Tragic Effects
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Re-writing

Das ist die Lage.
Geschichte, blutige Koloratur.
Mehr Atem braucht sie als ein Bote hat.
Unfertig ist sie in jedem Augenblick.
Schon scheint vieles besser zu sein. Plötzlich
brichst du ein auf der Stelle, auf der du stehst.
Du fängst an zu graben in der Geschichte,
die nichts entschuldigt, nur erklärt, warum
es schwer ist, einen Grund zu finden für Schlaf
und Appetit, ein kurzes Leben lang.¹

That is the situation. History, bloody coloratura. It needs more
breath than a messenger has. In every moment it is incomplete.
Much already seems better. Suddenly you appear, in the place
where you stand. You begin to burrow into that history that
excuses nothing, only explains why it is so difficult, for an entire
brief life, to find reasons for sleep and appetite.

The story has been told now, more than once. Does that mean we
have come any closer to it? In his eloquent discussion of the Lutheran
Bible’s historical significance, Franz Rosenzweig describes the “miraculous”
moment in the history of translation in which the foreign work becomes,
for better or for worse, a native text, when “the receiving people comes forth
of its own desire and in its own utterance to meet the wingbeat of the for-
eign work.”² Sophocles’ tragedies might be said to have had their miracle in

von Martin Walser und Edgar Selge (Frankfurt: Insel, 1989), 1.
² Franz Rosenzweig, “Scripture and Luther,” in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Scripture
Hölderlin’s translation, in the “sensation” (as Rosenzweig described Luther’s translation) of its clash with the German language and the perceived madness of its form. Tragedy had already begun to have its German moment before Hölderlin’s texts made their disquieting debut, but his particular approach to the Greeks stands out for its longevity as well as its resistance to systematic resolution. Ultimately Hölderlin’s translation has changed the modern tragic landscape not because of its sheer legibility, as was the case with Luther’s Bible, but because of its challenges to reading; it compels, continuously and without end, its own revisitation. Indeed, it might be argued that Rosenzweig and his co-translator, Martin Buber—who claimed to have been dismayed precisely at the expressive beauty of Luther’s translation, its “smoothed-over conceptual language”3—eventually followed a path of translation already laid out by Hölderlin.

As we have already seen in Brecht’s adaptation, the ongoing confrontation in the twentieth century with the gaps and incoherencies of these Sophocles translations mimics for some readers the challenge of engaging with an even more incomprehensible history. The struggle with the text figures as a struggle with the past and thus is aligned with a certain approach to history that leaves wounds open. As a result, not just the tale but also its telling amount to “bloody coloratura.” “In every moment it is incomplete”: we tell that tale to no end, rummaging in its darkest corners for something that would show us how to finish. Yet its meaning—and its conclusion, its burial, as it were—eludes us, for with every shift of light or circumstance we must look upon it differently.

Since Brecht’s 1948 production, Hölderlin’s Sophocles has remained at the forefront of German classical reproductions: Carl Orff set Hölderlin’s Antigone to an operatic score for the Salzburger Festspiele in 1949 (Heidegger saw the 1951 production in Munich);4 a version of Ōdipus Tyrannus, with adaptation by Heiner Müller, was produced by the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin in 1967; and no less than seven theater companies staged high-profile productions of Antigone in the 1960s and 70s.5 Brecht’s Antigone,

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4. See Otto Pöggeler, Schicksal und Geschichte (Munich: Fink, 2004), 175–76. Pöggeler tells an amusing anecdote about a conversation between Heidegger and Orff: “During the storm of applause after the performance, a little man walked up to Orff on the semi-darkened stage, a man whom he first took to be a stage worker: ‘Thank you for reawakening classical tragedy! My name is Heidegger’” (11).
5. Pöggeler discusses the popularity of Sophocles on the German stage from the 1960s to the 1980s, citing 58 productions of Sophocles plays in the 1980s alone, but he does not specify how many
meanwhile, has also been produced and reproduced extensively, both in Germany and in various translations; Judith Malina’s Living Theatre alone produced the play over twenty times in sixteen different countries (Malina vii). The incompleteness (Unfertigkeit) of these plays, as Walser’s prologue indicates, evokes not only the text’s chequered past but the inexhaustibility of history itself, the more or less constant encounter of the past with its potential topicality in the present. Such is the status of Holderlin’s Antigone (and to a lesser extent, Oedipus) in the second half of the twentieth century; Antigone is invoked not merely to call attention to the relationship between past and present but in order to “make history,” to render it part of the present while (more or less) maintaining its fundamental estrangement.

In countless more general contexts, Sophocles’ Antigone has persisted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as an exemplary figure of resistance against the modern abuse of political power. As Malina writes in the introduction to her translation of Brecht’s Antigone, “... wherever we played it, it seemed to become the symbol of the struggle of that time and place—in bleeding Ireland, in Franco’s Spain, in Poland a month before martial law was declared, clandestinely in Prague—the play is uncannily appropriate to every struggle for freedom, for the personal liberty that Antigone demands for herself” (vii). Irish theater companies, for example, have embraced the Greeks as spiritual compatriots since the early twentieth century and have produced dozens of Greek plays in translation since the 1960s (including, most intriguingly from the standpoint of translation studies, versions in the Irish language). Indeed—in a gesture highly reminiscent of Hölderlin’s efforts to let translation amplify dramatic effect—in nations such as Ireland and South Africa, the very act of translation into native tongues (Irish and Afrikaans) lets Greek tragedy resonate with contemporary conflicts and resist dominant hegemonies. Using the classics as specimen piece also often lends enough subtlety to allow political protest to evade censorship; Athol Fugard’s 1973 play The Island, for example, in which two prisoners on Robben Island attempt to stage Antigone as a protest against their imprisonment, managed to earn considerable legitimacy within South Africa while clearly denouncing state oppression (Fugard called Antigone “the most powerful political play ever written”).

of those productions were based on Hölderlin’s translations (16).

6. See the anthology Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy, ed. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (Methuen 2002).


