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Tragic Effects
Ethics and Tragedy in the Age of Translation

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ABBREVIATIONS


Thinking in Translation

Ich kenne mich zwar nicht selbst genug, um zu wissen, ob ich eine wahre Tragödie schreiben könnte; ich erschrecke aber bloß vor dem Unternehmen und bin beinahe überzeugt, daß ich mich durch den bloßen Versuch zerstören könnte.

I do not know myself well enough to know if I could write a true tragedy; however, I am terrified of the very undertaking and am nearly convinced that I could destroy myself in the mere attempt. (Goethe to Schiller, 9 December 1797).1

Goethe knew. Perhaps it is not surprising to discover that he knew, but in the shadows cast over the generations that followed him, his words possess an especially marked poignancy. While Goethe does arrive at his own version of classical tragedy in Iphigenie auf Tauris, he ultimately criticizes that attempt as too “damned humane” (verteufelt human); meanwhile, there is little doubt that the peril he describes in confronting the tragic continued to haunt those who bore his legacy: Hölderlin, Kleist, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud.2 To produce “true tragedy” in a modern age implies nothing less than the pursuit of a phantom. Anyone who attempts it must reconstruct a world out of elements that are not only of another language but also of another time, another place, an entirely other system of thought. It demands, in other words, a constant engagement with a past that in

2. Speaking of the development of German drama after Goethe and Schiller, George Steiner describes Kleist and Hölderlin, as well as Georg Büchner and J. M. R. Lenz, as a “family of hectic genius” for whom “drama is the embodiment of crisis.” Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (New York: Knopf, 1961), 216, 218.
many ways has come to define us, but nevertheless remains just beyond our reach; and whoever does not heed this imperative risks losing contact altogether with his distant source. The project of modern tragedy departs from a nucleus that is at once magnetic and inaccessible.

Nonetheless, this inaccessibility has hardly proven a barrier to tragedy’s longevity as a model and point of departure in the post-Enlightenment age. Greek tragedy treats themes that remain universally familiar and provocative for modern readers, and nowhere is this more true than in the intellectual history of modern Germany. Since the birth of what Peter Szondi has called the “philosophy of the tragic” in the late eighteenth century, tragedy has served as a paradigm in aesthetic and intellectual efforts to define, illuminate, and stabilize modern subjective experience. Essential to the development of both Weimar classicism and German idealism, tragedy’s presentation of a society and a central figure in crisis has inspired confrontations with fundamental questions of social justice, ethical action, and individual responsibility. Why have so many poets and thinkers chosen to return again and again to a small set of dramatic texts written for a specific occasion, the Athenian Dionysia festivals, over two thousand years ago? And perhaps even more importantly, what does it mean to appropriate the themes and structures of ancient tragedy in the service of defining modernity? What is lost in such a transmission from ancient text to modern context? What is gained?

This study will place such questions into sharper relief by focusing on a progression of thought inspired by the often controversial practice of translating the Greeks. In 1804 Friedrich Hölderlin published translations of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* that were widely ridiculed by his contemporaries as incomprehensible products of a disturbed mind. “Is the man insane, or is he only pretending to be,” wrote Heinrich Voss, the son of the great translator of the *Odyssey*, “and is his Sophocles secretly a satire

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3. “Since Aristotle there has been a poetics of tragedy, but only since Schelling a philosophy of the tragic” (*Seit Aristoteles gibt es eine Poetik der Tragödie, seit Schelling erst eine Philosophie des Tragischen*). Peter Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1961), 7.

4. Classical scholars admit that our knowledge of what went on at those festivals is limited by our considerable historical distance from the events and the small proportion of remaining artifacts at our disposal; as Christian Meier asserts, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides each likely composed about one hundred plays, of which only about a dozen now remain, and they were not the only tragedians to participate in the festival’s competitions (*The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, trans. Andrew Webber [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993], 54). For a concise explanation of the festival setting, see also John J. Winkler and Froma Zeitlin’s introduction to *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 4–5.

5. In the Frankfurt edition of Hölderlin’s works, D. E. Sattler includes extensive notes on the reception of these translations in the nineteenth century. Friedrich Schelling, for example, claimed in a letter to Hegel that the translations “express fully his ruined mental condition” (*Seinen verkommenen geistigen Zustand drückt die Übersetzung des Sophocles ganz aus*). In FA 16: 20.
of bad translators? ... You should have seen how Schiller laughed” (FA 16: 20). In an age of celebrated and masterful translations, from Voss’s Homer to Humboldt’s Aeschylus and Schlegel’s Shakespeare—an age in which translation, in fact, was regarded as a tactical necessity in the development of German cultural identity—Hölderlin’s Sophocles project could perhaps only have appeared hermetic, tortured, mad. Although philosophers of language such as Herder and Schleiermacher soon argued for a translation practice in which the receiving language gains from being “bent toward an alien likeness,” the most celebrated translations of the time were still clearly characterized by their accessibility and stylistic beauty. The best sort of translation, as Wilhelm von Humboldt stipulated in his introduction to his translation of Agamemnon, benefits from the encounter with the source language while avoiding the loss of identifiable cultural markers: the translator must approach “the foreign” (das Fremde) without crossing over into “foreignness” (Fremdeheit) (Schulte 58). No wonder, then, that Hölderlin’s Sophocles, with its jarring hybrid syntax and often disorienting word choice, seemed to have fallen to earth from a distant star.

While Hölderlin’s engagement with Greek tragedy may have begun as a somewhat bizarre digression within the culture of translation around 1800, however, it has maintained a relevance far beyond the reach of its more conventionally readable cohort. In a general sense, as poet Hölderlin has gained nearly all of his renown since the start of the twentieth century, but it is his Sophocles that has captured a particularly large share of scholarly and creative interest. Both between and since the two world wars, no other

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7. Friedrich Schleiermacher, “On the Different Methods of Translating,” trans. Waltraud Bartsch, reprinted in Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida, ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 47. This tension between translation theory and practice around 1800 might perhaps inhere precisely in the cultural agenda that sought to define German national identity in relation to an abstract and mutable concept of the “foreign.” As Lawrence Venuti has argued, Schleiermacher’s advocacy of the “foreignizing” translation was perhaps based on an agenda of bourgeois nationalism: “Since the category ‘foreign’ here is determined by the educated, Schleiermacher is using translation to mark out a dominant space for a bourgeois minority.” The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation (Routledge, 1995), 103.

8. M. B. Benn already noted this retroactive interest in 1967; see “Hölderlin and the Greek Tradition,” Arion 6:4 (Winter 1967): 495. In the subsequent 40 years the degree of creative and intellectual fascination has more likely intensified than subsided.
rendition of Sophocles’ *Antigone* has had a more profound impact on the German stage, and perhaps only Hegel’s reading of the same tragedy has proven a more influential intellectual confrontation with the modern experience of the tragic. Cited and adapted by prominent artists and intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Bertolt Brecht, Heiner Müller, Martin Walser, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Hölderlin’s translations and accompanying remarks have become something of a specimen piece in the attempt to actualize ancient tragedy.

Discussions of how tragedy continues to raise ethical questions of relevance to modernity have become almost commonplace in literary and cultural criticism, as notable thinkers from Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray to Judith Butler and Carol Jacobs have offered valuable insight into the genre’s continuing relevance. Most of these discussions focus on thematic issues, taking up in particular the conflict between state decree and individual will in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. At least since Hegel placed tragic art at the center of the ethical universe in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1808), the figure of Antigone has maintained an exemplary status within a modern ethical debate encompassing the tensions between civic and religious laws, public and private spheres, the state and the individual, man and woman. Meanwhile, the more contemporary recasting of the ethical sphere sheds new light on the fundamental questions that arise when we are confronted with the tangle of relationships and motivations at the heart of this tragedy—questions that address the claims of justice and the legitimacy of crime; the nature of love and the effects of hatred; the status of siblings, of lovers, of family duties; the articulations of community, of responsibility, of resistance, of violence.

