

Hölderlin's Theory of Tragedy*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines some theoretical texts of Hölderlin on the function and historical task of tragedies, esp. the *Grund zum Empedokles* and the annotations to Sophocles. The tragedy is for Hölderlin a form of transition from antiquity to modernity. Through the individual tragical the historical occurs.

KEYWORDS: Friedrich Hölderlin, Sophocles, Greek Tragedy.

Hölderlin develops the theory of the tragic and tragedy primarily in five fundamental texts:

- I. *Grund zum Empedokles* (written originally in August/September 1799 between the second and third version of the drama).
- II. *Das Werden im Vergehen / Das untergehende Vaterland* (written originally at the turn of the century 1799/1800).
- III. *Die Bedeutung der Tragödien* (written originally c. 1803, but certainly after his return from France).
- IV. *Anmerkungen zum Oedipus; Anmerkungen zur Antigone* (published early spring 1804).
- V. The first letter to Casimir Ulrich Boehlendorff (4th of December 1801).

I.

The *Grund zum Empedokles* focuses mainly on the conditions for the possibility of the *recognisability* of unity. If religion (resp. revelation) is about separation out of freedom, and about the coming to itself of the whole as whole in separation, and how this occurs, then the fundamental problem of tragedy is the egression of the One out of itself. In the lyrical or

* Artigo convidado.



poetical, the relation between “keynote” (“Grundton”) and “artistic character” (“Kunstcharakter”), between essence and appearance/sign is also grounded: the keynote can *only* be gleaned from the artistic character. The fundamental figure of Hölderlin’s poetic is the portrayal in and through a “counterpart”, the portrayal *e contrario*. In the poetological tractatus on the tragic ode that introduces the *Grund zum Empedokles*, a (dialectical) movement is constructed that takes its incept point (that Hölderlin here calls the “Anfangston” resp. “Urton”) from “pure spirit”, from the “divine”, “higher”, “pure innerness”, and comes to the level of “sensibility” by way of its counterpart, “consciousness”, the “conflict” (that comes about “through excess of innerness”), to a “more humble innerness” and “quiet sober-mindedness” (StA IV/1, 149), in a word, to a synthesis of both opposites, that Hölderlin also calls “the idealic”. The beginning tone is rediscovered, but “with sober-mindedness” (“mit Besonnenheit”). So tragic is the way of the hyperbolic innerness of the original sentiment to the higher innerness. This higher, new innerness is distinguished from the original in that it has experienced division and taken this up into itself.

The tragedy, the “tragical dramatical poem”, to which Hölderlin then passes on, is to be distinguished from the tragical ode; here the contraposition has a universal effect, on both material and form. In tragedy, the material is strange and bold, the contrasts sharper, because the divine “Inner” (“Innige”) is deeper. As can here be clearly seen, Hölderlin’s theory of tragedy is inseparable from the theological problem of revelation: tragedy is no immediate expression of poetical sensibility and experience, “das Göttliche [...], das der Dichter in seiner Welt findet und erfährt” [the divine [...] that the poet finds and experiences in his world], reveals itself in tragedy (as in every poem) only in concealment. The innerness is more ‘symbolically’ present, for it is itself “unaussprechlich[h]” [ineffable]. (StA IV/1, 150) The artistic picture must “deny” the sentiment. As the Inner is not portrayable directly, but only in “most positive distinctions”, the poet must select for himself a material as ‘alien’ as possible. The foreignness of the forms serves vivacity; not only the language, but also the poesy makes innerness visible, because it alone can mediate the immediate. Innerness must and can realize itself here. With Hölderlin’s analysis of the tragic coincides a reevaluation of foreignness (the word is used six times), specifically in the context of a theory of the strange artistic material: the foreignness is no longer bad, because incomplete unification, but rather the only possible