8. Athol Fugard, Statements (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986). See also Ron
To be sure, some manifestations of this theatrical trend make the leap to classical text (and Antigone in particular) too effortlessly, a tendency that Seamus Heaney criticized in a commentary to his own translation of Antigone, which he rechristened The Burial at Thebes: “Antigone is poetic drama, but commentary and analysis had turned it into political allegory. . . . I didn’t want the production to end up as just another opportunistic commentary on the Iraq adventure, and that is why I changed the title.”9 Insofar as Hölderlin’s translations plainly resist this type of transformation, the persistent use and reuse of his Oedipus and Antigone brings an additional layer of complexity (and an echo of Antigone’s stubborn resistance) to this process of “re-writing” the classics. Moreover, the back story of Hölderlin’s brilliant yet ill-fated attempts at translation vibrates, at least as subtext, within any new inscription in the German context —indeed, along with the legacies of Benjamin, Brecht, and Heidegger, which likewise belong to the rich Fortleben of these texts. Within this context, three appropriations of Hölderlin’s translations stand out in particular, both for their engagements with this difficult legacy and their provocative treatments of the texts in contemporary contexts: Heiner Müller’s Œdipus, Tyrann, which was staged by the director Benno Besson in the above-mentioned Deutsches Theater production (1967);10 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s Antigone de Sophocle, produced by Lacoue-Labarthe and Michel Deutsch in Strasbourg in 1977;11 and Walser’s 1989 Antigone.12 Despite the prominence of their respective authors, these adaptations call attention to themselves, like those of Heidegger and Brecht, in their deference to Hölderlin as well as their energetic self-justification. Composing not only in different settings but with different audiences in mind as well, each author argues for the particular timeliness of tragedy in the present day. And not just any tragedy—Hölderlin’s tragedy. Meanwhile, the sad conclusion to the poet’s own life often functions as an additional layer of both history and drama; though the authors remain fairly reticent on this point in the published texts, there is no question that Hölderlin haunts the stage, underscoring in a different way the contrast between a past that can be recorded and verified and one that constantly threatens to disappear. The task of rewriting the past as mourning play (Trauer-spiel) thus echoes

the special responsibility in the writing of history: a responsibility to preserve the singularity of the past in the face of ideological pressures that threaten with transformation.

In his 1997 article “German Antigone,” Hans-Joachim Ruckhäberle gives a fascinating account of Antigone productions (most of them using Hölderlin’s translation) in the last decades of the twentieth century. In 1977–78 alone, the play was featured in five different theater companies, along with Volker Schlöndorff’s nod to Antigone in Deutschland im Herbst (Pöggeler 14). In a moment in which West Germany finds itself seized by leftist violence, reeling from the kidnapping and murder of Hanns Martin Schleyer and the subsequent suicides of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan Raspe, Antigone becomes “simply too current” (einfach zu aktuell), as one of the executives in Schöndorff’s scene describes the film clip he has just seen; in the film, the presentation of “denied burial, rebellious dames” (verweigerte Beerdigung, aufsässige Weiber)—in short, a “terrorist play” (Terrorstück)—proves uncomfortably destabilizing to the status quo, such that not even various modes of “distancing” can prevent the executives from recommending that the film be shelved.

In general, theater productions of Antigone at the time presented the play as an expression of political and social dissent, with Hölderlin playing nearly as prominent a role as Antigone herself. While Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Deutsch’s version in Strasbourg featured an epilogue in which Hölderlin appears and composes verse, Nel’s 1978 Frankfurt production offered the argument that the poet himself experienced the conflicts of the play, the struggle of the individual with the state and the proximity of that struggle to madness. As Ruckhäberle points out, Günter Rambow’s posters created for the Frankfurt production illustrate tendencies typical of the recent history of German Antigonies: “the longing for the immediate, the primal . . . the attitude of the individual toward the state, state terrorism . . . the critique of the Germans” (Ruckhäberle 489). Paired with several citations from Hölderlin, the image of a burning chair summarizes this stance with its reference to a shattered domesticity: “The piece of furniture that might provide a certain state of sedentariness stands in the wilderness; a piece of civilization burns” (489).

The developments that Ruckhäberle describes thus have a common consequence: Antigone becomes Hölderlin, and both present the terrible price of political and social opposition. The past as mourning play is rewritten to include the author, as tragic heroine and translator meet in their forced subjection to the “terror of normality” (489). The Antigone put on display in a yellow cocktail dress and pushed out onto the dance floor in Nel’s Frankfurt production is also the poet packaged for mass consumption. To reduce both to a few key representative gestures guarantees popular interest by establishing the potential of both figures to bear contemporary relevance, and yet it also calls attention to a problem, namely, that the process of rewriting inevitably creates new fictions on its path to new “truths.” In this respect, post-war productions that align Hölderlin’s text with contemporary history do more than, as Ruckhäberle puts it, “transcend borders between presentation and action” (488). Whereas the need to respond provocatively to the problem of state violence prompts a return to Sophocles’ and Hölderlin’s texts in the 1960s and 70s, for the most part those responses are not concerned with the extent to which that return performs its own violence on the body of text. The possibility of making theater political—of linking presentation with action—is thus undermined from within, as the call to give voice to dissent also amounts to a silencing of the text’s inherent resistance to its own actualization.

The next step in this process of bringing the tragedy in line with contemporary history is logical, even predictable, and in some ways even more violent: the Germans become Antigone. Not every adaptation’s author takes that step; in fact, some actively avoid it. Brecht, of course, had explicitly rejected this comparison, claiming that “the great figure of resistance in the ancient drama does not represent the German resistance fighters” (BFA 25:74), while Heidegger had alluded to it in his conflation of ancient Greek glory with modern German potentiality. The post-war adaptations of Hölderlin’s tragedy, however, face the issue of appropriation from a different perspective, inviting a manner of free association that permits recognition on any number of levels. As Walser asserts in the remarks accompanying his 1989 adaptation, for example, the parallels between Antigone’s conscience and the German experience of conscience among the post-war, post-1968 generation guarantee the possibility of such free-form recognition: “Everyone is free to adapt the Antigone example in his own way. One can hear one’s own voice in all of those voices that appear here” (15). That recognition of

15. “Es ist jedem freigestellt, sich das Antigone-Beispiel auf seine Weise anzueignen. Es kann einer in allen hier vorkommenen Stimmen seine eigene hören.”
“voices” implies an identification between the viewer and the play’s historical points of reference, whatever they may be. Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Deutsch’s production, for example, which opened with Antigone and Ismene hiding in an attic, evoked for Sarah Kofman the memory of Anne Frank and thus confirmed the continuing relevance of tragedy for modernity: “And you think that a Greek tragedy translated in this way can concern us once again today” (Et vous pensez qu’une tragédie grecque ainsi traduite cela peut encore aujourd’hui nous concerner).16

In depicting the process of translation and re-writing as a tenuous balance between maintaining a link to the text’s foreignness and inviting parallels to the present, Müller, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Walser contend more or less directly with the legacy of Brecht as well as Hölderlin. This is perhaps as it should be, since the engagement with a text such as Hölderlin’s must also take into account its considerable afterlife. But these more recent attempts move forward from Brecht’s project insofar as they are punctuated by their need to account for tragedy’s significance in the present day, whether through identificatory strategies (as in Walser’s or Kofman’s remarks above) or a kind of post-Brechtian detachment, as Benno Besson aims to orchestrate with Müller’s Ödipus. Either way, this is also their major shortcoming.

