“Das Opferthier, das nicht vergebens fällt”: The Meaning of Sacrifice in Friedrich Hölderlin’s *Der Tod des Empedokles*

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1 Introduction

To deepen our understanding of the phenomenon of sacrifice today and its relation to the community at large, it may be helpful to explore its meaning in historical periods that mark the turning points of modernity. The German intellectual discourse at the end of the eighteenth century, in which the issues of community and national identity were fundamentally debated and redefined, presents itself as a particularly fruitful ground for such an investigation. In the search for answers to the triple crisis of this period – in which social, political, and philosophical problems are entangled¹ – all leading thinkers assign a crucial task to the poet.

This article analyzes the work of such a *Dichter*,² Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), whose voice like no other echoes the turbulence of the time. However, we will not concentrate on his famous and important poems but shift attention to his dramaturgy. In the years preceding the turn of the century, Hölderlin is absorbed in a project to create a modern tragedy based on an ancient topic: the mythical death of the Greek philosopher Empedocles. In this work, the themes of sacrifice, community and identity are deeply and intriguingly connected. We will trace three different meanings of sacrifice as they can be identified in the subsequent versions of the text.

Hölderlin never completed his attempt to create a Greek tragedy for modern times; only three unfinished fragments remain. We seek to show how this failure marks a defining turn in Hölderlin’s thought, and how new and original insights into the problem of modern identity are initiated that will profoundly affect the meaning of sacrifice.

1 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Anne Marie Lang, *L’Absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), 13–14.

2 Poet. As we see it, the word may be used in a wider sense of an inspired, sensitive and eloquent person.

2 Longing for a Meaningful Death

In 1799, Hölderlin writes a poem in which the themes of sacrificial death and community are explicitly connected. The ode *Der Tod fürs Vaterland* evokes a battle scene in which youthful heroes descend a hill to fight the intruding enemy. Although this enemy – described as *Würger* (stranglers) and *Ehrelöse* (those without honor) – is physically stronger, they lack the spiritual weapons of the young heroes: their soul, the justice of their cause and their songs for the fatherland. In the third stanza, the wish to join their ranks is exclaimed, culminating in a motto expressing the longing for a meaningful death:

O nimmt mich, nimmt mich mit in die Reihen auf,
Damit ich einst nicht sterbe gemeinen Tods!
Umsonst zu sterben, lieb' ich nicht, doch
Lieb' ich, zu fallen am Opferhügel³

Already in the next stanza, the wish to die for the native country (*"Für's Vaterland, zu bluten des Herzens Blut/ Für's Vaterland"*)⁴ – is completed and the fallen youth descends into a realm which is closest to the images of the underworld in ancient Greece.⁵ Here, arriving as a 'humble foreigner', the hero is welcomed by the *"Helden und Dichter aus alter Zeit"* (heroes and poets of ancient times) who treat him as a brother. The final stanza completes the legitimization of the hero's sacrifice and of sacrificial death in general:⁶

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- 3 Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, ed. Michael Knaupp, 3 vols., vol. 1 (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1992), 225. "O enlist me, enlist me in the ranks/ So I won't die some paltry death!/ I don't want to die in vain,/ I'd rather fall on the field, a sacrifice." Translation from: Friedrich Hölderlin, *Odes and Elegies* (ed. Nick Hoff, Wesleyan Poetry Series; Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 55.
 - 4 "For the fatherland, to bleed my heart's/ Blood for the fatherland." See Hölderlin, *Odes and Elegies*, 55.
 - 5 See Götz Schmitt, "'Der Tod fürs Vaterland'. Hölderlins Ode und die Zeitgeschichte." *Hölderlin Jahrbuch* 35 (2006/2007), 360. "Griechisch sind die Vorstellungen vom Zustand der Gefallenen. Sie werden nicht in ein himmlisches Walhalla aufgenommen (...) sie kommen *hinunter*." (Greek are the conceptions of the condition of the fallen soldiers. They are not received in a heavenly Walhalla (...) they *descend*.)
 - 6 Unsurprisingly, this poem, which ends with a justification of casualties in the name of the fatherland, has been appropriated and abused to sanction, glorify and promote war and nationalist violence. A blatant example of such an abuse can be found in the Nazi propaganda movie *Stukas*, where the third and sixth stanza of the poem are recited to justify the

Und Siegesboten kommen herab: Die Schlacht
Ist unser! Lebe droben, o Vaterland,
Und zähle nicht die Todten! dir ist,
Liebes! nicht Einer zu viel gefallen.⁷

The meaning of sacrifice in Hölderlin's ode is inextricably linked to images and ideas of death as a violent killing, a sanctified death which fulfills the desire to essentially belong to a community that shares a spiritual identity.

