderlin’s translation.

Here Benjamin performs a twofold gesture that implicitly explains his particular, even personal interest in Hölderlin’s project: he marks Hölderlin’s Sophocles as “originary,” as the first of its form, and claims at the same time that this translation confirms the essence of his own argument. Could we then regard Benjamin’s essay as something of a translation (qua criticism, the illumination of that which inheres silently in the original) of that “originary” form? To be sure, Benjamin would not be the only reader of Hölderlin’s translations to suggest that they might require a translation of their own. Whatever he has said here, he claims, finds confirmation in Hölderlin’s
Urbild, yet the language of the translations only maintains the most delicate contact with the sense of the Greek text: “in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language” (SW 1: 262) (In ihnen stürzt der Sinn von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht in bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren, GS IV:1, 21). In an obvious and extreme way, the translation cannot shed light on its own truth content, because its translator has stretched the boundaries of his language so far that its gates “slam shut and enclose [him] in silence” (zufallen und den Übersetzer ins Schweigen schließen [GS IV:1, 21]). Given his evident interest in and even identification with Hölderlin as thinker, poet, and translator, we could indeed see Benjamin’s response to Hölderlin’s Sophocles as a dynamic expression of that text’s “living on”—not a translation of a translation (which, as he states, would be impossible) but an engagement with it that extends and expands its historical relevance.31

Benjamin’s apparent tendency to identify with Hölderlin throughout the early stages of his scholarly career also sheds light on some intriguing weaknesses in his argument here. Like so many readers both before and after him, he indulges in an overly neat conflation of the “monstrous” translation with the fallen translator. He does not miss the opportunity to point out that the translations are Hölderlin’s “last work” (SW 1: 262), thus suggesting that the “monstrous (ungeheure) and originary danger” to which he exposed himself in the process also made it impossible for him to fend off madness. Benjamin’s tendency to valorize this translator in particular begins to undermine his view that the subject is relatively unimportant in the process of producing a text’s truth content; here, Hölderlin rather heroically obliterates himself for the sake of the text (and, one could argue, for the sake of his audience). Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that Benjamin invokes one of Hölderlin’s most prominent terms from the translations here, ungeheuer, to describe the “originary danger” that the translator faces. In Hölderlin’s translation of Antigone, ungeheuer stood in for the Greek deinon and nearly matched its ambivalent complexity, evoking at once the exalted and the monstrous: “Ungeheuer ist viel, doch nichts ungeheuer als / Der Mensch” (Much is monstrous, but nothing is more monstrous than the human).

31. Samuel Weber reflects astutely on Benjamin’s concept of origin, outlined in the Trauerspielbuch, as it relates to translation. The origin is “the springing-forth that emerges out of coming-to-be and passing-away” (dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes), thus not a static moment but a relation to historical time, always in flux: “Its historicality resides . . . in its power to return incessantly to the past and through the rhythm of its ever-changing repetitions set the pace for the future.” Translation is similarly the “stopping place of an ongoing movement,” a gesture that touches the text without taking possession of it. “A Touch of Translation: On Benjamin’s ’Task of the Translator,” in Bermann and Wood, Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation (Princeton, 2005), 73.
This term, which the Chorus first used to describe humankind in general, came to be embodied by Antigone in our stead; ungeheuer encompassed the unfamiliar, unsettling quality that, through Antigone, the human subject is brought to recognize in himself. If Hölderlin as translator exposed himself to a danger within language that was ungeheuer—monstrous, enormous, disconcerting—then by Benjamin’s logic he, like Antigone, could only withdraw from the world as a result. His “last work” causes the gates to shut, just as Antigone’s ceremonial act of burial effectively causes the tomb to be sealed.