By placing emphasis on the problems inherent in translation, however, my study approaches the question of ethics from another angle. Contemporary discussions of translation address ethics extensively, in the wake of postcolonial and postmodern critiques of the power structures inherent in the relation between a source text (and culture) and its rendering in another form and context. In examining the ever-changing status of Greek tragedy in German translation, however, my focus turns not toward the interchange between radically different yet contemporary cultural discourses, but rather toward the historical implications of translation as palimpsest, over what Samuel Weber has called “instances” of translation.9 Insofar as translation

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9. “. . . translation always involves not merely the movement from one language to another, but from one *instance*—a text already existing in another language—to another instance, that does not previously exist, but that is brought into being in the other language.” Translation thus designates “both a general process, involving a change of place, and a singular result of that process.” Samuel Weber, “A Touch of Translation: On Walter Benjamin’s ‘Task of the Translator,’” in S. Bermann and M.
is always an act of close reading, requiring its practitioner to maintain an interpretive position with respect to her source text, it also forces a confrontation with the unfamiliar, the inconceivable, the untranslatable—those elements that, in the case of Greek tragedy, lie amid the ruins of the distant past. At the same time, this practice of reading—defined by distance from its interlocutor and hence a certain hermeneutic urgency—is fluid and profoundly mutable, marked irrevocably by the particular cultural, linguistic and historical context (the “instance”) in which it occurs. In appropriating the themes of tragedy in the service of constructing the modern subject, some readers have failed to account for this stubborn distance and allowed their work to glide seamlessly over the problems it poses, rendering them invisible to the reader; tragedy essentially becomes the property of modern Western intellectual discourse, often functioning—as in Hölderlin’s time—in the service of “nation-building.” The works of translation and adaptation I discuss in the following pages, however, attempt to confront those problems of undecidability head-on: the persistent unfulfillment that the transfer between linguistic and semiotic systems underscores; the experience of the radical limits of one’s own language and the vulnerability that those limits reveal for a subject constituted by his relation to language; the difficult tension between the task of making the past understandable and the responsibility to preserve its radical singularity.

Hölderlin’s attempt to translate the Greeks in a new way offers a fascinating case study for any reader interested in the history of efforts to make sense of modernity through the confrontation with an ancient past that is both foundational and inscrutable. Rather than adapting the themes and language of tragedy unproblematically to modern modes of thought, Hölderlin’s project affirms their difference in the very obscurity of his translation. His Sophocles reflects a profound commitment to exposing the relation between the structure of Greek tragedy—with its stark separation of chorus from characters, the isolation of the tragic hero, and the unsettling effects of poetic language—and the problem of translation as a mode of transfer from ancient to modern registers. Foreignizing word choices, through which Hölderlin aims to reconstruct the distinctiveness of the ancient source text, continually let translation speak its name, intensifying the precarious expe-


Tragedy’s effects by lingering at the fraying margins of language. This affirmation of disjunction as a mode of representation, both on the tragic stage and in the process of transmission, redefines the ethical impulse of tragedy not in the founding of the self in a modern sense but in the responsibility to a differentiating movement to which the self is continuously subject. By tracing the striking influence of these translations within a discourse on tragedy, ethics, and subjectivity extending to Benjamin, Heidegger, Brecht, Müller, Walser, and Lacoue-Labarthe, I aim to unravel the complex dynamics through which the perception of ethical responsibility, having long taken its cues from the themes of classical tragedy, might find resonance with a particular relationship implicit in the theory and practice of translation.

I. Tragedy

While the transmission of ancient text into modern forms models an inter-subjective exchange that is fundamentally ethical, discussions of ethics and violence in the context of Greek tragedy have generally taken place on a thematic level. Although in the following chapters I will be more concerned with the translation and adaptation of tragic form and language into the context of modernity, a brief summary of these thematic discussions will nevertheless help to illuminate the fundamental questions at stake in that process of transmission.

By staging a historical moment of transition from the age of myth to that of the Athenian polis, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has discussed, tragic drama has always presented a forum through which to confront political and ethical conflict against the backdrop of violence. With the phenomenon of tragedy coinciding with the formative years of the polis, Vernant and others claim that the plays typically portray a clash of the new burdens of citizenship with the traditional mythic world that precedes them. While the Chorus corresponds more closely to the contemporary point of view of the civic community, the hero represents a figure “more or less alien to the ordinary condition of a citizen” (Vernant 1988, 24). Within this framework the hero’s

11. In After Babel, Steiner eloquently expresses the disorienting effects of Hölderlin’s translation style: Hölderlin “compels us to experience, as in fact only a great poet can, the limits of linguistic expression and the barriers between languages which impede human understanding” (323).

virtues and exploits are no longer glorified by an admiring public, as was the case with epic; rather, “the hero has ceased to be a model. He is, both for himself and for others, a problem” (25). Insofar as it presents the conflicts and discrepancies contained within a moment of historical transition, then, tragedy does not merely reflect the social reality of its time but calls it into question: “... tragedy is born when myth starts to be considered from the point of view of a citizen” (33).13 That point of view is rent by a fundamental distance, a gap which has developed at the heart of social experience between a mythic past and a political present—a gap “wide enough for the oppositions... to stand out quite clearly... [yet] narrow enough for the conflict in values to be a painful one and for the clash to continue to take place” (27).14

Nor is this gap, reconstituted on the tragic stage, destined to find resolution there. As Charles Segal notes, the “systems of linked polarity” that determine the tragic universe—conflicts between “mortal and divine, male and female, man and beast, city and wild” (Segal 1986, 57)—operate as a critical instrument that reveals “not the orderly process of transition from one stage of life to another, but the inbetweenness, the marginality, the ambiguity in the juxtaposition of the two sides...” (60). By thinking through this lack of a solution, through the detached discovery on manifold levels “that words, values, men themselves are ambiguous, that the universe is one of conflict,” the spectator “acquires a tragic consciousness” (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 43). From its very start, then, the viewing of tragedy is linked to a critical perspective that extends beyond the identificatory dynamics that have since become associated with Aristotle’s notion of catharsis.

Such polarities extend deeply into the heart of tragedy, such that the dramatic scene does not merely reflect its social context in all of its ambiguity but also presents marginalized outliers, “others” that do not fit neatly into that context but are able to use their difference as a source of power. For example, by elevating female figures to the atypical status of autonomous

13. On this point see also Charles Segal’s comments in “Greek Tragedy and Society: A Structuralist Perspective”: “As part of a public festival, a ritual in honor of the god Dionysus, tragedy validates the social order... At the same time the violence of its action, its radical questioning of justice, both human and divine, its searching explorations of the failure or the betrayal of public and private morality take us outside of that order.” In Greek Tragedy and Political Theory, ed. J. P. Euben (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 47.

14. In an important article, Froma Zeitlin asserts that Thebes, setting of many tragic plays, takes shape as the essential scene of such conflict; it functions in the context of tragedy as the “Anti-Athens” (116), allowing problems to be displaced onto a city imagined as the “negative model to Athens’s manifest image of itself” (102). Insofar as Thebes comes to contain the tragic space, it becomes possible to conceive of Athens by contrast as a space where reconciliation and transformation are possible. “Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama,” in Euben 101–41.
decision-makers, as Helene Foley argues, tragedians were able to present the possibility of other modes of ethical reasoning that involved “the unknowable and the uncontrollable both within and outside the self.” Indeed, Dionysus himself was frequently identified with a femininity that, as Froma Zeitlin has shown, lends power to both him and the theatrical spectacle created in his name.

With its focus on historical moments of painful flux, then, tragedy was designed to leave its spectators both attuned to contradiction and yearning for its resolution. And in its appetite for the paradoxical pleasures of tragic pathos, modern Western culture has readily identified with both the oppositional structure and the will to dialectical resolution that this transitional dynamic inspires. Indeed, interpreters of tragedy in the post-Enlightenment era commonly relate their return to the Greeks to the perception of a crisis not unlike that which brought tragic art to light in the first place; the present day is perceived as a time in need of radical transformation, as Dennis Schmidt states in his book on tragedy and German philosophy, a time in which “those who argue most powerfully for a revitalization of the question of tragedy are united by the assumption that the present era is a time of crisis, of exhaustion, of historical limits reached.” Much of that crisis thinking is reflective of the sense that contradiction, the essence of tragedy, lies at the heart of experience and must be confronted. In her study of ethics and luck in ancient tragedy, Martha Nussbaum asserts that modern interpreters of tragedy often view its conflict as a kind of adversity that one should be able to avoid through the application of practical reason, by structuring life and commitments to avoid serious conflict (Nussbaum 51). This is an intellectual movement somewhat separate from the debates surrounding Aristotle’s conception of tragic effect, the awakening of fear and pity in the spectator, that Lessing initiated in the eighteenth century and Schiller transformed into a means of moral education. The German Idealists were also concerned with the problem of how tragic experience can bring resolution despite its

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15. Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 15. On this point, see in particular her comprehensive reading of *Antigone*, 172–200. See also Martha Nussbaum's comments on moral luck and ethical ambiguity in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, 1986), also in particular with respect to *Antigone*, which she introduces as “a play about teaching and learning, about changing one’s vision of the world, about losing one’s grip on what looked like secure truth and learning a more elusive kind of wisdom” (52).