According to the American scholar Kathryn McClymond, prevailing theories of sacrifice in religious studies are too often restricted to sacrifice as sacred violence.⁸ To counter the dominant paradigm of sacrifice, which overemphasizes the importance of violent killing, McClymond introduces a multilateral, polythetic approach. She distinguishes seven activities during sacrificial events, in which killing represents only a single – and not necessarily the most important – stage.⁹ In her work, McClymond examines Hebrew and Vedic texts and practices, but her general insight may also prove to be a fruitful starting point for the analysis of sacrifice in the literary writings of a canonical Western author such as Friedrich Hölderlin. Although our reading of *Der Tod fürs Vaterland* has led us to a one-dimensional view on sacrifice, it would be premature to discard the theme of sacrifice in Hölderlin's thought as self-evident. To show its layered and multifaceted significance in Hölderlin's oeuvre, we will turn to the contemporaneous text mentioned in the title of this chapter, which also carries 'death' in its title: *Der Tod des Empedokles*.

3 The Myth of Empedocles

In a letter to his publisher Neuffer, October 10, 1794, Hölderlin announces his initial idea to write a tragedy about the death of Socrates according to the

death of a young pilot. See Karl Ritter, *Stukas* (Germany, 1941), <http://www.wagneropera.net/Themes/Wagner-In-Movies-Stukas-1941.htm>.

- 7 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band I, 226. "And messagers of victory arrive: The battle's/ Ours! Live, O Fatherland, remain there on high/ And don't count the dead! O my beloved,/ Not one too many has died for you. See Hölderlin, *Odes and Elegies*, 55.
- 8 Kathryn McClymond, "Death Be Not Proud: Reevaluating the Role of Killing in Sacrifice", *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 6, nr. 3 (2002); Kathryn McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
- 9 The seven activities are: selection, association, identification, killing, heating, apportionment and consumption. Kathryn McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence*, 29–33.

ideals of Greek drama.¹⁰ Three years later – working on the second volume of his epistolary novel *Hyperion* – Hölderlin refers to a detailed plan for a mourning-play in a letter to his brother: “*Ich habe den ganz detaillierten Plan zu einem Trauerspiel gemacht, dessen Stoff mich hinreißt.*”¹¹ The subject matter that captivates Hölderlin is no longer the death of Socrates, but the mythical death of another ancient Greek philosopher, Empedocles. This pre-Socratic thinker who is famous for his cosmogony of the four classical elements of fire, earth, water, air and their mixture and separation through the forces of Love and Strife, is said to have thrown himself into the Mount Etna volcano.¹²

In the original design of the tragedy, laid down in the so-called *Frankfurter Plan*, Hölderlin envisions his *Empedokles* as a traditional five-act tragedy. In the following three years, Hölderlin’s work on the project results in a number of different texts. He subsequently composes three unfinished versions of *Der Tod des Empedokles*, of which the first is the largest and most complete.¹³ After the second version, Hölderlin also writes a theoretical essay entitled *Die tragische Ode*. This article contains a section called “Grund zum Empedokles”, where Hölderlin unfolds a foundation for his play which builds on his newly gained insights into dramaturgy. A short poem from the same period is also dedicated to Empedocles’ death. In our discussion, we will concentrate on the subsequent versions.¹⁴

10 Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band II, ed. Michael Knaupp, 3 vol., vol. 2 (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1992), 550.

