

Véronique M. Föti

# Epochal Discordance

Hölderlin's Philosophy  
of Tragedy

## Epochal Discordance

SUNY SERIES IN  
CONTEMPORARY CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

---

Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

EPOCHAL  
DISCORDANCE

*Hölderlin's Philosophy of Tragedy*

VÉRONIQUE M. FÓTI

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS  
ALBANY

© 2006 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address  
State University of New York Press  
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production, Laurie Searl  
Marketing, Anne M. Valentine

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Fóti, Véronique Marion.

Epochal discordance : Hölderlin's philosophy of tragedy / Véronique M. Fóti.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in contemporary continental philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and indexes.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-6859-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7914-6859-3 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Hölderlin, Friedrich, 1770-1843—Philosophy. 2. Tragedy—Philosophy. I. Title. II. Series.

PT2359.H2F68 2006  
809.2'512—dc22

2005030810

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my sons and daughters:*

*Sunil Sharma, Leila Sharma,  
Ravi K. Sharma, Amina Sharma*

**This page intentionally left blank.**

# Contents

---

---

PREFATORY NOTE		xi
PROLOGUE		1
ONE	The Tragic Turning and Tragic Paradigm in Philosophy	7
TWO	Communing with the Pure Elements: The First Two Versions of <i>The Death of Empedocles</i>	29
THREE	Singularity and Reconciliation: The Third Version of <i>The Death of Empedocles</i>	41
FOUR	Between Hölderlin's Empedocles and Empedocles of Akragas	55
FIVE	The Faithless Turning: Hölderlin's Reading of <i>Oedipus Tyrannos</i>	65
SIX	Dys-Limitation and the "Patriotic Turning": Sophocles' <i>Antigone</i>	75
SEVEN	From an Agonistic of Powers to a Homecoming: Heidegger, Hölderlin, and Sophocles	91
EPILOGUE		105
NOTES		111

BIBLIOGRAPHY	133
INDEX OF PERSONS	139
INDEX OF TOPICS	142

We must ask from the gods  
things suited to hearts that shall die,  
knowing the path we are in, the nature of our doom.

—Pindar, *Pythian* III, trans. C. M. Bowra

**This page intentionally left blank.**

## Prefatory Note

---

All translations from the German and French are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Translations from the Greek are based on the Greek texts cited and, where indicated, on other translations consulted, which have for the most part been modified.

In citing Greek names, I have generally rendered the letter *kappa* by *k*, rather than by the Latinized *c* (thus, for instance, Kreon); but in the case of names that are almost invariably cited with Latinized spelling, such as those of Sophocles and Empedocles, I have left the *c* in place.

**This page intentionally left blank.**

# Prologue

---

---

Excess dominates, which is why there must be tragedy, limits by default. . . . [The moderns] no longer had access to the transports which carried the Greeks beyond themselves: we are barbarians to the point of seeing Dionysian excess as mere barbarism.<sup>1</sup>

It is astonishing that this book—completed, as it happens, almost exactly two centuries after the publication (in April 1804) of Hölderlin’s Sophocles translations—remains one of the first two efforts to study Hölderlin’s thought on tragedy as a whole from the three fragmentary versions of his own tragedy, *The Death of Empedocles*, and the body of essays on the poetics and philosophy of tragedy connected with it, to the late translations (or, more properly, linguistic transpositions) of two of Sophocles’ three Theban plays, together with the hermetic “Remarks” he appended to them. There exist, to be sure, a number of excellent specific studies (particularly in the German and French scholarship), published mostly as chapters in edited or authored books; yet only one other scholar, Françoise Dastur, so far has undertaken to trace Hölderlin’s itinerary of thought *in tragoediam* (his *Denkweg*, as Heidegger might say), even though the question of the tragic forms the vital and sensitive nerve of his thought.<sup>1</sup>

The further task this book sets itself is to read Hölderlin’s analyses of tragedy as they demand to be read: as philosophy, rather than as the “theoretical” reflections (or worse: the oracular pronouncements) of a significant, but difficult, poet. Hölderlin, classically educated, a painstaking reader of Kant, student and critic of Fichte, and friend of Hegel and Schelling, was deeply involved in philosophy; and his own philosophy of tragedy is integral to (and may, in fact, have largely motivated) the “tragic turning” in German philosophy, which stretched from the close of the eighteenth century to Heidegger’s analyses near the midpoint of the twentieth century. Hölderlin’s fragmentary

Empedocles tragedy and his Sophocles translations are, to be sure, works of literature; but they rest on a philosophical foundation, which he took care to elaborate and clarify.

Hölderlin's thought on tragedy is not closed in on itself, but stands in vital interconnection with that of other thinkers, ranging from Empedocles (who, of course, did not write about Attic tragedy [although he is said to have composed tragedies of his own], but who, in his philosophical poem *Katharmoi*, or *Purifications*, presents his understanding of the tragic fate suffered by the spirit or *daimōn*) to Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. The question of the tragic penetrates the thought of these modern and contemporary thinkers to its core, as it does that of Hölderlin.