17. Dennis Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 5. Schmidt’s excellent and comprehensive book also contains new translations of many key texts on tragedy, to which I will refer in the following chapters.
unbearable contradiction, but their field of inquiry was that of dialectics: for Schelling (and in a different sense for Hegel), the affirmative moment of tragedy comes with the reinscription of the possibility of human freedom, despite the downfall of the individual subject. Although Hegel submits that both Antigone and Creon suffer the consequences of their actions in the name of divine or human laws—for within Hegel’s tragic universe both are unquestionably guilty—the restoration of equilibrium brought about by “justice” (Gerechtigkeit) ensures that universal Spirit shall continue its forward trajectory. For Nussbaum, then, Hegel regards tragedy as representative of a “primitive or benighted stage of ethical life and thought,” which suggests that his incorporation of the tragic into his dialectical system is at its heart no less a model for Bildung than the poetic efforts of Lessing and Schiller (Nussbaum 51).

For many others who follow in Hegel’s wake, however, Greek tragedy offers an ethical legitimacy outside the conventions of modern concepts of law and crime, innocence and guilt. While Nussbaum maintains that the Greek tragic universe is uniquely complex insofar as it presents the incommensurability of conflicting value systems (such as those of Antigone and Creon) as a permanent condition, untouchable by reconciliation,18 others such as George Steiner and Susan Sontag echo this idea to argue that “true” tragedy in Goethe’s sense is unsustainable within the modern Judeo-Christian framework of “moral adequacy”:19

Tragedy says there are disasters which are not fully merited, that there is ultimate injustice in the world. So one might say that the final optimism of the prevailing religious traditions of the West, their will to see meaning in the world, prevented a rebirth of tragedy under Christian auspices—as, in Nietzsche’s argument, reason, the fundamentally optimistic spirit of Socrates, killed tragedy in ancient Greece. (Sontag 137)

Central to these readings is a sense of historical distinction; Greek tragedy participates in a historical movement that presents it as capable of

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18. This frames Nussbaum’s central criticism of Hegel: what she sees as his tendency to eliminate conflict represents a “dangerous reform” of the tragic universe which neglects the possibility of separateness or difference in the world of value: “... to do justice to the nature or identity of two distinct values requires doing justice to their difference; and doing justice to their difference... requires seeing that there are, at least potentially, circumstances in which the two will collide”[68].

19. Thus it is certainly fitting that Steiner and Sontag wrote pieces with the same title. See Steiner, The Death of Tragedy, 4–8 and Sontag, “The Death of Tragedy,” in Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Picador, 1966), 132–39. With respect to the demise of Goethe’s “true” tragedy, Steiner offers some intriguing if schematic comments about Goethe’s “avoidance of the tragic,” 166–68.
speaking to modernity and at the same time maintaining its secrets. (To be sure, Hegel himself also addressed this issue of historical development as it pertains to tragedy, but not in the interest of preserving any trace of secrecy within that movement of history.) However, Hegel’s reading of *Antigone* has become such a mainstay of modern ethical discourse that its version of tragic events, even more so than Sophocles’ play itself, often assumes center stage. Many such critics take issue with Hegel’s account of sexual difference in his reading of tragedy, arguing that the tragedy of *Antigone* in particular, far from codifying gender roles in relation to the “laws” of family and state, calls established categories of sexuality and kinship radically into question.20 Judith Butler’s essay on *Antigone* is a case in point: the tragic heroine “upsets the vocabulary of kinship that is a precondition of the human, implicitly raising the question for us of what those preconditions really must be.”21 However, not unlike the models it criticizes, Butler’s reading of “kinship trouble” in the *Antigone* finally runs aground in its claim to an essential universality—the universality of multiplicity, as it were—in its presentation of the Greek tragedy as a work that conveys truths into a modern context with minimal disruption.

While the philosophy of the tragic, born in the long eighteenth century, has thus given rise to much important debate, in some ways the text of tragedy tends to remain isolated from this. (It is perhaps no coincidence that Schelling and Hegel refer only obliquely to tragic situations; Schelling never even names Oedipus, though he is evidently the subject of his discussion, and Hegel’s only citation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, as we will see later, is taken badly out of context.) Thus a new question arises where the Idealists leave off: where must the ethical stance of tragedy be situated, if it is not to become a mere reflection of modern systems of philosophy? And how does its performativity—the particularity of its language and rhetorical sway—come into play in the recognition of that stance? While Hegel and Schelling engage with the enduring legacy of tragedy, the perception that it expresses certain universal truths, it is their friend Hölderlin who considers


21. Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 82. As Butler emphasizes, the family headed by Oedipus and Jocasta hardly remains within a recognizable kinship structure, as Oedipus is both father and brother to Antigone and her siblings; and Antigone herself, as Butler and other readers have pointed out, is described in Sophocles’ language not only as a sister and daughter but also as a man (the Greek *aner*), a son (see Butler 62), and a mother (Jacobs, “Dusting Antigone,” *MLN* 111 [1996]: 910).
above all the differences that tragedy also expresses, both in structure and in language. And who allows his writings on tragedy—the translations, but also his weirdly hermetic essays—to reflect those differences in a manner that makes their existence, if not always their explicit content, intelligible.

II. Translation

Even when the material of a “true” tragedy such as Goethe describes above aims to be wholly original, any modern attempt to approximate tragedy approaches the transformative dynamics of a translation. The modern tragic poet must strive to illuminate the obscurities of the original form, to connect, however imperfectly, to the inscrutable quality that within the context of modernity would still lend tragedy its “truth.” As Goethe’s dread at the very thought implies, taking on the ancient forms of the tragic involves the acknowledgment of a distance both within the work and from it, a recognition and suspension of the work’s foreignness that may be destructive.

Matters become even more complicated when that confrontation also involves the mechanics of translation itself, as it so frequently has in the two centuries since Goethe’s remarks. Inspired to a “most comprehensive predilection for all things Greek” by the classical aesthetics of Johann Jakob Winckelmann, Goethe’s own age featured a rash of classical material in translation, from Voss’s celebrated Homer (1781) to Humboldt’s translation of *Agamemnon* (1816) and Hölderlin’s and Solger’s translations of Sophocles (1804 and 1824). Under these circumstances, the undertaking redoubles the risk to which Goethe referred. If any act of translation is inherently violent insofar as its need for comprehensibility is also a call to assimilate the distinctive elements of the other (text) to the familiar cadence of native language and thought, that violence may exact a toll not only upon the translated object but the translating subject as well. Particularly in the extensive discourse concerning translation in and around Goethe’s age, these two forms of violence frequently stand in direct tension with one another; the translator who aims to mitigate the violence of transmission also exposes himself to the limits of his own language and process of thought, that which had been most radically his “own.”

22. Of these, Voss’s Homer was the most influential and held in the highest regard; Goethe, for example, described Voss’s translations as the most perfect of their kind, achieving a “perfect identity” with the original in which “one does not exist instead of the other but in the other’s place” (Schulte and Biguenet 61). For a concise but nevertheless engaging summary, see Charlie Louth, *Hölderlin and the Dynamics of Translation* (Legenda: European Humanities Research Center, 1998), 5–53.
This consideration only renders more curious—and perhaps, at the same time, more understandable—the most intriguing aspect of the long tradition of translating the Greeks, particularly in Germany: the prevalence of translators who are also, or even primarily, poets. To be sure, one of the most prolific and enduring of all modern translators, A. W. Schlegel, was also involved in the Romantic aesthetic project presented in the Athenäum and other literary documents, but he was not a poet in the same vein as Hölderlin, Goethe, Hofmannsthal, Brecht, Pound, Müller, or Heaney.23 Nor did he attempt, as they did, to translate Greek tragedy. Does the encounter with the outermost limits of expression inherent in the task of translation—which Enlightenment theorists of translation such as Bodmer and Herder already regarded as essential to the development of thought itself24—demand, in the extreme case of tragedy, a poet’s sensitivity to the openness of one language to another, to the elasticity of representation and the conveyance of image? And what happens—to the poet, to the text, to the reader—if that encounter fails?