Authorship unbound: Müller’s Ödipus, Tyrann

In the German Democratic Republic, Antigone was persona non grata. As Horst Domdey notes, the urgency of her task and the determination with which she acts irritate the “Socialist credo of reform” (reformsozialistisches Credo) in which the resolution of conflicts depends on the passage of time; there is no possible “futurization” of her conflict, for waiting any longer will result not in profit but in loss.17 In this respect Antigone represents the “opposite of reform: dissidence. She provokes a decision, the break with despotism (Gegenposition zur Reform—die Dissidenz. Sie provoziert die Entscheidung, den Bruch mit der Despotie [Domdey 288]). Small wonder, then, that the GDR saw no new adaptations of Antigone after Brecht’s in 1948 and no new productions of Brecht’s Antigone after 1963 (Domdey 319n.). Nevertheless, in a fascinating analysis, Domdey locates echoes of Antigone throughout Müller’s dramatic oeuvre.18 While Domdey focuses on figures

18. According to Domdey, Müller engages particularly with Antigone with respect to questions
of personal and political responsibility to the dead and forgotten in original pieces such as Mauser and Zement, however, as well in the 1983 Medea play Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten, Müller’s Ödipus engages differently with Antigone, particularly Brecht’s Antigone, insofar as it appropriates and adapts not only classical subject matter but also the structural rubric of the Modell.

Müller is well known for his adaptations of Greek tragedies, of course, from Philoktet (1966) to Medea (1983). Within this progression, his Ödipus, Tyrann might appear to play a fairly insignificant role. The published version appeared in 1969, two years after the stage production and three years after the text was composed. It lies chronologically between two other adaptations, Philoktet (1966) and Der Horatier (1968–69), and was published just before Müller’s return to more concrete socialist themes in Mauser. Given its obvious affinities with these “Greek” plays, Hans-Thies Lehmann concludes that the subject matter of this Ödipus reflects similarly on the problem of Stalinism, which Müller locates in a fundamental dissonance between theory and practice.19 And there is no question that this dissonance permeates the play, indeed endows it with its critical thrust by emphasizing, in the figures of Oedipus and Creon, the thirst for power that masks the incommensurability of theoretical “truth” with the experience of reality. In representing the birth of this duality of theory and practice, the play both brings forth the extent to which any claim to communion between the two is shaken at its very ground and points toward the radicalization of that split in a more contemporary context, as Müller asserts in an article accompanying the program notes for the Berlin premiere: “The piece describes its (bloody) birth, its most radical formulation is the atomic mushroom over Hiroshima.”20

In this respect, Müller’s rendering casts Oedipus’s self-blinding in a new light: it is no longer merely an abdication from the past but also, insofar as it represents a retreat into the realm of pure abstraction, symbolic of the self-satisfied reliance on a theoretical knowledge unconcerned with political responsibility (Schulz 89).21

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21. Müller, cited in Schulz 89: “Die Haltung des Ödipus bei der Selbstblendung . . . ist ein tragischer Entwurf zu der zynischen Replik des Physikers Oppenheimer auf die Frage, ob er an einer Bombe mitarbeiten würde, wirksamer als die H-Bombe, wenn dazu die Möglichkeit gegeben sei: Es wäre technisch süß (technical sweet), sie zu machen. Die Verwerfung dieser Haltung bleibt folgenlos, wenn ihr nicht den Boden entzogen wird.”
This is a logically consistent reading, both with respect to this text in particular and within the larger framework of Müller’s engagement with classical models. The Oedipus of Müller’s *Kommentar* is a figure of brutal self-enclosure in the realm of reflection:

. . . er hat die Zeit überrundet
In den Zirkel genommen, *ich und kein Ende*, sich selber.
In den Augenhöhlen begräbt er die Welt.22

. . . he overtook time
Caught in the circle, *I and no end*, himself.
In his eyesockets he buries the world.23

The vocabulary of the *Ödipus* play itself, though it remains notably close to Hölderlin’s text, evinces a subtle shift in emphasis from the question of human finitude to a more contemporary critique of the abuse of power; whereas in Hölderlin’s translation, the Chorus reports Oedipus’s denunciation of Tiresias indirectly to Creon (“People are saying it. In what sort of temper, I don’t know” [Man sagt. Ich weiß es nicht, in welcher Stimmung]), Müller’s Chorus attributes the slur directly to their ruler: “Spoken by the King. No one knows the reason” (Müller 42: *Aus Herrscherwort. Man weiß nicht seinen Grund*). Similarly, the Chorus’s concluding remarks present Oedipus not simply as a mortal man exposed to the isolation that describes human beings’ distance from the gods and from each other, as in Hölderlin’s version, but as a man “who was powerful above all” (Müller 89: *der vor allen mächtig war*).

Müller’s recourse to the rubrics of absolute reason and power recall his modifications in *Philoktet*, where the Greek model is altered much more radically to emphasize the tactical Realpolitik and moral relativism of Odysseus. However, the provenance and ultimate influence of *Ödipus, Tyrann* are also somewhat more complex. Initially, the adaptation received notably more attention than its immediate predecessor; while *Ödipus* had its première at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin in 1968, *Philoktet*, published in 1965 in *Sinn und Form*, only opened in the GDR for the first time in the mid-1970s and received little attention there (Schulz 71).24 In a more general vein,


———. 24. *Philoktet* did have a very successful premiere in Munich in 1968. As Schivelbusch notes,
Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes Müller’s adaptations of Greek tragedy as a universal “parable form” lacking in “historical and social concretion.” These doubts about the relevance of classical material, which are also clearly voiced in the published reactions to Œdipus, Tyrann, may reflect more general debates at the time about the importance of cultivating the nation’s cultural heritage. On the other hand, Mauser, the play that directly follows the publication of Œdipus, Tyrann, represents for Schivelbusch the fortunate synthesis of a classically tragic “collision” grounded in socialist history, a worthy successor to Brecht’s Maßnahme (Schivelbusch 108). Yet to frame Mauser in this way also reveals a debt to the practice of adaptation as “reutilization” in the Greek plays, particularly Œdipus: only that now Brecht himself is the “Klassiker,” with Müller’s play presenting, as Schivelbusch puts it, “a more advanced level of historical consciousness on the basis of more advanced historical development and historical knowledge” (Schivelbusch 111).