Like Antigone, then, the translator in Benjamin’s view has already taken on a sacrificial role—“for the sake of pure language, he breaks through decayed barriers (morsche Schranken) of his own language” (SW 1: 261)—and if Benjamin associates Hölderlin in particular with this mode of sacrifice, that gesture only reveals a certain consistency in his method. Though not in such an explicit form, he has already made this association in “Two Poems,” where he develops, in conversation with Hölderlin’s poetry, a radical concept of the poet’s courage. The implicit characterization of the translator as heroic—as attempting a task both dangerous and necessary—thus demands that we wind our way back to Benjamin’s very first engagement with Hölderlin. In the earlier essay, Benjamin finds that the poet’s courage in facing the danger of death and the dissolution of the self in pure relatedness (the revelation of das Gedichtete, the truth content of the text) brings salvation to the world. Benjamin first rejects the notion of Dichtermut that lends Hölderlin’s first version its title, claiming that its lack of clarity places it in line with vulgar locutions such as Weibertreue, too close to the plasticity of life to attain the purity of connection to the poetized that Benjamin’s concept requires. Courage as he conceives of it, on the other hand, may be the primary stance of both versions of the poem but only reaches the level of intellectual insight in the final version, where courage is not merely a static quality (“Man and death stand rigid, opposing one another”) but a dynamic recognition of relationship in the poet’s surrender to death, “the innermost identity of the poet with the world” (SW 1: 34). With this gesture of surrender, which in the context of the poetic text is also recognition and revelation, “the poet does not have to fear death; he is a hero because he lives at the center of all relations.”

The authentically “heroic” stance of the poet is thus not that of the first version, Dichtermut, in its static confrontation with death, but of Blödigkeit.

32. “Der Dichter hat den T od nicht zu fürchten, er ist Held, weil er die Mitte aller Beziehungen lebt” (II:1, 124).
timidity, a characteristic that does not automatically invite associations with boldness or risk. The courage that Benjamin locates in timidity seems to inhere in the willingness to do nothing at all.

In die Mitte des Lebens versetzt, bleibt ihm nichts, als das reglose Dasein, die völlige Passivität, die das Wesen des Mutigen ist; als sich ganz hinzugeben der Beziehung. (GS IV:1, 125)

Since he has been transposed into the middle of life, nothing awaits him but motionless existence, complete passivity, which is the essence of the courageous man—nothing except to surrender himself wholly to relationship. (SW 1: 34)

One result of this surrender is the dissolution of the poet as subject, the collapse of poet and poetry at the “untouchable center of all relation” (SW 1: 35).33 The form-giving gesture of Greek art, the realm of the first version, thus makes space for the Oriental, the overcoming of the limits and boundaries of form. The distance the poet has traveled, from being an individual part of the world of form to the formlessness of the center, ultimately finds expression, Benjamin claims, in the “intrusive caesura” of the poem’s final lines:

Gut auch sind und geschickt einem zu etwas wir,
Wenn wir kommen, mit Kunst, und von den Himmlischen
Einen bringen. Doch selber
Bring uns schickliche Hände wir.

Good, too, are we and skillful for [or sent to] someone to some end,
When we come, with art, and bring one
From among the heavenly beings. Yet we ourselves
Bring suitable [or appropriate, fitting] hands. (SW 1: 22; my italics)

Benjamin’s use of the poetic term “caesura” (Zäsur) here doubtless refers at surface level to enjambments in the last two lines, but the term has a loaded significance for Hölderlin’s Sophocles project as well, as Benjamin surely knew: in the remarks on Oedipus, the caesura underlay Hölderlin’s theory of the relation between the structure of tragedy and its effects, marking that point of “counter-rhythmic rupture” at which the tragic hero is

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33. On understanding the poet’s courage in relation to passivity see Corngold 1998, 163–64.
banished from the centrality of life into the “excentric sphere of the dead.” At this moment, which for Hölderlin coincides with the appearance of the seer Tiresias, “representation itself appears.” Benjamin is a bit cryptic here, however, and the single mention of the caesura is perhaps not truly helpful unless we understand it through another lens. Although in this passage “caesura” seems to refer primarily to a rhythmic disruption, Benjamin makes evident in other writings that he understands the depth that the concept possessed for Hölderlin. In the essay on Goethe’s Elective Affinities, he invokes Hölderlin’s definition of the caesura as “the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture” (das reine Wort, die gegenrhythmische Unterbrechung) to describe a moment in which “something beyond the poet interrupts the language of the poetry” (SW 1: 341) (etwas jenseits des Dichters der Dichtung ins Wort fällt) [GS I:1, 182]—literally, it falls into language, underscoring the poet’s inertia in that process). And here we find a deeper connection to the notion of courage expressed as passivity; at the point of caesura the poet’s primary role, for Benjamin, is to give room to something larger than himself: “Every expression comes to a standstill, in order to give space to an expressionless power inside all artistic media” (SW 1: 340f.; trans. modified) (in der . . . zugleich jeder Ausdruck sich legt, um einer innerhalb aller Kunstmittel ausdruckslosen Gewalt Raum zu geben).