Indeed, one might ask what “failure” means at all in this context. In one sense, Hölderlin’s translations have continued to be an object of interest precisely because they violate an essential pact at the heart of translational practice: in their foreignizing tone they allow language, and therefore that which produces language—the voice of the translator—to be heard between the lines of text. Yet as we know from the writings of Lawrence Venuti, the translator has long been expected to strive for the opposite pole: to remain invisible. The translator is meant to be a mere intermediary, not to have a voice of her own but to reproduce, seamlessly, the voice of another (Venuti 1995, 2). But this is a false transparency, as Venuti has shown: while maintaining the appearance of unmediated access to a source text and author, the smooth transition from one language to another by an “invisible” translator

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23. Josephine Balmer discusses the “close, symbiotic relationship” between creative writing and classical translation, claiming that the “translator of a classic text can be seen more as an innovator, making their own mark on an already well-known work, reimagining it for a new generation, a new audience. . . . [I]n certain circumstances, a translation can supersede the original and become iconic in its own right.” “What comes next? Reconstructing the classics,” in Susan Bassnett and Peter R. Bush, *The Translator as Writer* (London: Continuum, 2006), 184.

24. Bodmer and Herder were early proponents of the idea, further developed by the Romantics, that translation offers a means of confronting one’s own language that is essential to the edification of the self. Bodmer advocated the expansion of language, and by extension the expansion of the possibilities of thought, via the translation of “substantial instances of special beauty,” figurative expressions that exhaust a particular thought through descriptive images. Such “instances” differ from language to language, yet each is intuitively comprehensible in any language because the images are recognizable. See Bodmer, *Der Mahler der Sitten*, reprinted in *Translating Literature: The German Tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig*, ed. and trans. André Lefevere (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), 18–20.
in fact requires a particularly violent degree of intervention (16f.). A common thread among newer theories of translation, then, involves advocating a more activist and ethical mode of translation, regarded not as a seamless transfer but as a creative practice that remains receptive to the distances—cultural, linguistic, temporal—from the source text, not concealing it with the appearance of transparency but rather engaging with it in a manner that allows new connections to emerge in the context of the receiving culture.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes this level of engagement as “the most intimate act of reading,” a “surrender” to the source text that attends to its specificity. The translator’s invisibility is displaced by her readiness to disturb her own language, to let it reflect the otherness of the foreign text rather than offer it to the reader in familiar forms.

Yet this truer form of translation may exact no less a price than the “true” tragedy in Goethe’s estimation. As we must realize from Hölderlin’s example, this approach to the source text carries with it a potentially dangerous imperative for the “true translator,” who, as Friedrich Schleiermacher had already suggested in 1813, subjects himself to “the most extraordinary form of humiliation that a writer . . . could inflict upon himself.” More than merely receding into invisibility, the translator in Schleiermacher’s model must deliberately expose himself to danger, must be willing to bear the stain of failure and sacrifice the quality of his own expression, all for the sake of a voice that would otherwise be effaced in the transmission from one language to another.

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 move-

25. The recent work of Susan Bassnett, a translator, poet, and scholar, is particularly interesting in this respect. See her discussion in “Writing and Translating” (Bassnett and Bush, The Translator as Writer [London: Continuum, 2006], 173–83), as well as her creative dialogue with the Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik in Exchanging Lives: Poems and Translations (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2002).

26. For a discussion of this idea of “translucence” in translation, see Sherry Simon’s response in Buden and Novotny 211.


ments 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.)

Along with Johann Jakob Bodmer, who sixty years previously had likewise prevailed upon translators to have the courage to make use of the “natural freedom” of language (“so that the freedom of words matches the freedom of things” [Lefevere 31]), Schleiermacher equates a translator’s fidelity to the foreign text with the possibility of ridicule on the home front. However, this does not by any means lessen the significance of the exercise. If, as Schleiermacher advocates, the proper method of translation is indeed to move the reader to the author rather than the author to the reader (“leaving the author alone as much as possible” [Schulte and Biguenet 42]), then the translator’s fidelity to his text may have an even more disconcerting result than invisibility; it may imply vulnerability of a most fundamental sort. To translate in these terms is to assume responsibility for communicating the foreign text while renouncing regard for one’s own voice, to enact a relation that refuses to reduce the difference of another voice to the discourse of the same. It represents, in other words, testing ground for a relation between self and other that evokes the ethical as such.

This call to ethical responsibility remains a vital aspect of the current field of translation studies, which approaches the history of such appropriations of the “foreign” (such as Schleiermacher’s here) far more critically. Schleiermacher composed his theoretical remarks in a period in which the practice of translation was regarded as essential to the construction of a national culture, and his advocacy of the foreign as a vehicle for establishing identity, while


30. This tone of responsibility to an other that the subject does not negate or appropriate but rather recognizes as primary and ineffaceable recalls the ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the relation to the Other constitutes “first philosophy,” the primary dimension of experience. For a perspective on the relevance of Levinas’s ethics for translation theory, see Robert Eaglestone, “Levinas, Translation, and Ethics,” in Bermann and Wood 127–37.

31. See Lawrence Venuti, The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference (London: Routledge, 1998). In his discussion of “the power of translation to form identities and to qualify agents” [6], Venuti attempts to outline an ethical stance through which both the practice and the reading of translation take place with a more nuanced view towards linguistic and cultural difference.
common among theories of translation in his time, also betrays a reliance on essentialist categories such as “nation,” “culture,” “equivalence” and even “the foreign” that contemporary critics call radically into question. Rather than an interaction between two static poles of identity (what Michael Cronin calls a “zero-sum of binary opposition” between “source and target language, source and target culture, author and translator, translator and reader”), translation today exemplifies flux; and the translator must once again muster her courage for the path that lies ahead, for she is charged with maintaining the productive tensions and discontinuities between a text and its translation. Susan Bassnett describes the practice of translation as “a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator.”

Both source and product of translation cannot remain unaffected by this process: while the text in translation introduces discontinuity and conflict into the perception of uniformity, the “original” obtains meaning in a new and different context. This transaction lies at the heart of Walter Benjamin’s notion that translation represents the “living on” (Fortleben) of a given text.

The responsibility of the translator in such models is no trifling matter. The basis for the translator’s more ethical stance—the imperative of “keep[ing] the reader aware of what he is doing,” in Schleiermacher’s terms—is risk: risk of exposure, of ridicule, and ultimately of failure. Indeed, the specter of failure looms large in any attempt at translation, and reflections on the ultimate impossibility of translation are as common in the theoretical discourse as discussions of its significance. Benjamin—who famously praised Hölderlin’s translations as “prototypes (Urbilder, originary images) of their form” that confirm “every important aspect” of his own thoughts on translation—alludes to this limit in his concept of the translator’s “Aufgabe,” a term which contains within it not only the idea of a task but also, as Paul De Man first pointed out, of giving up (aufgeben): “It is in that sense also the defeat, the giving up, of the translator. The translator has to give up in relation to the task of refinding what was there in the original.”

To be sure, in light of the contemporary discourse on translation, De Man’s remarks about “refinding what was there in the original” sound posi—

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33. See Cronin’s contribution to the forum in Buden and Nowotny 218.
tively antiquated. In an interview on his concept of the “third space” in translation, Homi Bhabha argues that the “original,” precisely insofar as it is open to translation, does not constitute an *a priori* totality.