In this context of debate between a conventional devotion to the literary tradition and more controversial attempts in the 1960s GDR to establish new “Klassiker” such as Brecht, Œdipus, Tyrann assumes a far more intriguing status in what has been viewed as Müller’s creative development. Insofar as it essentially represents a threefold claim to “classicism” (Sophocles—Hölderlin—Brecht) and at the same time insists upon its recontextualization, Œdipus, Tyrann relates to the past as both referent and foil, just as Müller’s Mauser will later relate to its predecessor, Brecht’s Maßnahme. What Helen Fehervary describes as the “new historical actuality” of Brecht’s drama in Mauser thus mirrors the far more complex process of actualization underlying Müller’s Œdipus, in which not only language and thematics but

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25. For Schivelbusch, this emphasis on universal problems accounts for Müller’s popularity with western critics.


27. Helen Fehervary introduces this term in her foreword to Schivelbusch’s article, which she translated for New German Review (Schivelbusch 105).

28. Brecht’s Antigone was certainly a point of comparison on critics’ and audience members’ minds with respect to Müller’s text and particularly Besson’s 1968 production, as the “Gespräch über Œdipus, Tyrann” makes clear in the published edition (133–134). Brecht’s stature in the GDR at this point was unassailable, as David Bathrick has discussed; by the time he was honored in 1968 with a symposium celebrating his seventieth birthday, he had achieved an ironically “classical” status. Within five years, however, that status had been seriously undercut. See Bathrick, “The Dialectics of Legitimation: Brecht in the GDR,” New German Critique 1:2 (Spring 1974): 90.
also dramatic technique itself (Sophocles’ and Brecht’s) are appropriated and “reutilized.”

While the concept of his adaptation can be situated squarely within the context of Müller’s creative development, however—at once consistent with and at odds with the state’s view of the relevance of pre-revolutionary material—its execution raised more mundane concerns based within the political present. These concerns make their way into the text’s apparatus, which like Brecht’s concept of the Modell engages the performance and reception of a theater piece with its textual base. Yet the text produced by this mode of appropriation is Brecht’s Modell turned on its ear: while Brecht maintained a nearly uncanny degree of creative control over the publication and dissemination of the Antigonemodell, Müller seems to have ceded his authorial claim entirely, offering no commentary on the text or its production in this published version. Nevertheless, this Ödipus is not fatherless, far from it; opinions about how to interpret his fate abound in the published text, which is framed by introductory remarks by Karl-Heinz Müller and a concluding “discussion” (Gespräch) between the production’s director, Benno Besson, and a group of audience members.

With its multiple authors, the published Ödipus, Tyrann appears in theory to present a process of reception and adaptation that takes Brecht’s concept of the Modell a step further by integrating into the textual apparatus the thoughts of the “common man.” The remarks that follow Heiner Müller’s rendition of the text are the transcript of a discussion involving “artists, teachers, workers, authors, housewives, state functionaries, engineers, and colleagues” (bildende Künstler, Lehrer, Arbeiter, Schriftsteller, Hausfrauen, Staatsfunktionäre, Ingenieure und Mitarbeiter). This run through the gamut of GDR professions—the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker—and the use only of single initials to identify each speaker promote anonymity, as if to suggest that anyone may have a hand in the process of re-writing.

At the same time, however, it is clear that the man behind the only identifiable initial, B, ultimately calls the shots. For despite its overtures to communal theatrical practice, the published text does have two “authors” who do not easily relinquish control over text and production: the author of the foreword, Karl-Heinz Müller, and more prominently, Besson (B). In fact, there is no indication within the transcript of the discussion or after it that Besson took any of the group’s criticisms to heart. On the contrary, he spends much of the discussion defending his production from what he obviously perceives to be misinterpretation, at times seeming almost incredulous that spectators could have understood the play in this way. For example, when participants in the discussion attempt to describe the play as a tragedy
of fate (“Schicksals-Tragödie”) with “no spiritual relevance whatsoever to the present” (100), Besson responds in apparent frustration: “Have you seen the production? . . . And you think that in this production the tragedy of fate simply remained intact, that fate is presented in it as inescapable?” (100).29

The result of this theatrical tug-of-war—for the discussion after the play is obviously no less staged than the play itself—is more revealing than productive, given its context. Despite the air of indeterminacy and mutability that opens the discussion (like Brecht, Besson describes the production repeatedly as “only an attempt,” “a great experiment” (nur ein Versuch, ein großes Experiment [Müller 95]), the book in which that discussion appears opens with an interpretation that insists upon itself quite emphatically. Ironically, a central tenet of this interpretation—which is, in effect, a radicalized version of Hölderlin’s discussion—is that Oedipus’ fate need not be understood as predetermined, that he sets events into motion himself through his excessive will to knowledge. A reading that insists on the indeterminacy of fate thus relies heavily on its own determinacy as a reading. While Oedipus’ fate now lies in his own hands, the fate of the spectator—whose autonomy receives lip service but little else—cannot be separated from the dominant interpretation presented in the program, as K, one of the discussants, recognizes: “Everyone who believes he has seen your conception was prejudiced (vorbestimmt, literally predetermined) through your comments on Oedipus” (Müller 110). Even the word K uses to describe the influence of Besson’s interpretation on the spectator, “predetermined” (vorbestimmt), suggests a link to Oedipus’s helplessness with respect to his own fate.

Nor is that prescribed spectatorial experience meant to be inaccessible to the reader of this volume. Early in the introduction, Karl-Heinz Müller describes the parallels between the goals of staging the play and those of presenting it as text:

The reader should not only concretize his point of view on Sophocles’ tragedy, as with the mere reading of text, but rather should also be confronted with foreign points of view. Thus the book aims to communicate something of the process that otherwise takes place in the reception of art in the theater, where author, director, actor, theater technician, spectator—with their various opinions, standpoints, feelings, desires, abilities, means of expression—enter into communication in a production. (Müller 7)30

29. Haben Sie die Aufführung gesehen? . . . Und Sie finden, dass in dieser Aufführung die Schickalstragödie weiterhin einfach bestehen blieb, dass in ihr das Schicksal als unausweichlich hingestellt wird?