form of the presence of the divine. The divine is only portrayable in divisiveness.¹ In the following historic-philosophical analysis, Hölderlin therefore no longer places “spirit” resp. “art” and “nature” – whose extreme alienation constitutes the fundamental crisis of (enlightened) modernity in his subsequent analysis of the philosophy of history – into a relation of mere negation, but now assumes the equality of the antinomical members: he is no longer concerned with a negation of the “organic” in favour of the “aorgic”,² of self-action and reflection in favour of the unconscious-unification, but now nature and art rather need one another in order to fulfill themselves in their true sense. The fundamental contradiction of nature and art constitutes the world in general as well as the individual man in particular; the balance in time and world can only be produced tragically. Only art can bring nature to bear in her authentic; the goal is an enduring unification of the universal and special that preserves the differences. The contraries are confused: nature becomes more organic, man becomes more aorgic. The meaning of these analyses for the Homburg ‘dialectic’ lies in that Hölderlin explains the opposites, ‘nature’ and ‘art’ with respect to his *philosophy of history*: if the harmonically counterposed unity, in which the extremes are distinct from one another, and yet in this very counterposition still remain in their unity – if this unity is to be known and not merely ‘felt’, then it must divide itself in twain; “soll es [das eine Leben] erkennbar sein, so muss es dadurch sich darstellen, dass [...] es sich trennt”. (StA IV/1, 152)³ [if it (the one life) is to be recognizable, then it must portray itself by (...) separating itself.] Tragedy is the “middle” of this process of the struggle between the opposite extremes. Hölderlin has gained a new concept of entirety: his later work is no longer about playing nature, the irrational, off against consciousness, the rational (cf. the ode “Natur und Kunst”).

II.

The draft of philosophy of history, *Das untergehende Vaterland*, stands in the closest connection with the Empedokles tragedy.⁴ Here, the dialectic of the revolutionary transition is

¹ Cf. on this JAMME, C. „Ein ungelehrtes Buch“. *Die philosophische Gemeinschaft zwischen Hölderlin und Hegel in Frankfurt 1797-1800*. Bonn: Bouvier, 1983, p. 357.

² On the origin of the concepts: aorgisch/organisch cf. SCHWERTE, H. Aorgisch. *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, n. 34, 1953, p. 29-38.

³ The following cf. StA IV/1, p. 153.

⁴ Cf. on these connections MÖGEL, E. *Natur als Revolution: Hölderlins Empedokles-Tragödie*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1994.

made finally by Hölderlin to a model of historical development, and coupled with the theory of the tragic.⁵ Hölderlin defines both the historical process and the tragic process as a process of negation of negation; the struggle appears as a form of the portrayal of Being in the middle of processes. Here, too, the concern is with the relation of spirit and sign, this time conceived as a harmonical contraposition of something finite-individually ideal and infinitely real, resp. between sensuality and life, as Hölderlin conceives the relation of epic and lyric. Both are united in the tragic. The significance of the article is that Hölderlin transfers the intuition from the necessary 'egression' of the Being of the One in the material world of its "feelableness" to the history of the Fatherland, in whose phase of decline there is not only the chance of a comprehensive renewal, but especially also the origin of consciousness of its integration into the history of humanity. This is clarified above all by the segment on the margin "for the world of all worlds..." (FHA 14: 136, 171) – for Michael Franz the "Summe des Hölderlinschen Weltverständnisses" [sum of the Hölderlinean understanding of the world].⁶ The "world of all worlds" shows itself once "in all time" i.e. in the eternal, in timelessness, succinctly: in the intellectual intuition, but on the other hand, and in this consists its excitingly new character, also "in the moment", i.e. "in the fall" of a special world. Here, Hölderlin formulates not only a real-dialectical law of world history, but also a law for poetry, namely, that it is bound to the turning point in history; at last, this sentence is of such exemplary significance, because here the unity of intuition is transferred onto the history (of the Fatherland): the One Being receives a history; 'time' and 'history' become for Hölderlin conditions of the 'feelableness', the original *hen kai pan*. The relation of God and history is conceived as ground/sign relation. The once static and differenceless One becomes a "living Whole", even, as Hölderlin more precisely states in the second version, a "living" but "special Whole", i.e., it becomes what Hegel will only a little later call "concrete totality".⁷

III.

⁵ StA IV/1, 282-287 (under the title: *Das Werden im Vergehen*).

⁶ FRANZ, M. **Das System und seine Entropie. ‚Welt‘ als philosophisches und theologisches Problem in den Schriften Friedrich Hölderlins.** Saarbrücken, 1982, p. 90.

⁷ Cf. JAMME, C. **Ein ungelehrtes Buch**, p. 366f.