... translation is a way of imitating, but in a mischievous, displacing sense—imitating an original in such a way that the priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact that it *can* be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum and so on: the ‘original’ is never finished or complete in itself.37

Likewise, the familiar allusion to the translator’s inevitable “failure” reflects an attitude that newer translation theory aims to transcend, not least since translators succeed in completing translations all the time. Where Benjamin’s interest in Hölderlin becomes most instructive for contemporary translation theory, then, is with respect to more fundamental questions about the nature of translation as “Aufgabe”: what if the task of translation, for Hölderlin in particular but also in a more general sense, were not to “refind what was there” at all? Not to reconstitute an “original” but rather simply to produce a relation between texts and contexts that reflects the differential and variable use of language as such?38 The relevance of that relation would then persist and evolve over time, offering a key means by which to address the ethical implications of translation practice within literary and cultural histories. Jorge Luis Borges claimed that Homer in translation represented not merely the Greek classic itself but also “different perspectives of a mutable fact, . . . a long experimental lottery of omissions and emphases,” and examining a translation’s evolution within a given language sheds much light on the stakes inherent in that process.39 The critical study of a text’s “living on” in other forms and contexts shifts the central question of translation away from a binary of success or failure: from a yes or no to a why and how.40

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38. See Weber on Benjamin’s notion of “origin” in “A Touch of Translation,” Bermann and Wood 65–78.
40. An outstanding example of this type of study is Antoine Berman’s *Experience of the Foreign*, in which he outlines the process by which degrees of receptivity to difference as well as pockets of resistance become legible in the ambivalent manner in which a translating culture approaches its object: “We may formulate the issue as follows: Every culture resists translation, even if it has an essential need for it. The very aim of translation—to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one’s Own through the mediation of what is Foreign—is diametrically opposed to the
As that progression aims to cross ever broader temporal and spatial chasms, moreover, as the orientation of the original grows more distant from what is familiar, the potential violence of translation cuts deeper still, necessitating not only the negotiation between languages but also the conceptual transmission of an alterity that cannot be entirely recovered. Winckelmann’s double imperative of imitating the Greeks and surpassing them (“the imitation of the ancients is the only way for us to become great—yes, if it is possible, inimitable”41) left poets and would-be translators around 1800 acutely aware of this dilemma. Friedrich Schiller may have best described its implications in his essay On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy (Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragödie)—an essay that accompanied his only attempt to reproduce classical Greek forms in a modern drama, The Bride of Messina:

The palace of the kings is locked up now, the courts have withdrawn from the gates of the cities into the interiors of houses, writing has suppressed the living word, the people have therefore become an abstract concept, the gods have retreated into the hearts of men. The poet must open up the palaces again, must lead the courts back out into the open air, he must prop up the gods again, he must reproduce everything immediate that has been annulled through the artificial institution of real life and cast off, as the sculptor does with modern garments, all of the artificial constructions on and around the human that hinder the appearance of his inner nature and his original character; he must take up, from all of his external surroundings, nothing except that which makes visible the highest of forms, the human.42

ethnocentric structure of every culture, that species of narcissism by which every society wants to be a pure and unadulterated Whole” (4).

41. “Die Nachahmung der Alten ist der einzige Weg für uns, groß, ja wenn es möglich ist, un-nachahmlich zu werden” (The imitation of the ancients is the only way for us to become great, yes, if it is possible, to become inimitable). J. J. Winckelmann, Sämtliche Werke, ed. J. Eiselein (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1965), 8.

42. “Der Palast der Könige ist jetzt geschlossen, die Gerichte haben sich von den Toren der Städte in das Innere der Häuser zurückgezogen, die Schrift hat das lebendige Wort verdrängt, das Volk . . . ist . . . folglich zu einem abgezogenen Begriff geworden, die Götter sind in die Brust der Menschen zurückgekehrt. Der Dichter muß die Paläste wieder auftun, er muß die Gerichte unter freien Himmel herausführen, er muß die Götter wieder aufstellen, er muß alles Unmittelbare, das durch die künstliche Einrichtung des wirklichen Lebens aufgehoben ist, wieder herstellen, und alles künstliche Machwerk an dem Menschen und um denselben, das die Erscheinung seiner innern Natur und seines ursprünglichen Charakters hindert, wie der Bildhauer die modernen Gewänder, abwerfen, und von allen äußeren Umgebungen desselben nichts aufnehmen, als was die Höchste der Formen, die menschliche, sichtbar macht” (Friedrich Schiller, Werke und Briefe, Band V, ed. M. Luserke [Frankfurt: Klassiker, 1996], 286f.).
Schiller's lines here evoke an arduous and solitary process of reconstruction that captures both the exertion and the artistry of confronting the ancients, highlighting the special task of anyone who aims to become their translator. The long tradition of translating Greek tragedy, insofar as it demands a degree of transformation perhaps unmatched by the exchange between modern works, may subject both text and author to a particularly ruthless form of violence. Perhaps this is what Goethe knew.

III. Other Ethics

In her introduction to the recent anthology *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation*, Sandra Bermann proposes that translation as an object of study “might be effectively re-thought in historical and temporal terms rather than only in ontological and spatial ones.” In this sense, translation gains relevance not only as a means of intercultural exchange but “in terms of a history of ‘instances’ or of linguistic negotiations occurring over time, each a poeisis, each establishing a new inscription and, with it, the possibility of new interpretation” (6). Bermann’s model provides a compelling framework for examining the impulse to translate the Greeks since the Enlightenment, with each new version a different manifestation of the exchange between modernity and its nearly imperceptible shadows.

In seeking to frame this exchange as it develops diachronically, I examine a constellation of texts that reflect upon the ethics of translation as a way of thinking—an epistemological category that proposes to call a dialectical-mimetic progression of thought (what Heidegger will call “metaphysics”) into question. Hölderlin’s translation project, emerging out of a discourse in which both translation and tragedy operate in the service of establishing identity (in conversation with and in opposition to the “foreign”), allows language to slip its moorings in a manner that effectively undermines a fixed concept of identity. The intersection of tragedy and translation thus opens up the possibility of thinking otherwise, of experiencing the foreign not only as it relates to the perception of identity or the process of Bildung but rather also as that which cannot be reconciled, that cannot offer any greater lesson than its own fundamental, permanent dissonance. In the sense that it aims to reveal tragic experience as both radically foreign and curiously foundational, Hölderlin’s translation project prefigures, as Heidegger recognized, a concept of “das Unheimliche.”

Nowhere does this intersection of tragedy and translation have more lasting effects than in the German intellectual tradition. Chapter 1 thus makes
the case for considering the significance of translation for the modern understanding of tragedy by situating Hölderlin’s project within the intellectual climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a time in which translation was regarded as a crucial means toward national and individual Bildung and most German intellectuals had something to say about the relationship between ancient Greece and modern subjectivity. While many of the models that emerged were essentially ahistorical in approach, treating the themes of tragedy as universal truths to be mined for their modern relevance, the texts of Greek tragedy themselves were regarded by translators and educated readers as immutable ideals to be rivaled, perhaps, but never changed. Hölderlin, who grappled with the issue of the tragic for most of his productive life, finally manages in his translations to hollow out a space between these two poles, neither appropriating ancient tragic concepts in the service of a modern intellectual agenda nor pledging unquestioned fidelity to the original text. Neither a relic nor a modern transformation, Hölderlin’s translations represent a space in which transition itself can come to light.

It is this concern for marking the space between texts that defines Hölderlin’s project as a valuable counterpoint to a conception of ethics more commonly shaped by the thematics of Greek tragedy. Most voices in this debate address the identity of tragic figures more than the structure of tragedy itself. However, Hölderlin’s illumination of the process of transmission represents something else in its rapt attention to the otherness of tragic language and structure; as a result, the writers that follow in his footsteps inevitably reflect on problems that his translations both confront and produce. What questions, if any, can we answer by reading Greek tragedy today? How do we represent a past that eludes our comprehension? What can we understand of tragedy at all, and what can we glean from that which we do not understand?