30. “Der Leser soll nicht nur, wie bei bloßer Textlektüre, seinen Gesichtspunkt zur Tragödie des
Not only the nominal author is responsible for the text’s point of view, then; everyone, in effect, is not merely invited but obliged to assume that responsibility. And in being confronted with the contributions of others to the text’s development, one also comes to recognize its polyvalent complexity. The engagement with the foreign, always integral to Hölderlin’s conception of Greek tragedy within modernity, thus expands as the notion of individual authorship (or individual translation, for that matter) dissolves into multiplicity. That multiplicity—foreign points of view, in the plural—is what the producers of Ödipus, Tyrann aim to concretize on the stage.

However, the discussion soon indicates that this mode of presentation only results in the audience’s confusion and alienation from the events on stage. Despite the creators’ lip service to the notion of collaborative authorship, the participants in the discussion after the play are unified only in their skepticism about the very particular valence of Besson’s production. The process of re-writing, stylized in the supposedly productive communication between director and audience, has been preceded and dominated from the start by a contextualized re-reading, through which Sophocles’ tragedy has attained a more contemporary “function”; the authors’ concern is no longer cathartic release, nor the experience of the dialectics of the nation-state developing out of the polis, but rather the unveiling of contradictions inherent in the individual’s confrontation with the new classless society:

> With the story of Oedipus, we can gain insight into the process through which the individual constructs himself in and outside of, with and against the new society—which took shape out of the classless and community-conscious tribal society—and about the contradictions in this process. (Müller 10f.)

The introduction goes on to describe the process of re-writing explicitly as a journey of discovery with a recognizable destination, the “discovery of the piece with the actors” (Entdeckung des Stücks mit den Schauspielern) and ultimately “the finding of the fable” (das Finden der Fabel). Simply put, the...
play now stages the downfall of the individual who abandons the community and thus seals his own fate:

The great individual, who had once brought good fortune to the community, released himself from the community. Oedipus remains alone with the power of his thought, with a body destroyed of his own accord, at a loss, superfluous (*unnütz*), no one follows him anymore (Müller 16).\(^{32}\)

Not only at a loss for action but “unnütz,” useless, Oedipus exchanges the infrastructure of community for the wilderness of abstraction. For Besson, this is what makes Oedipus a revolutionary figure in his time, an example of the “development of individual consciousness out of the community’s consciousness” (*Herausbildung des individuellen Bewusstseins aus dem Stammbewusstsein* [Müller 124]), whereas GDR society is involved in the reverse movement, in which individuals attempt to conceive of themselves as a social body (*Gesellschaftswesen*). Oedipus insists upon the possibility of crafting his own fate, which renders his position radical; but only an alienated audience can recognize that although he can indeed determine his fate from an individual perspective, he must also take account of the social determination of that fate, how the community affects individual identity.

Besson makes an eloquent argument here, one that is consistent with Karl-Heinz Müller’s introductory remarks; however, his discussants still seem skeptical. The tone of the exchange thus remains tense, as both sides reproach one another for drawing anachronistic conclusions (“You are drawing conclusions based on today’s way of thinking” (132: *Sie schliessen im heutigen Denkschema*). Yet Besson’s final remarks constitute a determined affirmation nevertheless: “Our discussion proves to me, precisely through the protestations that are being made, how correct it is to stage *Ödipus, Tyrann*, and indeed in the way we have produced it: as foreign (154).\(^{33}\) By emphasizing its distance from the familiar, the play’s producers are able to transform the play’s alienating effect on its perplexed audience into something productive. In a moment of somewhat elitist condescension, they even suggest that those who approached the discussion “naively” were able to glean the most from it: “those who approached without pre-established views, who let the play work

\(^{32}\) “Der große Einzelne, der einst der Gemeinschaft Glück gebracht hatte, löste sich von der Gemeinschaft. Ödipus bleibt mit seiner Denkkraft allein, mit eigenmächtig zerstörtem Körper, ratlos, unnütz, ihm folgt keiner mehr.”

\(^{33}\) “Unser Gespräch beweist mir gerade auch durch die Einwände, die gemacht werden, wie richtig es ist, Ödipus, Tyrann aufzuführen, und zwar so, wie wir ihn aufgeführt haben: fremd.”
its effect on them and listened (176). The organizer “D” thus draws out of the discussion a positive outcome that is meant to apply to the theatrical production itself: the reproduction, after the audience has viewed the play, of a flexibility that combines knowledge (here, the familiarity with classical myth, Kenntnis der Mythologie) with openness and the ability to listen.

This obvious dissonance between the prevailing interpretation of the text and its reception reveals a fundamental point of contention in GDR culture, the suspicion of intellectual elitism that hindered the success of most “modernist” art in the 1950s and 60s (Hermand 85–86). The apparatus of this Oedipus production falls into a similar category. If the state’s goal was to diminish the gulf between “bourgeois” art and the common people, then Besson’s attempt to engage in dialogue with workers and peasants of every stripe, though politically intriguing, proves utterly counterproductive. A concluding gesture of “agreeing to disagree” hardly resolves that contradiction, given that the means of production in this case remain in the hands of the play’s producers, thus on one side of the argument. While Heiner Müller himself, conspicuously silent at the moment of its publication, appears to have relinquished the play, Besson and company cannot help but claim authority (and perform that claim, both rhetorically and structurally, in their published text). The voices may be many, but the vision remains unmistakably singular.

Walser’s Antigone

More explicitly than any of the authors we have examined so far, Martin Walser reflects in his 1989 Antigone on the problems of writing and rewriting history; in this sense his reading resonates with the central arguments of this book, although it does not correspond to those arguments. The relationship to the past expressed through the perils of translation, which has informed the entire progression from Hölderlin to Heidegger, Brecht, Müller, and others becomes, for Walser, a more specific point of identification between Antigone and the Germans. Simply put, Walser seeks to make

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34. “... der also, der nicht mit bereits festgefahrenen Ansichten an die Sache heranging, der die Sache auf sich wirken liess und zugehört hat.” Besson himself exhibits, apparently naively, an elitism disconcertingly tinged with racism when he describes how the actors in the Chorus were unable to make their movements complement their vocalizations until the producers brought in African dancers to demonstrate “wie man tanzen kann” (160). Asserting the difficulty of achieving this dimension of physical “intelligence” in modern “civilization” (160), Besson succeeds in insulting both the East German performers (who were evidently too “civilized” to dance properly) and the “uncivilized” Africans who coached them.
Antigone stand for the post-war struggle in Germany to work through the past, commonly known as “Vergangenheitsbewältigung.” The focus of the play as well as her character is, after all, a “burial problem” (Beerdigungsproblem [Walser 9]), “because the past has not been cleared up yet” (12); thus Antigone is no historical drama but rather “an example of how to deal with one’s own recent history” (12).