This is one reason why no single study can hope, after all, fully to encompass Hölderlin's thought on tragedy, not only in its textual and intellectual scope, but in all its complex ramifications in the wider panorama of philosophy and literature. A further reason is that such an encompassing project would also require a detailed scholarly analysis of Hölderlin's Sophocles translations, on which, as yet, little work has been done. During the writing of this book, I (who will here lay aside the academic author's mask of quasi-anonymity to speak in the first person) have had the experience of a recurrent, quasi-visual image. The image was one of scintillating light flashing forth in the pure colors of the spectrum at some otherwise inconspicuous point—the sort of sudden flashes of color one might see in a drop of dew or on an icicle touched by the winter sun (I must leave the contemplation of faceted diamonds to wealthier authors). At almost every point the issues treated seemed similarly to scintillate; and one could have followed out multiple trajectories of questioning. I trust, however, that the reader will, on the whole, find such sparkle more stimulating than the blank whiteness (or, on the analogy of a pigmentary mixture of colors, the dull grey) that would have resulted from seeking to integrate and to resolve absolutely everything. Perhaps the reader will herself or himself be stimulated to follow out some of the questions that are allowed to flash forth.

In this Prologue, I will indicate just two or three of the points at which the light breaks. Firstly, whereas Hegel situates tragedy, or tragic conflict and its resolution, within ethicality (*Sittlichkeit*, as a surpassed self-actualization of spirit), Hölderlin decisively withdraws it from the ethical domain. In this, he is followed by Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as by Reiner Schürmann (who, however, dismisses his thought on the basis of a cursory and questionable reading, taking his own guidance from Nietzsche and Heidegger). The twisting free of tragedy from the grip of Hegelian ethicality does not mean that the concerns normally classed as ethical are cast to the winds (a reproach too often made to Heidegger), but rather that they are resituated against a vaster horizon—the horizon, perhaps, of what lies “beyond good and evil,” of the dispropriative trait in the propriative event (*Ereignis*), or of the tragic structure in the instauration and despoilment of hegemonic principles.

If these characterizations roughly indicate the wider horizon as understood by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Schürmann, how does Hölderlin understand it? One cannot offer a rough characterization here, for, even though his ethical and political vision (succinctly articulated in his character Empedocles' final testament in the tragedy's First Version) remains constant, the horizon against which it articulates itself does not. Just how to interpret its changing configurations? These range from Hölderlin's initial exaltation of nature's primordial elements (indebted, not to the Latin principle of *natura*, but to Empedocles' elemental "roots"), which so far has not been commented on in the interpretive literature, to—firstly, but not finally—the idea of the destinal sacrifice of an exceptional individual as demanded by an epochal transition or "turning of the times." The notion of an essential sacrifice, which also informs Hegel's early thought on tragedy and which can be traced as a rather cryptic locution in several Heideggerian texts, constitutes another point of scintillation, which will merely be noted here without further comment.

Hölderlin, however, goes on to repudiate the speculative and perhaps religiously inspired thought-structure of the sacrifice of "time's first born" (without ceasing to link tragedy to an epochal transition). The horizon for understanding tragedy becomes, in the end (at the final tragic turning or *Umkehr*) that of the sheer finitude of mortal experience, of a temporality without issue, and of an affirmation of this earth. A question that flashes forth is how this affirmation can arise from one's being thrown back, in suffering, upon what Hölderlin refers to as the empty form of time (a specter, perhaps, of Kant's understanding of time as an *a priori* form of intuition), which leaves "beginning" and "end" in irremediable, atelic, and counterspeculative discordance. What is the full import of this radical temporal incoherence and fragmentation, which subverts the schema of speculative thought? It will not admit, for instance, of an originary yet still withheld beginning, a beginning that is yet to be realized, as Heidegger thinks it in his understanding of the historicity of Western thought. More generally, how could human life configure itself ethically, or also creatively, in Hölderlinian temporal discordance? Must and can such discordance be modified without denying the conflictual structure of the real that is fundamentally at issue in tragedy?

A second and important point of scintillation can perhaps be envisaged from the perspective of the idea of reconciliation. Whereas, for Hegel, reconciliation remains the guiding aim of tragedy and defines its cathartic work, the late Hölderlin sees ultimate reconciliation—the reconciliation of man with divinity—not as the ideal of a differential interrelation, but as a hybridic union, destructive of the singular, and motivated by "eccentric enthusiasm," which is fundamentally a passion for death. The cathartic work of tragedy therefore becomes for him a work of dispersive separation.