The following two chapters focus on Hölderlin’s translation project, the uniqueness of which lies in his attempt to make the experience of translation an integral part of the tragedy’s effect on a modern audience. That modern experience rests upon the sheer foreignness of the material and is intensified by a strange and hauntingly beautiful syntax that is neither German nor Greek. Thus not only the plight of Oedipus and Antigone but the language of the plays themselves is unsettling, unfamiliar—and nevertheless captivating. In this synthesis of form and content, translation and tragedy, Hölderlin’s texts suggest that the modern subject is brought to a place that the tragic figures already inhabit: a place in which, as Antigone’s Chorus testifies, “Much is monstrous, yet / Nothing more monstrous than the human.” While other readers of Antigone’s tragedy, most notably Hegel, understand her decision to bury her brother as representative of divine law in conflict
with the law of the state, in Hölderlin’s translation she not only resists that gesture of assimilation into the structure of legitimacy but also brings those around her “outside of the law.” The modern subject’s apprehension of Antigone’s solitary entry into the tomb, and of a language that constantly slips its moorings, forms the basis for the recognition of an essential difference—a “monstrosity”—that exceeds that subject’s presupposition of his own immanence. What others in his time see as the ethical context of tragedy—the conflict of divine and human realms, the dialectical advancement of subject, community and finally history—is thus complicated by a model of tragic experience inseparable from the dynamics of translation. For Hölderlin the ethics of tragedy is grounded in nothing more than the imperative to preserve the dignity of an unfathomable and ultimately untranslatable difference; by calling into question the reflected immanence of the subject, it brings into focus that subject’s responsibility for engaging with a form of alterity that both disrupts and defines it.

In the following chapters, I extend my discussion to Hölderlin’s most influential twentieth-century readers, all of whom problematize the ethical stance that these translations illuminate. Common to these engagements with the same set of texts is an emphasis on the particular timeliness of tragedy, and particularly of Hölderlin’s translations, in the political and cultural milieu of the present day. Consequently, the relationship between the ethical and the political becomes central, particularly with respect to the question of identity (both national and individual). Insofar as all these writers attempt to engage their thinking about tragedy with the horrors of recent events and with efforts to come to terms with the violence of the past, the question of responsibility gains even greater urgency.

Walter Benjamin’s engagement with Hölderlin’s Sophocles, which opens this second section, is a thread, an accumulation of reflections over two decades rather than a single essay or text. At no point does Benjamin offer a sustained reading of the translations and remarks in the manner of his writings on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* or even Hölderlin’s twinned poems “Dichtermut” (“The Poet’s Courage”) and “Blödigkeit” (“Timidity”). There is no question, however, that Hölderlin’s Sophocles represents a crucial foundation not only for Benjamin’s concept of translation but for his theory of criticism in a more general sense. From his early essay “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” through the celebrated “Task of the Translator” and his monumental habilitation, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, it is apparent that Benjamin regards Hölderlin not only as a poet but also always as a translator—as a translator, in fact, of the very highest order. If Benjamin was not the first reader to acknowledge this, he was certainly the most impassioned.
For Benjamin, Hölderlin’s renditions of Sophoclean tragedy underscore the ethical implications of translation as a mode of reading and engaging with the continued “life” of a text; and in this sense, they inch closer to a relation to an abstract notion of “truth” to which all poetry, and essentially all cultural artifacts, refer. By examining the individual moments in which Benjamin turns to this text, either directly or obliquely, as an example of his own thinking, I consider the extent to which a concept of translation informs not only his notion of Aufgabe or “task” in that celebrated essay but also, in a much larger sense, the idea of criticism itself as integrally related to the expression of a higher truth. Although his earliest reading of Hölderlin emphasizes the idea of the poet’s courage (“Dichtermut”), I attempt to trace the less-trodden path by which the translator comes to express a particularly Benjaminian (and thus profoundly ethical) fortitude.

In his remarks on translation and tragedy in his lecture “Hölderlins Hymn ‘The Ister,’” Martin Heidegger also develops his own concept of courage, particularly with respect to the poet or thinker, but that courage is ultimately expressed in a political rather than an ethical realm, and its ramifications are considerably more controversial. Delivered in 1942–43, the lecture has drawn much criticism for its violent and transformative readings of Hölderlin’s poetry and Sophoclean tragedy, which many critics view as indicative of the totalitarian streak still legible within Heidegger’s philosophy. To be sure, Heidegger’s usual reading practice is in evidence in the lecture; the texts he examines are ultimately brought in line with a disturbing conception of “the Germans” that renders the past a mere reflection of the destiny about to be fulfilled. However, I argue that the lecture also presents a fascinating tension between this totalizing violence that silences reading in any genuine sense and a more fluid reading practice, thematized in the concept of dialogue or “Zwiesprache,” that both describes Hölderlin’s relationship to the Greeks and frames Heidegger’s own reading on a rhetorical level.

This is not an attempt to “rescue” Heidegger, whose methods of interpretation remain problematic on many levels, but rather to engage with his text in a way that goes beyond the often knee-jerk tendency to expose Nazi sympathies in his writings of the 1930s and 40s. Heidegger’s concept of “Zwiesprache” represents a movement away from the totalizing violence that characterizes his earlier texts on Hölderlin, offering a mode of reading posited on a semiotics of incomprehension, on the possibility that the failure of reading can also convey a certain kind of knowledge. That failure is highlighted in the clash of differences that ancient tragedy represents in a modern context. In the negotiation between foreign and familiar that informs both Sophoclean tragedy and Hölderlin’s writings, Heidegger argues, the
unsettling experience of being “not-at-home” (Unheimischsein) constantly underlies the process of “coming to be at home” (Heimischwerden)—is, in fact, integral to that very process. By allowing this instability to permeate the practice of interpretation itself, Heidegger performs the same exchange with Hölderlin that Hölderlin, as he argues, undertakes with Sophocles: a “dialogue” that allows for the possibility of being moved by the past and its echoes—even those still to be heard—in the present.

In Chapter 6, the 1948 adaptation of Hölderlin’s Antigone by the notorious anti-Aristotelian Bertolt Brecht highlights this issue of violence as expressed within the various media that form history. With his Antigonemodell, a collection of script, notes, photographs, and sketches that creates a record of the play’s performative genesis and development, Brecht attempts to lay bare the process by which recorded history marks and shapes dramatic forms and possibilities. His presentation of the modern ruins of Greek tragedy offers a model and an ethical argument for what he calls the “ruination” of German theater in the immediate post-war period. By basing his adaptation on Hölderlin’s alienating translation, he underscores the sheer foreignness of the Greek original and thereby rejects the violence of transformation that would leave the past as a mere version of the present. Meanwhile, his construction of the Modell serves both as an example and as open-ended stimulus for continued adaptation. The “Modell” introduces another dimension of historical transformation by assuring at its very foundation its own infinite variability, thus the impossibility of ever being “finished” with the past.

The concluding chapter deals briefly with more recent appropriations of the translations by Heiner Müller (Ödipus, Tyrann, 1967), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (L’Antigone des Sophocle, 1977), and Martin Walser (Antigone, 1989). All three authors emphasize the special timeliness of tragedy for the historical moment in which they write their adaptations; all consequently grapple more or less openly with the ethics of mining the past for the sake of its affinities with the present, in particular with respect to the particularly German task of coming to terms with the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung). Composed in three different milieus—the GDR, France, and the Federal Republic—the texts express vastly different comfort levels in setting parameters for this process of appropriation. As each adaptation is intriguingly mirrored upon Hölderlin’s own structure—a text accompanied by detailed remarks—I show how each author takes a particular conception of “re-writing” as a point of departure in the attempt to situate tragedy within modernity. Rewriting the past as text thus gains a metaphorical significance that underscores the responsibility inherent in any process of remembrance:
a responsibility to preserve the traces of singularity, even eccentricity, that resist the sway of ideology, of tradition, of historical transformation.

As a side note, I am painfully aware of the considerable ironies of presenting a text of and about translation, in translation. As a compromise I have provided the German texts of most primary sources, particularly where the use of language is consequential or intentional, either in the body of text or in footnotes. Where an author’s particular mode of expression in German must be foregrounded — in poetic passages, as well as in much of Hölderlin’s, Benjamin’s and Heidegger’s theoretical language—I have placed the German source text ahead of the English translation; for passages in which content is more important than expression, I have placed the German text in footnotes. Moreover, while many translated passages are based on published material, I have often modified those existing translations to correspond more precisely to the arguments I wish to make. This is not in any way meant to suggest that the published translations of Hölderlin, Heidegger, or Benjamin are deficient—on the contrary, in general they are admirably precise—but rather to underscore the extent to which translations are always individual inscriptions within a multitude of possible readings.