Benjamin goes on to draw a logical parallel, which for our purposes possesses an almost tantalizing potential:

Solche Gewalt ist kaum je deutlicher geworden als in der griechischen Tragödie einer-, der Hölderlinschen Hymnik andererseits. In der Tragödie als Verstummen des Helden, in der Hymne als Einspruch im Rhythmus vernehmbar. (GS I:1, 182)

Such power has rarely become clearer than in Greek tragedy, on the one hand, and in Hölderlin’s hymnic poetry, on the other. Perceptible in tragedy as the falling silent of the hero, and in the rhythm of the hymn as objection. (341)

Composed in 1919–1922 and published in 1924–5, the essay on Elective

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34. Lacoue-Labarthe offers another highly evocative image of the caesura in an interview in the documentary film “The Ister,” where he describes it as an historical moment in which “humanity is all of a sudden short of breath.” This is, in a sense, another dimension of the “expressionless” moment of which Benjamin speaks; Lacoue-Labarthe ultimately associates the caesura as historical phenomenon with the reality of the Shoah, as an inexpressible moment after which “we will always have trouble catching our breath.” In Barison and Ross, “The Ister,” Black Box Sound and Image, 2004.
Affinities marks almost exactly the chronological span between the “Task of the Translator” (1921) and Benjamin’s habilitation, the Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels), which he completed in 1925. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that this passage incorporates elements of the earlier essays (Benjamin’s interest in Hölderlin’s writings on translation and his poetry) as well as the later study. The “falling silent” of the tragic hero to which Benjamin refers here is a trope identified by Franz Rosenzweig in the Star of Redemption, and it will play a significant role in Benjamin’s reading of Greek tragedy in contrast to the Baroque Trauerspiel. In the Trauerspiel book, the tragic conflict marks a transitional and ambiguous moment in which the hero must sacrifice himself for the sake of the world, and that sacrifice is both “first and final,” because at once he moves to invalidate the gods and to announce the onset of a new order:

Die tragische Dichtung ruht auf der Opferidee. Das tragische Opfer aber ist in seinem Gegenstande—dem Helden—unterschieden von jedem anderen und ein erstes und letztes zugleich. Ein letztes im Sinne des Sühnopfers, das Götttern, die ein altes Recht behüten, fällt; ein erstes im Sinn der stellvertretenden Handlung, in welcher neue Inhalte des Volkslebens sich ankündigen. (GS I:1, 285)

Tragic poetry is based on the idea of sacrifice. But in respect of its victim, the hero, the tragic sacrifice differs from any other kind, being at once a first and a final sacrifice. A final sacrifice in the sense of the atoning sacrifice to gods who are upholding an ancient right; a first sacrifice in the sense of the representative action, in which new aspects of the life of the nation become manifest.  

In the midst of this turmoil of transition, the tragic hero remains notably silent, confined for Rosenzweig within “the icy loneliness of the self” (Origin 107). The hero is emphatically not an object of identification for the audience but rather embodies change; his silence is the “sublime element” that generates a tipping point from the gods’ complete dominion to their decline, as the audience sees “not the guilt of the accused but the evidence of speechless suffering” (Origin 109) (nicht die Betroffenheit des Angeschuldigten, sondern das Zeugnis sprachlosen Leidens, GS I:1, 288). In tragedy Rosenzweig recognizes the “paradox of the birth of the genius in moral speechlessness,

moral infantility” (*Origin* 110) (*Das Paradoxon der Geburt des Genius in moralischer Sprachlosigkeit, moralischer Infantilität*, 289).\(^{36}\)

A sustained reading of the *Trauerspiel* book would take me too far afield here, but surely it is impossible not to be tempted by the apparent similarities between the respective portraits of the tragic hero in *Trauerspiel* and the poet in “Zwei Gedichte.” Indeed, when in the *Elective Affinities* essay Benjamin calls attention to the caesura’s convergence in the falling-silent of the tragic hero and the rhythm of Hölderlin’s late poetry, he more or less invites that comparison. To what extent, however, can we push the analogy? Can it lead us from Hölderlin as poet to Hölderlin as translator of Greek tragedy—the Hölderlin who, for Benjamin, stands alongside the poet from the very start?