Entirely similar is the argumentation in the article, *Die Bedeutung der Tragödien...* (FHA 14: 382) The originality needs a “sign”, in order to come into appearance: tragedy; yet because this sign is “=0”, the original comes here completely and entirely to bear.

IV.

It is debated whether this text should be considered the close of the *Empedokles*-project (1798-1800) or a pre-orientation for the planned introduction to the Sophocles translations (1803).⁸ In any case, the poetic-theoretical articles of the Homburg period, and the work on his own *Empedokles*-drama constitute a preparation for the theory of tragedy as Hölderlin prepared it in the commentaries to his translations of *King Oedipus* and the *Antigone* of Sophocles. Only later was this last independent publication of Hölderlin taken seriously; even today, one tends mostly to let e.g. the estranging but unambiguous words vis-à-vis the princess Auguste, to whom the work is dedicated, rest. Originally, Hölderlin wanted to translate all of Sophocles' tragedies (and he had already begun with the *Aias*). That he distinguishes *Oedipus* and *Antigone* stands in his contemporary tradition and the historical situation. Since Aristotle, *Oedipus Rex* had counted as *the* tragedy. Since the end of the 18th century, *Antigone* was estimated as the highest form of tragedy, even as the epitome of art (by Hegel, for example). Hölderlin interprets Sophocles from the *Bakchai* of Euripides, from the model of a cultural revolution. He had already become acquainted with this drama together with Hegel in Tübingen. Here, in Tübingen, arose also the first attempts at a translation (including the first attempt at a metric rendering of the choruses). The basis of the translations was the so-called Juntina-edition. Hegel had also completely copied Brunck's notes on Sophocles for himself. *Antigone* was preferred, because the main figure effects a revolution (in this context, one should think of the stylization of Antigone in Jacobi's *Allwill*). In Frankfurt Hölderlin's famous epigram on Sophocles is written. Here Oedipus is still seen as the model; later (1803/04) Oedipus is guilty of an all too priestly interpretation of the oracle, making himself lord over the oracle. In autumn 1799 Hölderlin has translated the first chorus of *Antigone*, though still more temperately, more

⁸ Cf. on this SCHMIDT, J. in: Hölderlin, F. **Sämtliche Werke und Briefe**. Ed. J.S. vol. 2. Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994, p. 1252f. – The Sophocles complex is documented in: Jamme, C. and Völkel, F. (Ed.). **Hölderlin und der deutsche Idealismus. Dokumente und Kommentare zu Hölderlins philosophischer Entwicklung und den philosophisch-kulturellen Kontexten seiner Zeit**. 4 Vols. Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2003, Chap. V.4 (Vol. 4) in more detail.

“humanistically”. One page is preserved upon which Hölderlin draws up the meter for the parodos more exactly; Rosenkranz reports the same of Hegel. The new feature of Hölderlin's commentary is that after 2000 years Greek tragedy is entirely conceived as rhythm. *Sturm und Drang* had rejected meters (Klopstock), Goethe's *Iphigenie* had rehabilitated them, but not yet antique meters; it was only Süvern who attempted this with the *Trachinierinnen* in 1802.

Hölderlin's translation of *Antigone* was produced after the *Oedipus* translation, in the loneliness of Nürtingen. The reception of these translations was in Hölderlin's own time unanimously deprecative; Voß, Schiller, Schelling und Hegel laugh the poet to scorn. Bettine Brentano was the first to take the translations seriously. Today, since Orff and Brecht, we see in Hölderlin's text a version which stands closer to the Greek language than all others, which is, however, quite doubtful.