IV. The Task of the Reader

Each of the texts I will examine in this study undertakes the challenge of engaging with difference through a particular mode of performance that I would describe as rhetorical—taking shape through the effects of discursive form rather than through the transmission of content alone—and that ultimately concentrates its effects on the practice of reading rather than spectatorship. Hölderlin’s performative expression rests in his concept of translation, Heidegger’s in Zwiesprache; Brecht’s in the Modell, which is presented as a kind of “image-text” that is meant to represent the text’s infinite malleability and yet also carry the same weight as Sophocles’ and Hölderlin’s written “originals.” That practice of reading takes place in the unmistakable presence of difference, of distances both temporal and conceptual that lead the reader in each case to limits that remain uncrossable: to the untranslatable in Hölderlin; the unreadability of “poetic knowledge” in Heidegger; the gaps between word and image, between text and performance in Brecht.

43. See Spivak on the distinction between the focus on rhetoric and the reliance on logic in translation: “Logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections. Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around in order to see what works and how much” (“Politics of Translation” 181).
All these texts, in other words, demand from the reader a receptivity to the singularity of the past and a preservation of the distance that separates past, present and future.

In this regard, the translation of tragedy takes on precisely the characteristics that its German synonyms suggest: it is at once a crossing from one “instance” to another (Über-setzung), a carrying-over (Über-tragung) and a passing-on, the reception of a history (Über-lieferung). For the reader, this trifold context involves an engagement with the material of that translation that goes beyond the traditional sense of “tragic effect.” Reading in this manner implies not an active, identificatory suffering for the sake of a tragic hero but a suffering more closely related to receptivity, to the effort involved in finding one’s way through a text that is transparent, in the sense that Martin Buber claimed all translation should be transparent: not clarifying the “true” meaning of the “original” but on the contrary, as in Buber’s Bible translation, allowing the obscurities of the source text to shine through its language so that “its otherness in comparison with much that is familiar will become clear, but so will the importance of our receiving this otherness into the structure of our own life.”

44. Martin Buber, “On Word Choice in Translating the Bible,” in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Scripture and Translation, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 76f., Buber, in making the case for his and Rosenzweig’s new Bible translation in 1930, argues forcefully that the reader should have to work his or her way into a foreign text, rather than receiving it in familiarized form—that in fact such a mode of reading bears all the more fruit: “Readers openmindedly looking for the way to the Bible will find words of the new version at odds with what they are used to; but then they will seek to pass from those words to the realities that are expressed in them, will consider whether the usual rendering does justice to the special character of these realities, will measure the distance between the two, and will consider how the new rendering holds up in comparison. For such readers the biblical world will in their reading be revealed, sector by sector; its otherness in comparison with much that is familiar will become clear, but so will the importance of our receiving this otherness into the structure of our own life.”
TWO RELATED intellectual projects frame the context in which Hölderlin would translate Greek tragedy in the long eighteenth century: on one hand the ongoing discussion of how classical Greek models—including, but not limited to tragedy—might provide the aesthetic ideal to which German culture should aspire, on the other the discourse surrounding the importance of translation for the development of German language and identity. These developments were multifaceted, to say the least, and expressed the underlying principles of the Enlightenment on several fronts. Winckelmann inspired a pan-European frenzy for ancient Greece in 1755 with his treatise on the imitation of classical art, which he considered the only possible path to cultural greatness; meanwhile, Lessing spearheaded efforts to reinvent German drama in the spirit of classical and Shakespearean tragedy (and Schiller aimed for its culmination in Weimar). At the same time, the language philosophers Bodmer, Breitinger, and Herder promoted the expansion of German language and thought through the confrontation with foreign texts and authors, and pioneering translators such as Wieland and Voss paved the way for the Romantic-era achievements of A. W. Schlegel and Goethe. Literary language, confronted with difference and consolidated

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14. Louth describes Germany’s particular openness to a historical moment of translation, whereas British intellectuals were less receptive to the “potential lying in translation” (31).
15. Schmidt submits, in fact, that every thinker concerned with Greek tragedy in the post-Enlightenment era, from Schelling to Nietzsche to Heidegger, departs likewise from the assumption that “the present age is a time in need of radical transformation.” On Germans and Other Greeks, 5.
17. For an illuminating discussion of their respective views on translation, see Katherine Arens,
In the seventeenth installment of his immensely popular journal *Letters Concerning the Latest Literature (Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend)*, published with Mendelssohn and Nicolai in 1759, Lessing had argued passionately for a turn from French ornamentation to a more Shakespearean approach to tragic theater, while his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767) offers a reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics* that reframes the conventions established by the likes of Corneille and Racine.\(^{18}\) His campaign is clearly intended to incite rebellion in German theatrical circles, as is immediately evident in the seventeenth letter:

“No one,” say the authors of the library, “will deny that the German stage has Professor Gottsched to thank for much of its initial improvement.” I am this no one; I deny it point-blank.\(^{19}\)

The final lines of the text are equally audacious in their call for a more specifically German mode of expression. After presenting a scene from a Faust drama purportedly written by one of his “friends” (who turns out to be Lessing himself), he challenges the reader directly: “You wish to see a German play full of such scenes? So do I!” (Lessing 60).\(^{20}\)

Herder composed his *Fragments* as a direct response to Lessing’s *Briefe*, and he takes aim at the same target as his compatriot, submitting that the “French” mode of translation (which Gottsched had also come to represent) is just as imperfect a model for the Germans as their theater was for Lessing:\(^{21}\)

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\(^{18}\) This pairing of Shakespeare and Aristotle is itself a risky gesture, since in fact Shakespeare was likely unfamiliar with Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Still, as Steiner points out, Lessing’s assertion continues to color our view of modern tragedy (*The Death of Tragedy*, 188).


\(^{20}\) “Sie wünschen ein deutsches Stück, das lauter solche Szenen hätte? Ich auch!” Arens indicates that the *Letters* generally represented a new, satirical style of criticism not previously seen in German (Arens 91).

\(^{21}\) Gottsched regarded translation generally as a useful exercise for aspiring authors, just as copying the works of great painters would train beginning art students. Although he does not directly reference the “French” manner of translation in the way that many of his contemporaries do, he advocates a form of translation that leans toward the transformative description others give: “. . . express everything by means of locutions that do not sound strange in your own language, but have a familiar ring to them” (Lefevere 16).
The French, who are overproud of their national taste, adapt all things to it, rather than to try to adapt themselves to the taste of another time. Homer must enter France a captive, and dress according to fashion, so as not [to] offend their eye. But we poor Germans, who still are almost an audience without a fatherland, who are still without tyrants in the field of national taste, we want to see him the way he is. (Lefevere 33)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{32} Cited in Arens 104: “Den Genies, die bloß ätherisch lesen, ist sie eine sichere Handleiterin zu einer klaren Quelle. Sie sehen den tragischen Geist der Griechen, lernen das Eigentümlichste ihrer Denkart und ihrer Rührung: können ihre Einfalt und ihre Zusammensetzung, ihre Anlage und Fortleitung bis zur Errichtung des Zwecks verfolgen.”

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

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

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

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

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

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37. In this letter he also describes the pitfall of remaining so long in “foreign service” that one cannot safely return to one’s own language, an uncannily prescient observation that both Louth and Constantine have discussed in some detail, see Louth 58f. and Constantine, “Translation Is Good for You,” lecture at Swansea University, 30 June 2010.
38. “Die Sprache ist Organ unseres Kopfs, unseres Herzens, Zeichen unserer Phantasien, unserer Ideen; uns muss sie gehorchen. Hat sie nun zu lange in fremdem Dienste gelebt, so denk’ ich, ist fast zu fürchten, daß sie nie mehr ganz der freie reine, durch gar nichts, als durch das Innre, so und nicht anders gestaltete Ausdruck unseres Geistes werde” (StA 6, 1: 125).
by David Constantine, but not always. To be more precise, it is surely good for the Germans but not necessarily good for the translator. Friedrich Schleiermacher would later recognize the extent of the translator’s exposure, describing the “extraordinary form of humiliation” to which he must subject himself for the sake of his source text; Hölderlin—at least in the eyes of many readers, from his contemporaries to the present day—has come to embody its consequences. Within the specific context of the nascent German nation, however, the sacrifice makes sense; translation, which is at once a look backward and a step forward, a negotiation with difference and a gesture that constitutes new identity, grants the source text a renewed hermeneutic urgency. This was especially true for Greek tragedy, given the distances the form had traveled and the passionate responses it nevertheless continued to inspire. An ancient text has the potential to mean something different in a modern context, Hölderlin and his cohort imply, and by that other relevance to lend shape to the intellectual and aesthetic activity of the day.