One context in which this separative work gains special importance is that of the historical relationship between Greece and Hesperia (the name by

which Hölderlin, who links Greece to the East, refers to the West). Hölderlin's analysis here turns on distinguishing, in both cultures, between natal endowment and formative drive (*Bildungstrieb*). Greece and Hesperia stand in a chiasmatic complementarity in that the Greek formative drive strives for the sobriety, lucid articulation, and plastic power that constitute Hesperia's natal endowment, whereas the Hesperian formative drive cultivates what is natural to the Greek spirit: a fiery passion, intensity, and grandeur that verge on devastating excess. Only through an assiduous cultivation of what is alien to it, in keeping with its own formative drive, can either culture come to learn the free and sovereign use of what is genuinely its own; for a consummate actualization of one's ownmost gifts is, as Hölderlin stresses, far from spontaneous or natural. At the same time, however, the formative drive, having achieved a high perfection of its ideal, can then come to define a culture, as Greece tended to be defined by what Nietzsche called its Apollonian traits, masking its natal tendency to Dionysian excess.

This implies, firstly, that any attempted *mimēsis* of ancient Greece will always be deflected by coming up against the self-alienating force of the Greek formative drive and so will be incapable of reaching "Greece" itself, which shows itself to be a phantom. More importantly, however, such a mimetic relationship, blindly pursued, will, in Hölderlin's view, prove dangerous. It is tragedy that reveals this danger in that it *presents* (but does not itself enact) the breaking free of the searing Greek fire from the restraints and limits imposed on it by the Greek formative drive, as a failure of the restraining and purifying impulse from which, in his view, Greece ultimately perished (along with its tragic art). Hölderlin here presents a very different view of the death of tragedy (in the context of the perishing of Greek classical culture) than does Nietzsche, for whom tragedy perished, not of unpurified Dionysian excess, but of the exaltation of theoretical reason. If Hesperia should now seek blindly to imitate Greece, it will find itself drawn fatefully into maximizing the impassioned excess that constitutes the Greek natal endowment. This happens due to the orientation of Hesperia's own formative drive, which strives for what is lacking in the natal gift proper to Hesperia: passion, grandeur, and a sense of destiny.

If sobriety and lucid articulation are pursued to excess, they become pedantry and cultural sclerosis (it is against the latter, as an excess of the Greek formative drive, that Antigone, on Hölderlin's interpretation, rebels); but the Greek fire, maximized by the Hesperian quest for a mimetic union with Greece, becomes an encompassing and destructive conflagration.

The question that flashes forth here concerns Hölderlin's premonition, if such it was, of the dangers looming on the still-distant Hesperian horizon, and the self-critical vigilance that he therefore demanded of intellectual life. His warning certainly has not been heeded and probably was largely not understood. Today, however, one still needs to ask oneself how to configure

the ineluctable relationship of contemporary philosophical thought to that of ancient Greece. The idealization of Greece, which invited a mimetic paradigm, has, to be sure, seen its day; but then again Heidegger, who initiated a new responsive engagement with Greek thought (including tragedy), has tended, in casting “the Greeks”<sup>2</sup> as “a people of poets and thinkers,” to veil the tendency of the culture toward impassioned excess, which Hölderlin, as well as Nietzsche, were acutely sensitive to. It remains an open question how to engage, in particular, with Greek tragic thought, without either relegating it, with Hegel, to an essentially surpassed form of spiritual life, or else effacing Hesperia’s differential separation from it, which Hölderlin regarded as salutary.

Now, however, lest one’s eyes blur or tire, it is time to look away from the play of scintillations and to lay the sparklers aside. It is time then to turn to the texts themselves, and to enter upon the patient but challenging labor of reading which this book proposes to undertake.

**This page intentionally left blank.**

## ONE

# The Tragic Turning and Tragic Paradigm in Philosophy

---

---

Let us also reread that, at Aulis, [Agamemnon's] function as commander defines and universalizes him, that he inserts it into a world that is meaningful, but that also, at Aulis, the undeniable—yet denied—allegiance to his offspring likewise singularizes him. The other prescription expels him in advance from the world of arms and ships: a world that, in sacrificing his daughter, he plainly exalts as normative. The denied prescription makes non-meaning penetrate into the universal meaning. To think this double prescription for itself is to make tragic knowing one's own.

Toward the close of the eighteenth century, tragedy, which had been of scant interest to philosophers since Plato and Aristotle, began to move to the forefront of German thought. Not only was this tragic turning of philosophy sustained well into the nineteenth century, it also surfaced anew in the first half of the twentieth century in the work of Martin Heidegger. Whereas Plato and Aristotle were concerned with the question of the educational and political impact of tragedy, or with its poetics, the German thinkers focused not so much on tragedy as a dramatic form (although Hölderlin took pains to study it as such, and Hegel does explore it in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*), but on the very essence and philosophical thought-structure of the tragic, and ultimately on the role of the tragic paradigm in philosophy. Although such a focus is not wholly alien to the therapeutic concern that runs throughout much of the Western philosophical tradition—a concern for the assuaging of human suffering through a discipline of thought (here the interest of German Idealism in Spinoza is relevant, although Spinoza's thought did not directly motivate