11 Ibid., p. 661: translation: “I have made the very detailed plan for a tragedy with a very fascinating subject.”

12 Though Hölderlin consulted several authors on the life and work of Empedocles, he mainly relied on the account of Diogenes Laertius in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (VIII, 51–53), of which he possessed the Greek Latin edition of Stephanus (1570). See Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band III (ed. Michael Knaupp, 3 vols., vol. 3; München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1993), 327–328.

13 In a letter to Neuffer on July 3, 1799, Hölderlin defines the rejection of all *accidental elements* as an essential feature of tragedy. See Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band II, 781. The different versions, from the Frankfurter Plan to the third and final version of *Der Tod des Empedokles*, illustrate this progressive “Verläugnung des Accidentellen” (disavowal of the accidental). Only the third version displays a unity of time and place. See Maria Cornelissen, “Die Manes-Szene in Hölderlins Trauerspiel ‘Der Tod des Empedokles’”, *Hölderlin Jahrbuch* 14 (1965/1966), 98.

14 Different editions of the *Empedokles* exist, which differ from each other significantly. See Friedrich Beissner, “Hölderlins Trauerspiel ‘Der Tod des Empedokles’ in seinen drei Fassungen”, in *Hölderlin. Reden und Aufsätze* (F. Beissner; Köln-Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1969). We will use the 1992 edition of Michael Knaupp.

4 Sacrifice as Victimage

The first version opens with a dialogue between Panthea, a young woman from Agrigentum, and Delia, a visitor to the city. They meet in front of Empedocles' garden and talk about him incessantly with fearful adoration. Empedocles is characterized as a semi-divine figure who lives harmoniously with plants, earth, water and the clouds.

Man sagt, die Pflanzen merkten auf
ihn, wo er wandre, und die Wasser unter der Erde
strebten herauf da wo sein Stab den Boden berühre!
und wenn er bei Gewittern in den Himmel blicke
theile die Wolke sich und hervorschimmre der
heitre Tag.¹⁵

Panthea relates the recent miraculous cure from her deadly illness by Empedocles, affirming his superhuman command of nature. The first scene ends with a foreshadowing of Empedocles' death, which is inimitable to common mortals. The wrath of the gods is insinuated as a possible cause of his demise.

(...) denn groß ist auch der Tod der Großen.
Was diesem Manne widerfährt,
Das, glaube mir, das widerfährt nur ihm,
Und hätt' er gegen alle Götter sich
Versündigt und ihren Zorn auf sich
Geladen (...)¹⁶

In the second scene, this possibility has become real. Critias, the archon (ruler) of Agrigentum and the priest Hermocrates, both declared enemies

15 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 769. “They say the plants gaze up at/ him as he walks by, and the waters ‘neath the earth/ strive upward to the surface when his staff grazes the ground!/ and when in a storm he looks at the sky/ the clouds part and reveal the shimmering/ cheerful day.” See Friedrich Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, tr. David Farrell Krell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 38.

16 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 773. “For great is also the death of the great/ what is coming to confront this man,/ Believe me, will confront but him alone,/ And if he were to sin against all gods, and/ Invite their wrath upon him (...).” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 42.

of Empedocles, conspire to bring him down. The opportunity seems ripe because apparently Empedocles has made himself vulnerable by committing a fatal mistake. *“Denn es haben/ Die Götter seine Kraft von ihm genommen,/ Seit jenem Tage, da der trunkne Mann/ Vor allem Volk sich einen Gott genannt.”*¹⁷ Empedocles has publicly declared himself a god in front of the people of Agrigentum. Hermocrates and Critias plot to bring about the expulsion of Empedocles on account of the inexcusable *hubris* (arrogance) of ranking himself among the gods: *“Damit er nimmerwiederkehrend dort/ Die böse Stunde büße, da er sich/ Zum Gott gemacht.”*¹⁸

When Empedocles enters the stage in the following scenes, he is shattered by feelings of guilt and abandonment, as he confesses to Pausanias, his favorite pupil: *“(...) ich allein/ War Gott, und sprach im frechen Stolz heraus – / O glaub es mir, ich wäre lieber nicht/ Geboren!”*¹⁹

In a dramatic confrontation with a crowd of angry citizens, led by Critias and Hermocrates, the priest pronounces a violent curse upon Empedocles which seals his banishment from the polis:²⁰

(...) du hast mit uns
Nichts mehr gemein, ein Fremdling bist du worden
Und unerkant bei allen Lebenden.
Die Quelle, die uns trinkt, gebührt dir nicht
Und nicht die Feuerflamme, die uns frommt, (...)
Und wenn du stirbst, die Grabesflamme dir
Bereitet, wehe dem, wie dir! – hinaus!²¹

17 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 775. “The gods have robbed him of his force, ever since/ The day the man, besotted, to be sure, in front of all/ The people recklessly proclaimed himself a god.” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 44.