II. The Step Forward: Romantic Translation

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

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

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

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

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

Herder’s comments on the practice of translation uphold this distinction between antiquarian and aesthete, as he pegs the ideal translator as “creative genius”: “A German Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles . . . builds a monument unnoticed by pedants and schoolmasters, but it holds the eye of the wise by virtue of its silent grandeur and simple splendour” (Lefevere 31). At the

*ppractice* of translation turns this secret self-transformation into a conscious exercise in individual and universal betterment. The one who translates, however, bears a heavy burden: as the transmitter of the foreign, he is responsible to both text and reader. Little wonder, then, that such a translator must be, in Herder’s estimation, a “creative genius” (Lefevere 31).

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

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

Steal the art of inventing, not its substance: the primary task of translating is not to copy foreign material (what Herder calls “wretched imitation” [Lefevere 31]) but to learn from foreign methods in the creation of new material, “an imitation which manages to remain original.” As Gerhard Sauder discusses, Herder’s formulation clearly echoes the aesthetic ideology of the Sturm und Drang, with its emphasis on the essential role of genius for achieving great art, and we also see most clearly his influence on the Jena Romantics’ thinking on translation as expansion and improvement over the original (Sauder 319). His comments find an echo in Novalis’s provocative claim, in a 1797 letter to A. W. Schlegel, that “the German Shakespeare (i.e., Schlegel’s translation) today is better than the English.” This process of improvement does not suggest, as it would have for Gottsched or even for Lessing, that the translation must compensate for a source text’s poetic weaknesses.42 Rather, as Berman discusses, Novalis refers here to the Romantic idea that “the original has an a priori scope that never quite is” (106); translation, in the sense that it implies continued aesthetic and intellectual reflection, represents a potentiating process that moves the work of art toward its culmination. The look backward is always a step forward—and for Novalis, a step upward.43

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

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

III. Divergent Methods: Humboldt and Hölderlin

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

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

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

As one thinks oneself into the mood of the poet, into his time, into the characters he puts on the stage, the obscurity gradually fades and is replaced by a high clarity. A part of this careful attention must also be given to the translation: never expect that what is sublime, immense, and extraordinary in the original language will be easily and immediately comprehensible in the translation. (Schulte and Biguenet 59, trans. modified).45

The basis of reading here is attention, “thinking oneself into” another age and mode of expression; darkness fades and is replaced by “high clarity” (*hohes Klarheit*), implying the elevation of the viewing subject to an elevated level of understanding (indeed, his word choice recalls the German Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] itself). This is somewhat reminiscent of Herder’s “secret translation,” in the sense that the reader is swept away, by the power of his own reading, to another time, place, and “mood,” but Humboldt’s model insists on activity, the *work* of thinking, rather than surrender to the effects of foreign expression. Indeed, the reader must be challenged to think through a text’s obscurities, left conspicuously in place by the translator, while avoiding the interference of “feeling” at all costs: “Least of all should one allow the influence of so-called aesthetic feeling, to which translators may feel themselves called, if one wants to avoid encroaching on the text in a manner that sooner or later will make space for other encroachments (the worst thing that can happen to an interpreter of the ancients).”46

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

46. Störig 85: “Am wenigsten darf man dem sogenannten ästhetischen Gefühl, wozu gerade die Übersetzer sich berufen glauben könnten, darauf Einfluss gestatten, wenn man (das Schlimmste was
The idea that translation from the Greek involves and fosters intellectual work, not only for the translator but for the reader as well, strongly reflects Humboldt’s vision for the reform of educational institutions in the early decades of the nineteenth century. As a model of Bildung, the philological study of the ancients would instill in the individual the drive toward “self-willed citizenship” (Marchand 28). (Again—as with the translation that leaves some obscurity in place for the reader’s “attention”—the subject’s momentum toward clarity emerges as an act of volition rather than in the form of Herder’s surrender to “secret translation.”) As Marchand discusses, Humboldt’s model of Bildung identified “appreciation of the Greeks with the ideal of individual self-cultivation, thereby drawing him away from, rather than into, the public sphere” (26); the individual subject, turning inward in the interest of developing intellectual skill, places himself (and for Humboldt it can only be himself47) on the path to active citizenship.

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

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

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

It is at this juncture, where impressions of the foreign are governed by einem Bearbeiter der Alten begegnen kann) nicht dem Text Einfälle aufdringen will, die über kurz, oder lang andren Einfällen Platz machen.”

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

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

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

50. Steiner justifiably points out that Goethe’s model is in general “unsatisfactory,” leaving too much open to conjecture, but that it does fit in well with Goethe’s central philosophic beliefs: “Translation is an exemplary case of metamorphosis” (After Babel, 259).
51. “. . . Voß konnte das Publikum zuerst nicht befriedigen, bis man sich nach und nach in die neue Art hinein hörte, hinein bequemte. Wer nun aber jetzt übersieht, was geschehen ist, welche
The gradual (nach und nach) education of a modern audience is accomplished for Goethe through the process of “sich hineinhören” (literally, hearing oneself into the foreign work); by exposing the senses to new and unfamiliar forms, the public makes itself comfortable with those forms (Goethe’s formulation is “sich hineinbequemen,” an echo of “hineinhören;” interestingly enough, Humboldt had insisted on the importance of “sich hineindenken,” emphasizing once again the work of the intellect rather than the senses). Voss’s translations may never be duly appreciated in his own age, Goethe suggests here, but their time will come. Humboldt’s easily recognizable distinction between the desirable “foreign” and undesirable “foreignness” is perhaps only temporary, then, and the question of its limit must continually be posed anew as the senses expand to meet more challenging material. Goethe’s notion of an audience in flux points to a dynamic and historical dimension of Fremdheit, thus of translation itself: if translators such as Voss or Hölderlin push the boundaries of their readers’ tolerance for the foreign, it does not mean that their works are failed or “ruined” translations. Indeed, to follow Goethe’s point, perhaps a translation must be situated at this limit, must risk foreignness in order to sustain that experience of the foreign that even Humboldt regards as essential. The continued life of the text in translation (its “living on,” in Benjamin’s terms) depends on the translator’s maintaining that precarious balance.

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

IV. Suspension

Der scheinet aber fast
Rückwärts zu gehen und

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

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

As is so typical for Hölderlin, the poetic depiction of the Danube’s flow evokes the depth of his relation to the ancient past (here “the East”): the look back, the reflective contact with the source, the fleeting effect of suspension as the river, seemingly moving forward and backward at once, clings momentarily to the mountainside.\(^{52}\) In a similar way, his translation practice will enact a suspension between two languages where the reader must hold each one in brief abeyance, dislocating herself from the steady flow of her own language in order to measure the distance traveled by the text. In a recent article, Stanley Corngold eloquently describes a similar “delay” in the process of translation that implies a fundamental ethics:

How should we begin to know such a person—and we must—otherwise than by becoming acquainted with dislocation, our own dislocation, outside language, outside competence? What room is there for this difficult strangeness, if we have not learned to stand firm in the midst of it, abiding a moment of inexpressibility, an incommunicable sense of otherness, of intimacy with a common human grain.\(^{53}\)

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


\(^{53}\) Stanley Corngold, “Comparative Literature: The Delay in Translation.” In Bermann and Wood 144.
Bildung. For Hölderlin, translation is not “good for you” because it expands subjective horizons outward but because its effects unsettle identity at its very core. This leaves his translation practice at some distance not only from the “antiquarian” mode of imitating the ancients but also from the idea of “surrender” to the text that Herder proposes (and that contemporary translation theorists like Spivak have continued to refine). Hölderlin’s investment lies rather in the possibility of rendering tragedy “more alive” by allowing the translation to speak, always imperfectly, of the complexity of relation between contexts and languages. The resonance of such “tragic effects” is evident, as we will see, in the extent to which Hölderlin’s Sophocles has sent (and continues to send) ripples through modern concepts of translation, reading, and interpretation.
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