Both Jennings and Beatrice Hanssen have noted the proximity of the poet in “Zwei Gedichte” to the character of the tragic hero, though not in direct relation to the *Trauerspiel* book. Jennings draws a specific parallel to Hölderlin by pointing out the similarities between the courageous poet and the tragic hero Empedocles, both of whom must save the world by surrendering their own subjectivity:

> [T]he poet and Empedokles are at once privileged and condemned to lead a life above and outside that of the ‘Volk.’ And again like Empedokles, the poet in Benjamin’s reading is able by virtue of his song to impose a new order and meaning on the lives of the people. . . . And finally, just as the problem of Empedokles’ death stands at the center of the drama, so, too, does the death of the poet in Benjamin’s interpretation figure as the major and necessary event in the realization of the new order. The poet’s death frees his song from the bounds of his subjectivity and thus objectifies and universalizes it. (Jennings 1983, 554)

This comparison is compelling and largely persuasive but does not go far enough. In Hölderlin’s dramatic text Empedocles is heroic not just because he speaks but because he first speaks too much—articulating too clearly his own privileged status as conduit to the divine—and then falls silent. He does not “impose a new order and meaning on the lives of the people” merely

\(^{36}\) Rainer Nägele associates this pivotal quality of Greek tragedy in Benjamin’s view with Hölderlin’s distinction of Greeks and moderns in the relationship between word and body (the Greeks’ more physically mediated relation [deadly-factual, tödlichfaktisch] vs. the moderns’ more spiritual and unmediated relation [“killing-factual,” tödendfaktisch]); both describe the “scene of the formation of the yet unformed, of giving language to the yet unspoken,” linking them to Kant’s concept of becoming mündig, that process of coming to consciousness that amounts literally to receiving a mouth. Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation*, 38. The discussion of Kant appears on pp. 7–8.
because of his song but also by his silencing of that song. The thrust of the tragedy rests on his recognition of this very point, as the priest Hermocrates describes:

Verderblicher denn Schwert und Feuer ist
Der Menschengeist, der götterähnliche,
Wenn er nicht schweigen kann, und sein Geheimnis
Unaufgedeckt bewahren . . . (FA 13: 821f., 1. 168–71)

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

While Empedocles achieves heroic status not just through his song but also through his silence, we also find a similar situation in Oedipus, whose self-blinding is another expression of the silencing which follows too much speech (where “the spirit of Oedipus, all-knowing, articulates the nefas” [FA 16: 252]). This is the aspect of tragic heroism that Rosenzweig elides but Hölderlin underscores: in the end, the hero’s silence is a necessary consequence of having said too much.

How can this description of the tragic hero’s silence possibly relate to the poet, as Benjamin suggests? By definition, after all, a poet cannot be silent. For Benjamin, however, he does embody “timidity,” and the association with the tragic hero may offer insight into the question of how to understand the somewhat problematic formulation Blödigkeit. Corngold calls it a “troublesome word . . . which while unquestionably meaning ‘timidity,’ also, like Blöheit, suggests short-sightedness and, in certain contexts, stupidity” (162). And indeed, at least in a contemporary sense it is difficult to separate the word Blödigkeit from the common exhortation blöd, meaning stupid.37 (Grimms’ dictionary, by the way, includes both infirmitas (feebleness) and timiditas as possible definitions along with hebetudo, mental dullness.38) The quality of timidity or weakness that Benjamin locates in Hölderlin’s poem, however, implies above all a receding from the spotlight into a realm of insignificance: “The poet is nothing but a limit with respect to life, the point of indifference . . . ” (SW 1: 35) (Er ist nichts als Grenze gegen das Leben, die Indifferenz . . . [II:1, 125]). The kind of courage denoted by Blödigkeit is the

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37. See Avital Ronell’s commentary in Stupidity (University of Illinois Press, 2002, where she discusses the “tradition” among commentators since Benjamin “of diverting the title from its disturbing implications” [7], whereas she sees Hölderlin’s shift from the poet’s courage to his Blödigkeit as “bringing forth stupidity as a crucial poetic sign” [8] in the tradition of Rousseau.