18 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 777. “That there, never to return again,/ He’ll pay, and dearly, for that evil hour he/ Made himself a god.” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 46.

19 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 784. “I alone/ Was god, and spoke it out in haughty insolence – /Oh, believe me, would I never had/ Been born!” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 53.

20 Though the curse is not a death sentence in the physical sense, the banishment from the polis does entail the deprivation of vital resources and – worse than a death penalty – the refusal of a proper burial in the future.

21 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 789. “(...) you and we/ Share nothing any longer; a stranger now,/ You are unknown to all that lives./ The source that slakes our thirst is not/ For you, nor is the fire that serves us well; (...) And when you die, whoever

In the second version of *Der Tod des Empedokles*, the envy of his antagonists and their machinations are emphasized even stronger, when Hermocrates states unequivocally: “*Er oder wir! Und Schaden ist es nicht/ So wir ihn opfern. Untergehen muß/ Er doch!*”²²

In the first Act of version I of the play and in the corresponding scenes of the second version, the meaning of Empedocles’ sacrifice originates in his hubris. By unthinkingly declaring himself equal to the gods, the great man brings about his own downfall. This is what makes Empedocles an essentially tragic figure, whose desire for elevation leads to his fall into the depths.²³ Feeling isolated from the gods and excluded from the community, he finds himself in a state of paralysis. In his banishment from the polis, Empedocles appears as a victim (*‘Opfer’*).²⁴ His sacrifice is an act of atonement for the violation of the divine and social order.²⁵

5 Sacrifice as a Speculative Death

The motive of sacrifice as victimage finds a dramatic reversal in the second act of the play. Roaming through the wild, Empedocles and Pausanias arrive at a peasant’s hut where they beg for food and shelter. But the owner, having recognized Empedocles as the banned and cursed Agrigentian, refuses any hospitality and chases them away. Completely exhausted, they find a place to rest at a fountain. The moment Empedocles drinks water from the well, he regains his former power and finds his own *Quelle* (source) again. Hölderlin explicitly added a stage direction to underline the transfiguration of Empedocles from

sets a flame upon/ Your funeral pyre-woe to him and you! begone!” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 58–59.

22 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band I, 845. “It’s him or us! We do no harm when/ We sacrifice the man. He must go down/ In any case!” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 118.

23 In this context, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe refers to the double meaning of the Latin word *altus*. See Jane Hiddleston and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Stagings of Mimesis: an interview”, *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 8, nr. 2 (2003), 63.

24 In German, the word *Opfer* has a double meaning, signifying both ‘sacrifice’ and ‘victim’.

25 It would be interesting to approach this motive from a Girardian perspective. On the one hand, mimetic desire and communal scapegoating seem to be pervasive. But the scheme is complicated by the fact that the object of desire and the scapegoat seem to coincide in the figure of Empedocles. Moreover, there are many implicit analogies to be found between Empedocles and the figure of Christ (miraculous healing, elevation and condemnation by the crowd, accusation of claim to divinity etc.).

an outcast and humiliated victim into the hero he used to be: “*Von hier an muß er wie ein höhers Wesen erscheinen, ganz in seiner vorigen Liebe und Macht.*”²⁶ The return to his original strength at the same time leads to a clear vision of a future destination:

Siehst du denn nicht? Es kehrt
Die schöne Zeit von meinem Leben heute
Noch einmal wieder und das Größre steht
Bevor; hinauf, oh Sohn, zum Gipfel
Des alten heiligen Aetna wollen wir²⁷

From now on, Empedocles' determination to climb Mount Etna only increases. The people and leaders of Agrigentum, who soon feel the absence of their benefactor, regret their decision to expel Empedocles. They follow him and urge him to return, offering unlimited honors and power. Empedocles declines, in a reply that exposes his resolute decision and acceptance of his fate:

Laßt diese Glücklichen doch sterben, laßt
Eh sie in Eigenmacht und Tand und Schmach
Vergehn, die Freien sich den Göttern liebend
Opfern, denen alles Erstgeborene
Der Zeit ist heilig. Mein ist diß.²⁸

To freely and lovingly sacrifice himself to the gods, this is the will and the fate of Empedocles. How can the meaning of such a death be understood?