Walser’s swift transition from Antigone to the collective “we ourselves” serves the argument that, far from requiring “topicalization” (Aktualisierung), the conflict of the play in its original context can easily apply to “us”: “We do not have to graft our own motives onto Sophocles in order to make him useful to us. Nor must we saddle Hölderlin with topicality in order to make him our contemporary” (11). Distinguishing his adaptation from Brecht’s, therefore (and by extension from Müller’s as well), Walser instead claims Antigone for modernity based on the universality of the play’s themes; despite having been written 2400 years ago, he writes, it can still be “our piece” (unser Stück).

At the cusp of a stunning historical turning point in 1989, then, Walser places primary emphasis on the “usefulness” of the piece to highlight the correspondence between the problem of burial and a particular set of criteria for historiography, ostensibly inspired by Antigone: “The past must be swept underground, but how? As something incomparably, thus incomprehensibly evil? Or historically determined and explicable, despite all of its unique monstrosity. . . . And already, one would be amidst the buzz of voices and counter-voices (13).

Walser’s entire discussion in these remarks focuses on the thematics of Sophocles’ play, breaking off only to offer praise for Hölderlin’s translation and justification for his adaptation of it. If, however, Walser is concerned with representing our encounter with the past, with our search for a way to be “done” with it, to what extent does this concern extend to his appropriation of Hölderlin’s text? He refers often enough, here and elsewhere, to his lifelong devotion to Hölderlin’s lyric;37 yet in this piece he also strives to explain why certain alterations were necessary. Evoking in positively Hölderlinian phrasing the translator’s “relentlessly lyrical breadth of expression” (rücksichtslos lyrischen Ausdrucksweite), his “sleepwalkingly’ free use

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35. “Wir müssen Sophokles nicht mit unseren Motiven impfen, um ihn für uns brauchbar zu machen. Wir müssen auch Hölderlin nicht aktuell aufladen, um ihn zum Zeitgenossen zu machen.”


of language” (traumwandlerisch freien Sprachgebrauch), Walser describes his attempt to dramatize the translation’s lyrical dimension: “No general restriction of the elevated tone’s frequency, more of an effort to make Hölderlin’s elevated tones useful for the purpose of Antigone [für den Antigonezweck]” (12).38

The reference to the “usefulness” of tone in the service of the “Antigone purpose” (Antigonezweck) is, interestingly enough, both consistent with and contradictory to Hölderlin’s project; for Hölderlin, as we have seen, tone bears an effect that intensifies and complicates the effects of tragic plot. Walser, however, aims to generate a particular effect through the clarification (and modernization) of Hölderlin’s language and syntax. But does this shift to the idea of making tone “useful” as a conveyance of plot not simultaneously constitute a “burial” of the text’s strangeness, which had essentially defined it? A few glances into Walser’s text certainly indicate that this has happened. One of the most striking lines of Hölderlin’s translation, for example, Ismene’s remark “Was ists, du scheinst ein rothes Wort zu färben?” (What is it? You seem to color a red word) becomes “Was ist es? Was bewegt dich so?” (24: What is it? What agitates you so?). The Chorus’s disconcerting self-assessment “Jetzt aber komme ich eben selber aus dem Geseze” (Now even I myself am brought outside of the law) becomes “Jetzt verliert ich auch noch den Kopf” (58: Now even I am losing my head), and the striking double valence of seeing Antigone “wandeln” in the same passage (both to wander and to change) becomes flatter and more concrete: “wenn ich Antigone / seh auf dem Weg / ins alleschweigende Bett” (58: when I see Antigone on the way into the all-silent bed).

This reluctance on Walser’s part to present the sheer foreignness of the text he is so eager to reference is significant in light of his interest in the problem of historiography, which he describes as the possibility of “clearing up” (klären) the past. The formal peculiarities of Hölderlin’s text constitute an active rejection of that plea for clarification, a rejection that operates alongside Antigone’s own refusal to be “done” with the past. Both Sophocles’ text and Hölderlin’s translation offer a more complex relation to the ruins of history, letting the past remain open like a wound rather than burying it underground; Antigone’s defiance in the name of her brother Polynices is, after all, not simply a burial but a ceremonial gesture meant to preserve his memory. The unending responsibility to the past, despite its irritation, is central to Antigone’s resistance of Creon’s mandate and to Hölderlin’s

38. “Keine generelle Frequenzbeschneidung des hohen Tons, eher eine Bemühung, Hölderlins hohe Töne für den Antigonezweck brauchbar zu machen.”
method of translating, which always upholds the status of an untranslatable remainder. Re-writing the past for Hölderlin demands the preservation, even the orchestration of the distance which defines our relationship to it. Walser, in claiming simply that Antigone has never been “plainer” (eindeutiger) than it is today, misappropriates Hölderlin’s project in this fundamental sense.

What exactly does Walser find “eindeutig” about the play? The cornerstone of his reading is the question of conscience and its relationship to personal and civic responsibilities. From where does conscience emerge? How is it implemented in public and private contexts? What is its relation to reason (Vernunft)—that is, can one follow one’s conscience in a direction that is also “unreasonable” (unvernünftig), and what would be the implications of that decision? Antigone’s act is fundamentally an act of conscience, but it necessitates her becoming guilty; it represents a Gegenstimme, an irrational counterpoint to the rationality of the state. She refuses to allow conscience to be proscribed by an outside instance, and in this sense exemplifies the universal struggle against state injustice: “In our intellectual history, Antigone is the first great insurgent against the captivity of conscience (die erste große Empörerin gegen die Gefangennahme des Gewissens) (10).