38. See the Grimm’s dictionary online at http://germazope.uni-trier.de/Projekte/DWB.
courage to withdraw into the marginality of death for the sake of a truth that will bestow itself on the living. The courage, in effect, to be tragically, heroically silent.

This concept of courage strongly recalls Hölderlin’s remarks on Oedipus, where he identifies the caesura as the moment in which Tiresias banishes the hero from a position of centrality to one of excentricity:

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 entrückt und in die exzentrische Sphäre der Todten reißt. (FA 16: 251)

He steps into the course of fate as overseer of the natural order which tragically displaces the human being from his own sphere of life, from the midpoint of his inner life into another world and tears him into the excentric sphere of the dead. (Constantine 64; trans. modified)

While the instance of caesura in tragedy denotes the hero’s silencing in the case of Oedipus (and Empedocles by association), it also represents in the remarks on Antigone “the moment of greatest risk in the course of day or a work of art”—the moment in which “the human being must hold onto himself the most” and therefore also “stand most openly there in his character.” In that moment of risk, which the human being confronts by holding on more tightly, the tragic hero, by contrast, must let go. Benjamin’s poet, with his stance of passive courage, must effectively do the same.

The weak and distant pulse that remains as mark of Hölderlin’s tragic hero thus links him conceptually to Benjamin’s poet, who lets go of his own form for the sake of the relatedness of the whole; both figures succumb to silence rather than “holding onto themselves” in the way that the human being typically must, at least for Hölderlin. Yet if letting go of oneself is related, for both Hölderlin and Benjamin, to accepting silence as opposed to maintaining one’s own voice—not being silent—then we find ourselves facing yet another intriguing triangulation. For who is more silent in this sense than the translator? Much more obviously than the poet, after all, he is meant to be as silent as possible in the course of fulfilling his task—silent not in the sense of creating a smooth and seamless translation (for that degree of intervention would in fact be the opposite of silence), but in the manner that Benjamin describes: as a surrender of control over the sense of a text in the name of a radical fidelity to its language. Perhaps one could even go so far as to say that the translator has no choice but to make himself “blöd,” if
he wants to achieve a translation of the peculiar quality that both Hölderlin and Benjamin demand.

Interestingly enough, Schleiermacher realized this a hundred years before Benjamin.

The attempt seems to be the most extraordinary form of humiliation that a writer, who is not a bad writer, could inflict upon himself. Who would not like to have his native tongue appear everywhere in its most enticing beauty, of which every literary genre is capable? Who would not rather beget children who are in their parents’ image rather than bastards? Who would like to show himself in less attractive and less graceful movements than he is capable of, and at least sometimes appear harsh and stiff, and shock the reader as much as is necessary to keep him aware of what he is doing? . . . These are the sacrifices that every translator must make; these are the dangers to which he exposes himself. . . . (Schulte and Biguenet 46f.)

The translator, in “keep[ing] the reader aware of what he is doing” and sacrificing his own poetic capacity for the sake of the text before him, must be willing to face humiliation, not just to accept the passive silence of Blödigkeit but also to risk the exposure of Blödigkeit in its other sense: to look stupid. At least in the eyes of many of his contemporaries, Hölderlin as translator certainly exposed himself in this respect. Schleiermacher recognizes and sheds light upon the injustice of such characterizations: the translator looks stupid, yes, but it is probably not his fault. Benjamin, on the other hand, takes that charge of stupidity, as it was applied specifically to these translations and this translator, and reformulates it as an asset. Hölderlin’s translations look stupid because as a translator he is blöd, and with respect to the “living-on” (Fortleben, the afterlife) of both the text and the languages that mark a crossroads within it, that is courage par excellence.

This process is in no way effortless, and a hint of the tragic hero’s “speechless suffering” is implicit in the stance of the poet or translator who gives space to a truth that otherwise defies expression. Much later, in a text of 1936 entitled German Men and Women, Benjamin revisits the idea of a suffering that this translator-poet must bear; taking up the language of a second letter to Casimir Ulrich Böhlerndorff from 1802 (subsequent to the more famous letter of 1801 regarding the interplay of the foreign and that which is one’s own, das Fremde und das Eigene) he describes the suffering that connects Hölderlin’s world to that of ancient Greece, not as “blossoming idealized world” but as “the desolate real one”: “This suffering is the secret of the historical transformation, the transubstantiation, of the Greek spirit, which
is the subject of Hölderlin’s last hymns” (SW 3:181). In historical transformation we find the same insufficiency with which the “desolate real” world of the Greeks would have met alongside its idealized image. For Hölderlin the best solution was to embed that suffering within his poetry by marking out, in language, the distance that this “Greek spirit” would have traveled.