According to Joseph Suglia, the necessity of Empedocles' death derives from the “reflective idealist pathos for reconciliation between the self and the

26 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 810. “From now on Empedocles must appear as a higher form of essence, altogether restored to his prior love and power.” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 78.

27 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 811. “Have you not seen? They are recurring/ The lovely times of my entire life again today/ And something greater still is yet to come;/ Then upward, son, upward to the very peak/ Of ancient holy Etna, that is where we'll go.” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, p. 79.

28 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 827. “Allow the most felicitous of human beings/ To die before they fall to self-aggrandizement,/ Frivolity, and shame; let free humanity, upon/ The fitting hour, offer itself as a loving sacrifice unto the gods,/ For whom time's early harvest is holy. This is mine.” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 97.

world.”²⁹ Already the Frankfurter Plan shows Empedocles’ desire for unification with the infinite nature.³⁰ Empedocles’ suicide is therefore a philosophical death; an intrinsically motivated death to overcome the chasm between the self and the outer world, or, in Fichtean terms, between ‘*Ich*’ and ‘*nicht-Ich*’ (‘I’ and ‘non-I’). The French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe also points to the evident speculative desire of Empedocles as constituting the heart of the play:

Empédocle y est la figure même du désir spéculatif et de la nostalgie de l’Un-Tout, souffrant de la limitation temporelle et voulant s’arracher à la finitude. Le drame s’organise alors – je simplifie – autour du débat intérieur du héros (...). Son seul sujet pratiquement, c’est la justification du suicide spéculatif.³¹

The dialectical structure and the speculative desire to overcome oppositions is profoundly discussed in the enigmatic text *Der Grund zum Empedokles*, in which Hölderlin elaborates the fundamental principles of the tragedy.³² In this document, another dialectic pair is added to the speculative scheme:

Natur und Kunst sind sich im reinen Leben nur harmonisch entgegengesetzt. Die Kunst ist die Blüthe, die Vollendung der Natur; Natur wird erst göttlich durch die Verbindung mit der verschiedenartigen aber harmonischen Kunst, wenn jedes ganz ist, was es seyn kann, und eines verbindet sich mit dem andern, ersetzt den Mangel des andern (...) dann ist die Vollendung da, und das Göttliche ist in der Mitte von beiden.³³

29 Joseph Suglia, “Empedokles and the Absence of Sacrifice”, *Focus on German Studies* 10 (2003), 12.

30 Ibid.

31 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’imitation des Modernes*, Collection La Philosophie en effet (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 60–61. “Empedocles is here the very figure of speculative desire and nostalgia for the One-Whole, suffering from temporal limitation and wanting to escape finitude. The drama is then organized (I am simplifying) around the hero’s internal debate (...) Its sole subject, virtually, is the justification of speculative suicide.” See Christopher Fynsk (ed.), *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 228.

32 Joseph Suglia, “Empedokles and the Absence of Sacrifice”, 15.

33 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 868. “When life is pure, nature and art oppose one another merely harmoniously. Art is the blossom, the perfection of nature; nature first becomes divine when it is allied with art, which differs from it in kind but is in harmony with it, first when each is everything it can be and when each allies itself with the other, supplying what the other lacks (...) at that point perfection is achieved and

Hölderlin introduces the opposition *organisch* and *aorgisch*, to describe the all-important dialectic movement between art and nature. It is in their reciprocal relation (*Wechselwirkung*), that the opposition between the immeasurable and destabilizing forces of nature and the measuring order of art can reach a higher harmonic level. Along these lines, Empedocles' auto-sacrifice symbolizes the extreme limit of the dialectic pairing of the organic and the aorgic.