To be sure, this concern for the voice of the individual in counterpoint to the dominance of the state has been central to readings of the Antigone for centuries, and is particularly prevalent in recent interpretations, such as Judith Butler’s and Martha Nussbaum’s, which have focused impressively on the ethical complications posed in both Greek and modern societies by an outlier such as Antigone. The primary problem with Walser’s reading, however, is that his emphasis on questions of conscience throughout the remarks invariably ends with the nearly imperceptible shift to “ourselves” (uns selber), thus to the more pressing concern with the contemporary articulation of guilt. And that guilt no longer has much to do with Antigone at all. “Is it possible to regulate, to dictate our association with our guilt? Can one association be better than another?” (13). Antigone’s striking courage in Sophocles’ tragedy emerges not from the recognition of her own guilt; although she does voice that guilt, it is secondary to her resolve to act in spite of the assurance that she will become guilty, at least from the standpoint of the state. How, then, does this relate to the guilt that Germans bear in 1989? The comparison, when we think it through, is problematic. Antigone acknowledges in advance a guilt imposed by a human instance of law while invoking on her own side an unwritten, eternal law associated with the

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divine. What does Walser invoke in his discussion of individual conscience and ethical responsibility? In effect, he cannot invoke anything more than a guilt that is undeniable and for which he, and many others, still struggle to find words.

The public acknowledgment of our guilt has in the meantime led to a competition which is less concerned with guilt itself than with the fact that one is always criticizing another for not expressing our guilt properly. . . . In this way one is already something positive compared with the other. The terrible negative, however, guilt, remains incomprehensible. (14)

As long as words fail, guilt remains at a distance. It is impossible not to find in this statement a frustrated expression of Walser’s own experience in taking controversial positions with respect to Germany’s troubled history. By equating the difficulty of publicly acknowledging guilt with Antigone’s dilemma, Walser places the Germans (and specifically himself) on her side once more. In Walser’s defense, however, I read that equation more as a challenge than a self-congratulatory comfort. One should not take Antigone’s side because she is “right,” or even because she is “innocent,” but because she is courageous. Because she risks something. Reminiscent of Brecht’s claim that Antigone acts without regard for anyone else, Walser’s attempt to provoke his readership places the heroine in the exemplary position of heeding her conscience, which is always “the ownmost thing, Anti-public as such” (allereigenste Sache. Antioffentlich schlechthin [13]).

That this affirmation of risk is conspicuously absent from Walser’s approach to Hölderlin’s text may not be entirely unavoidable, given that he is constructing the adaptation with a specific audience in mind. Nevertheless, with his version he does describe the approach to the tragic that shaped Hölderlin’s interpretation and translation. As Hölderlin did, Walser presents the argument that a tragedy such as Antigone does not give us answers but rather raises questions and highlights contradictions. The main difference is that Hölderlin sought to present this sense of contradiction through his translation; Walser, by striving to clarify that problematic thematically and highlight the “usefulness” of the text, manages to dampen the structural impact that constituted Hölderlin’s primary contribution.

A comparison of the final lines of the translation and Walser’s adaptation provides a case in point of this simultaneous emphasis and effacement; while Hölderlin’s line reads “Um vieles ist das Denken mehr, denn Glückseligkeit” (Thinking is about much more than happiness), Walser’s rendering, “Die einzige Glückseligkeit ist doch das Denken” (76, Thinking is the only happiness) constitutes a near complete reversal. For Hölderlin, reflection reaches beyond happiness and toward the nothingness of death; for Walser, thought is redeemed as the only legitimate form of happiness. Where Walser’s reading and adaptation “settle” in happiness, then, Hölderlin’s remains unsettled and unsettling (unheimlich), pointing to the subject’s status beyond the representable, the translatable, the conceivable.

Lacoue-Labarthe: L’Antigone de Sophocle

Of the contemporary adaptations of Hölderlin’s Sophocles discussed here, Lacoue-Labarthe’s 1978 translation into French, rendered by a scholar of Romanticism and literary theory, is the most philosophically rigorous—and the most successful. Concerned less with literality than with the conveyance of a certain experience of dislocation, Lacoue-Labarthe’s project includes, in its published form, both an interlinear translation and a set of remarks. The former may be a nod to Benjamin, who stated in “The Task of the Translator” that the best translation is interlinear, since no translation can be truly literal; the latter is a justly influential essay, La césure du speculatif, that converses with both Hölderlin’s own remarks and the literary-philosophical thinking of the tragic, a line extending from Aristotle to Schelling to Szondi. Perhaps because it is an attempt to translate rather than to adapt Hölderlin’s text—thus addressing questions about how closely it hews to the “original”—Lacoue-Labarthe’s Antigone takes on Hölderlin’s Antigonä in a manner different from the other appropriations we have seen in the twentieth century; because it is a translation, the author cannot simply change the text to fit a specific purpose but rather must engage in interpretation (not only of Sophocles’ plot, but of Hölderlin’s mode of translation as well). Lacoue-Labarthe’s rendering follows closely from Hölderlin’s project, precisely because he arguably thinks more about translation than about the play itself—as Hölderlin did, of course, in confronting Sophocles.41

41. In the introduction to his essay “La césure du speculatif,” Lacoue-Labarthe describes his project in this light: “On n’y trouvera donc pas une ‘présentation’ d’Antigone: ces pages n’ont autre but que d’éclairer brièvement, dans la mesure du possible, le sens du travail théorique mené par Hölderlin sur la tragédie depuis le projet d’Empédocle jusqu’à la rédaction des Remarques sur la traduction de
Although Lacoue-Labarthe was one of the most prominent interpreters of Hölderlin in France during his lifetime, Hölderlin's poetry in particular has attracted a wide readership and has been translated repeatedly into French. Lacoue-Labarthe’s curious decision to translate one of the most difficult translations in the German oeuvre—only Buber and Rosenzweig’s Bible translation seems comparable—thus does not emerge from out of the blue. Nevertheless, in his foreword Lacoue-Labarthe points explicitly at the timing of this production: “But what was important was also (because it is a matter of some urgency) to listen to Hölderlin in France, today, on the stage” (Mais l’important était aussi (parce qu’il y a bel et bien urgence) de faire entendre Hölderlin, en France, aujourd’hui, sur une scène [Lacoue-Labarthe 1978, 2]). The historical reference here may, as noted above, be an attempt to evoke the debates surrounding the issue of left-wing radicalism in Germany, debates in which Antigone frequently served as a cultural touchstone.