In an interview in the fascinating documentary film “The Ister,” the filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg describes his visual concept of Hölderlin’s relation to Greek sources, which offers a similar, but more affirmative version of transubstantiation than the one Benjamin constructs: the image of a “little,” empty model of a stage marks the insufficient reflection of an idealized Greece, juxtaposed by Hölderlin’s words.

To have Greek theater in our life . . . the best . . . is . . . as a little model, not too small, but very precisely made, full in light. And if you then hear the words of Hölderlin, together with this empty stage, and see this piece, this model of Greece, then you have it. You have what he means.39

Taken as a reflection on the challenges of historical transformation, Syberberg’s concept is no pessimistic statement on translation’s impossibility. Nor does this process of reconstruction demand, as it does for Benjamin at the endpoint of the “Task of the Translator,” submitting to a strictly literal mode of translation. The reconstruction may be of smaller stature than its idealized source, but it is precise, and its contours are brightly illuminated. This offers a worthy counterpoint to the model of “invisible” translator and “transparent” text, effectively redefining the set of values that traditionally underlie perceptions of “good” translation: Hölderlin’s translations of ancient text—as well as their transubstantiation in poetic form, which for Benjamin involves a similar process—make no particular claim to transparency, and that is their virtue. What they do claim instead is the reconstruction of a text that lives on. The translator’s courage, the courage to be small, perhaps, and to allow one’s words to echo around an empty stage, is ultimately a stance more liberating than constrictive. It sheds light on language as language, on the unexpected relationships between languages and between texts and contexts that let a text live and breathe; and at the same time, it ennobles the gesture of Aufgabe as surrender, perhaps, but not failure. Translation in this sense is essential to the living-on (Fortleben) of texts in new contexts, and the translator bears responsibility for that living-on; like the tragic hero, she is the silent pivot that lets the source text cross barriers, whether temporal or spatial, and resonate anew.

39. David Barison and Daniel Ross, The Ister (Black Box Sound and Image, 2004).
Only a few years after Benjamin reflects in *German Men and Women* on the rupture between the distant, idealized world of the Greeks and the harsh glare of the “real”—implicitly situating the translator-poet, once again, as ethically bound to a purely passive courage—Martin Heidegger takes on the question of courage as well, also binding it to the figure of the translator-poet (and particularly the poet who engages in an exchange with classical Greece) in his 1943 lecture “Hölderlins Hymne ‘Der Ister.’” As we will see in the next chapter, Heidegger brings together Sophocles’ Antigone and Hölderlin’s late hymn “Der Ister” to consider the exchange or “conversation” (*Zwiesprache*) between the two texts as well as to engage in his own dialogue with them. In some ways, Benjamin and Heidegger are intriguingly close to one another in their respective assessments of the role of translation and the “foreign” in the development of one’s own language. The two seem to agree, for example, that the exchange with the foreign should remain transparent, that the translator-poet ought never to erase the tracks that lead him outward into the unknown and back to the “Eigenes,” that which is one’s own. For Heidegger, however, the ultimate goal of the “conversation” with ancient text is not, as it was for Benjamin, a glimpse of the connection to a universal truth inherent in the space between languages; rather, insofar as the poet represents the voice of his people, the Germans, his expression of courage serves a political rather than an ethical purpose, standing in the service of consolidating national identity during the crisis of wartime. This concept of identity, moreover, is not universal but rather originates precisely in the specific relationship of the Germans and the ancient Greeks—the idealized Greeks, once again, and not their “desolate real” world, in harmony with a no less idealized version of the Germans. Yet however emphatically Heidegger attempts to embed patriotic sympathies in his lecture, delivered in the period of the siege at Stalingrad, his reading and simultaneous performance of the concept of dialogue or *Zwiesprache* renders problematic any possibility of triumphant homecoming.