With his translation, Hölderlin attempted to pave the way for a Hesperic tragedy. Therefore, he makes a conscious effort to transport the *Antigone* into the Christian, because this drama is for him the transition from the Greek to the Hesperic drama. *Antigone*, as the reasoning goes, finds for eccentricity a new and stronger center than the Greeks. The drama itself is interspersed with Christian concepts (“temptation”, “hell”, and the like).⁹ The transition to the new spirit of the Hesperic republic is graspable in almost every word of the *Antigone*. Hölderlin realigns Antigone nearer to Oedipus, and both of them nearer to himself (he identifies himself with Antigone, though at the same time he struggles to resist this identification). He translates the act of blasphemy as learning to know God, as a new sublimated form of the encounter with God.¹⁰ The fundamental principle of the Hölderlinean interpretation of the tragic in the commentaries has recently been treated by Jochen Schmidt¹¹: Hölderlin conceives the tragic hero as the individuum, as the limited, which is affected by the unlimiting, the elementary, the God (this is a distinct parallel to the *Grund zum Empedokles*, and to the Boehlendorff-letters). The actually tragical action consists in that the individuum is forced open and “in eine andere Welt gerückt” [placed into another world]. Within this conception of the tragic (as being eccentrically snatched away), the concern is not with the character of the hero or of his fate, but the hero is rather a mere medium for a superpersonal occurrence. Just as Oedipus, Antigone attempts to assert herself against the god, the aorgic, by also moving about in the sphere of

⁹ FHA 16: 321, 295.

¹⁰ Cf. BÖSCHENSTEIN, B. Gott und Mensch in den Chorliedern der Hölderlinschen ‚Antigone‘. In: Jamme, C. & Pöggeler, O. (Ed.). *Jenseits des Idealismus. Hölderlins letzte Homburger Jahre (1804-1806)*. Bonn: Bouvier, 1988, p. 123-136.

¹¹ Cf. SCHMIDT, J. in: Hölderlin, F. *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, p. 1322ff.

consciousness herself, albeit reactively, and in contrast to Oedipus, as consciousness itself raised to the highest. Hölderlin speaks of how Antigone “auf dem höchsten Bewußtsein dem Bewußtsein ausweicht” [at the highest consciousness, avoids consciousness]. In the desperate effort to come to herself, Antigone leaves consciousness behind. The monstrosity that can be observed here, namely, to rise to something that is no longer consciousness, is nearly a glorious transfiguration. This is connoted with blasphemy (“Antitheos”): the blasphemous resistance against God (“Freigeist” [freespirit]) is the penultimate phase of the tragic occurrence (“sie wirklich der gegenwärtige Gott ergreift” [the present god really seizes her]). What is most uncanny is that these statements correspond to what Hölderlin says of himself in the second letter to Boehlendorff.¹²

In the third paragraph of the commentary on *Antigone* this is expanded: through the individual tragical the historical occurs. This is all interpreted with the model of a cultural revolution. This all has to do with a most complex combination of the three levels of reality, language and portrayal. There are the “Verfahrungsart” [method of proceeding] and the “Aufruhr” [turmoil], that are connected with each other. Hölderlin is concerned with the problem of the world historical turning point (the transition of antiquity to modernity) – transferred onto the turning point in history that was introduced by the French Revolution. *Antigone* is the tragedy of the transition from antiquity to modernity; the “vaterländische Umkehr” [patriotic turning] as “Umkehr aller Vorstellungsarten und –formen” [reversal of all notions and imaginative forms], which is addressed here, is the direct continuation of that which is accomplished in the *Grund zum Empedokles*. Haemon and Antigone stand for the rising republican and humanistic form of spirit (Christian martyrs). The reason of the state passes from tyrannical autocracy to a constitutional monarchy (Creon remains as one transformed).

This finds itself exclusively in the *Anmerkungen zur Antigone* (and in the first Boehlendorff letter). In the third part of the *Oedipus-Anmerkungen* it plays no role. Here it is asserted that the execution can only be realised through the structure of antithesis. This structure determines the entire third part: God and man couple and separate. Tragic is defined as “divine infidelity”: the god needs man in order to demonstrate with him that he, the god, is never accessible to man (for which reason the god destroys Oedipus). Oedipus and Antigone become traitors to the god to whom they owe everything. Behind this the Aristotelian catharsis theory

¹² I owe many insights into the Sophokles-*Anmerkungen* to the colloquium organised by O. Pöggeler and C. Jammé in the Werner Reimers-Stiftung in Bad Homburg, 3.-5. March 1994.

shines through (“purifying”). The Aristotle quote is also about the portrayal of the natural power: the writer of tragedies is the “grammateus” of “physis”.¹³ In this way Hölderlin accounts for the contraposition of chorus and dialogue: if the dialogue is the portrayal of the struggle of god and man, Hölderlin conceives the chorus as a harmonical form in which the antitheses resolve (aufheben) themselves.