Although his detailed notes to the translation clearly demonstrate his constant attention to small details of Hölderlin’s discourse, there is one point at which Lacoue-Labarthe’s impressive sensitivity to Hölderlin’s text and project becomes especially apparent. Where no one else noticed anything out of the ordinary, Lacoue-Labarthe finds a strange alteration in Hölderlin’s text, the condensation of three minor figures in Sophocles’ play (the guard who discovers the dust on Polynices’ body, the messenger who reports Antigone’s act, and the servant who describes the scene in the tomb) into a single “messenger” character. In entrusting to one voice the charge of reporting “that which cannot be represented” (157), Lacoue-Labarthe explains, Hölderlin also compels the representation to expose “the separation . . . between the properly dramatic and the narrative (the scene and its ‘outside’)” (157: le partage . . . entre le dramatique proprement dit et le narratif [la scène et son ‘dehors’]). The very appearance of this separation guarantees its permanence: “the tragedy never breaks away from narration and does not cease to strive, mournfully, for a ‘theatricality’ it can never accomplish” (157: la tragédie ne s’affranchit jamais du récit et ne cesse de s’efforcer, douloureusement, vers un ‘théâtralité’ qu’elle ne peut accomplir). In this sense the messenger is for Lacoue-Labarthe “the pivot of the tragic structure” (157); his appearance and reappearance in Hölderlin’s version give him a history and a substance that mark his presence on stage as a caesura and place him in league with the seer Tiresias, whose pronouncements are likewise defined by their narrative quality.

Sophocle” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1978, 185).

That Hölderlin placed this structural and rhetorical disturbance into the heart of a text that constantly tests the disruptive forces of language and syntax is highly significant. Reporting in narrative form “that which cannot be represented” is the dramatization of the experience of falling short, of the impossibility of translation itself. Words separate their speaker from the theatrical, set him apart from the mise en scène, making evident that the entire play, at least in Hölderlin’s hands, dramatizes the collapse of representation’s solid ground—the persistence of remains, unrepresentable and untranslatable, to which the play relates mournfully.

Surely it is in part this separation to which Lacoue-Labarthe refers when he writes in “The Caesura of the Speculative” that Antigone is “the most Greek of tragedies,” thus not “reconstitutable” in the way that Oedipus is (220); however, this very “Greekness,” this insistence upon its own difference in our context, is also what makes the tragedy “modern.” Sarah Kofman notes the dislocating effects in Lacoue-Labarthe and Deutsch’s production, which began to take shape when the audience entered, via a decaying staircase, what looked like the attic of a bombarded house: “you are in an entirely other space than the classical stage, in a place that radically displaces ‘theater’ . . . in the space of the caesura that shatters that of representation—of radical disruption and dislocation” (Kofman 78).43 The play that ensued was both Greek and modern, evoking in its use of French “three languages, three rhythms, three epochs” (80). If Kofman’s account of the staging is reliable (and there is no indication that it is not), then translation once again becomes a crucial dimension of effect here, introducing a gap sufficient to displace the Antigone of Sophocles and let Hölderlin’s Antigone emerge, only to emphasize once again her distance from a French audience in 1978. Yet in emphasizing that separation, Lacoue-Labarthe evokes at the same time a strange alliance between texts, between spectatorial experiences.

That which is played out here is the infinite distance that separates Hölderlin from the Greeks and that which distances us from Hölderlin; but in both cases, what is played out in extreme distancing is extreme proximity. (Kofman 81)44

43. “. . . vous êtes dans un tout autre espace qui celui de la scène classique, dans un lieu qui déplace singulièrement le ‘théâtre’ . . . dans l’espace de la césure, qui brise celui de la ‘représentation,’ le trouble et le disloque singulièrement.”

44. “Ce qui se joue là, c’est la distance infinie qui sépare Hölderlin des Grecs et celle qui nous éloigne de Hölderlin: mais aussi bien, dans les deux cas, so joue dans l’éloignement extrême, l’extrême proximité.”
Kofman captures it well: for Hölderlin and for Lacoue-Labarthe, Antigone is “the tragedy of isolation, of the interval, of the in-between; of failure, Hölderlin’s and ours” (la tragédie de l’écart, de l’intervalle, de l’entre-deux; de la défaillance, celle de Hölderlin, la nôtre [81]). If “we” can learn anything from Hölderlin’s Antigone in particular, it is this, that language and representation can only, in the end, show us the blank spaces that gape wherever the stability of law meets its resistance, wherever translation runs up against that which it cannot master. Lacoue-Labarthe lets this strange experience of proximity dominate his rendering of the play, thus deferring more to Hölderlin’s method of translating than to the events of the drama. The result is a curiously “Hölderlinian” translation and interpretation, one that refuses to resolve imperfection for the sake of purposeful adaptation.

In the final analysis, it is evident that Hölderlin’s approach to tragedy continues to fascinate and confound readers and spectators with an irresistible combination of eloquence and opacity. The unsettling effects of Hölderlin’s mode of translation demand further elaboration just as emphatically as the stories they present. By not only preserving the distinctions of the source text—including the fierce contradictions inherent in tragedy—but intensifying the discontinuities that translation must produce, he offers the framework for an argument within modern translation theory and practice that would leave such gaps between languages open to interpretation, negotiation, and experimentation. Indeed, this gesture bears a significance that extends beyond the realm of literary studies, as Emily Apter has proposed in The Translation Zone, into intersubjective relationships across national, cultural, and linguistic borders:

Cast as an act of love, and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements.45

Apter’s inclusion of the experience of history here points up the particular depth and significance of Hölderlin’s project and its numerous adaptations in the present day—the considerable “living-on” of an exchange that refuses mere transparency, a somewhat messy history that presupposes its

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own eternal state of incompleteness. Indeed, as we have seen, that quality of incompleteness not only motivates adaptation but ultimately becomes enfolded within the dramatic presentation. Hölderlin’s legacy, then, is not precisely in the tradition of the “querelles des anciens et modernes,” understood as the attempt to situate modernity against a static or idealized notion of antiquity; nor does it suggest that modern discourses ought to translate classical material into current contexts. Rather, his attention to the theoretical problems of translation, always in conjunction with the conflicts presented within the text, allow an ancient text to open up points of contention within modernity itself. Perhaps no other tragedies could be as modern, or as postmodern, for that matter, as Hölderlin’s; in the best sense of his own term, they leave room for the “tearing spirit of time,” that articulation of the passage of time that cannot finally be calculated, only brought endlessly into contradiction with itself.

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46. By contrast, Apter points out the new “will to system” inherent in technological approaches to translation, in which “everything (in theory at least) becomes translatable through the medium of digital code” (10). The sheer difficulty of Hölderlin’s texts represent a stubborn (and laudable) counterpoint to this idea of translation’s “systematicity.”