If one compares the third part of the *Oedipus-Anmerkungen* with the last *Anmerkungen zur Antigone*, the differences become distinct: in *Oedipus*, “wrath” is spoken of, in *Antigone*, enthusiasm. At the beginning of the third part of the *Antigonä-Anmerkungen* there are three paradoxical formulations about the relation of mediacy and immediacy that are missing from the *Oedipus-Anmerkungen*. There is the encounter: that is the mediate; then there is the tragical catastrophe – the immediate -, that is the “pairing” (“deadly factual” [“tödlich faktisch”] means mediate, “killing factual” [“tötendfaktisch”] means immediate). The pairing and separation of the god and man can be shown fundamentally, although not in any specific passage of the drama.

Furthermore, the *Anmerkungen zur Antigone* contain an excursus on the Hesperic and the Greek. Hölderlin emphasises the poet’s connection to “vaterländische Vorstellungsarten” [patriotic imaginative modes]; as the peoples have their strength in that which they do not innately have, the Greeks strive toward sobriety (“Geschick und Athletentugend” [skillfulness and athletic virtue]) and the Hesperians toward passion. The most difficult thing is to rediscover the innate. In the first letter to Boehlendorff,¹⁴ this is stated more precisely: a culture must acquire that which is not inborn in it, the “Vaterländische” must “so wahrhaft das Fremde sich an[...]eignen” [thus, the patriotic must truly appropriate the alien.]” The Greeks, for whom the “heilig[e]Pathos” [sacred pathos] was innate, must learn sober embodiment; the origin of modern culture lies, then, precisely in this sober power of reflection, and as balance, it must therefore appropriate passion; it must learn pathos. Because of this “Pathosbedarf der Moderne”

¹³ Cf. on this BRAGUE, R. Ein rätselhaftes Zitat über Aristoteles in Hölderlins ‚Anmerkungen über Ödipus‘. In: Gawoll, H. J. and Jamme, C. (Ed.). **Idealismus mit Folgen. Die Epochenschwelle um 1800 in Kunst und Geisteswissenschaften**. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1995, p. 69-74.

¹⁴ StA IV/1, 425-428, B236. – Cf. On this BÖSCHENSTEIN-SCHÄFER, R. Hölderlins Gespräch mit Boehlendorff. **Hölderlin-Jahrbuch**, n. 14, 1965/66, p. 110-124. BINDER, W. **Hölderlin und Sophokles. Eine Vorlesung, gehalten im Sommersemester 1984 an der Universität Zürich**. Tübingen: Hölderlin-Gesellschaft, 1992, p. 66ff.; KURZ, G. „aus linkischem Gesichtspunkt“: Überlegungen zu Hölderlins Tragödienkonzeption. Vortrag an der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. In: Ehrich-Haefeli, V. i.a. (Ed.). **Antiquitates Renatae. Deutsche und französische Beiträge zur Wirkung der Antike in der europäischen Literatur. Festschrift für Renate Böschenstein zum 65. Geburtstag**. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998, p. 177-190.

[modernity's need for pathos],¹⁵ one must not, according to Hölderlin, simply imitate the Greeks: "außer dem, was bei den Griechen und uns das Höchste sein muss, nämlich dem lebendigen Verhältnis und Geschick, [dürfen] wir nicht wohl etwas gleich mit ihnen haben [...]". [aside from that which must be the highest for the Greeks and for us, that is, the living relation and destiny, we should not be expected to have anything in common with them.]

The last form of the thinking of art as looting the alien for what is one's own is the image of the egression of the spirit (Dionysos) into the "Kolonie" [colony]¹⁶: To this belongs the imparting of the spirit unto the Hesperics (this purpose was furthered e.g. by the conversion of the antique gods' names in the translations of Sophocles).

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¹⁵ According to the especially successful formulation of Wolfram Högbe (in the discussion of G. Kurz' lecture in Jena).

¹⁶ On the verses „Kolonie liebt und tapfer vergessen der Geist“ cf. KREUTZER, H.J. Kolonie und Vaterland in Hölderlins später Lyrik. **Hölderlin-Jahrbuch**, n. 22, 1980-81, p. 18-46.

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