We have distinguished two meanings of sacrifice which run as separate layers through Hölderlin's text. Using Empedoclean terms, one could characterize the first motive of sacrifice as a movement of repulsion and strife. Empedocles' sacrifice is an extrinsically imposed act of atonement. Cursed and victimized, Empedocles has become an outcast from the community. The second account of sacrifice, on the other hand, is motivated by an inner longing to reunite the fundamental antinomies of finitude/infinity, art/nature and between the organic and aorgic. The moment Empedocles reconnects to his inner source of strength, he is attracted to the fire of the volcano of Mount Etna, beckoning to come up and fulfill his philosophy, his chosen destiny.

6 Sacrifice as a Black Sin

The third version opens with a monologue by Empedocles, who has just woken up from his sleep. Both sacrificial motives mentioned above are unmistakably present and seem to reinforce each other in his words. Empedocles speaks of the ridicule, humiliation and curse (*"Schmach," "Hohn," "Fluch"*) which accompanied his banishment from the polis. But he also designates it as just, curative, and a blessing (*"wohl verdient," "heilsam," "Seegen"*). Describing himself as a sinner, incapable of love for mankind, and a dreamer, he has now been released from all human bonds to freely embrace his fate. The speculative nature of this fate leaves no doubt. Empedocles evokes the volcano (*"Vater Aetna"*) and the beckoning of Nature: *"Du rufst, du ziehst mich nah und näher an."*³⁴ The flame of death is calling: *"Du zauberische/ Furchtbare Flamme! (...)/ Mir wirst du helle, denn ich fürcht es nicht/ Denn sterben will ich ja. Mein Recht ist diß."*³⁵

the divine stands at the midpoint of the two." See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 114.

34 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 885–886. "You call, you draw me close and closer to yourself." See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 173.

35 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, p. 886. "you thaumaturgic/ Frightful flame! (...)/ I'll see you clearly in the light, for I am not afraid./ And, yes, I want to die. This is my right." See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 173.

Even the devotion of his beloved pupil Pausanias, the only remaining tie to worldly existence, cannot change Empedocles' determination. At the end of the second scene, he sends Pausanias away: *“Da ich geboren wurde, wars beschlossen . . . / Wir müssen scheiden, Kind! und halte nur / Mein Schicksaal mir nicht auf, und zaudre nicht.”*³⁶

The second scene ends with a statement that conveys the inevitability of Empedocles' will and fate in the strongest possible way: *“Und was geschehen soll, ist schon vollendet.”*³⁷

However, with the sudden appearance of a new and mysterious character in the third scene the justification of Empedocles' speculative suicide is abruptly challenged. In ironic and provocative terms, Manes the Egyptian defies Empedocles to quickly consummate the deed: *“Nun! säume nicht! bedenke dich nicht länger / Vergeh! vergeh! Damit es ruhig bald / Und helle werde, Trugbild!”*³⁸

Initially, it is not clear whether Manes himself is not a mirage, a “*Trugbild*”. When demanded to disclose his identity, *“Was! woher? / Wer bist du, Mann!”*, Manes reveals himself as a mortal, *“ein Sterblicher, wie du.”* It becomes clear that Manes is an old teacher of Empedocles, an omniscient sage (“*Alleswissender*”). The appellation “*Aegyptier*” symbolizes his intimate knowledge of the divine Nomos, the eternal fate which transcends all individuality.³⁹ Manes understands the sacrificial nature of the fate which Empedocles has chosen for himself:

Umkränze dir dein Haupt, und schmük es aus,
Das Opferthier, das nicht vergebens fällt.⁴⁰

36 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, p. 890. “For at my birth, already then, it was concluded (. . .) / We have to part, my child! do not / Delay my destiny, do not procrastinate.” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 177.

37 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 895. “And what / Is yet to happen already is accomplished.” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 182.

38 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 895. “Now! do not delay! don't ponder any longer / But pass away! yes, pass! that we may have some quiet / And a brighter day, mirage!” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 182.

39 See Cornelissen, “Die Manes-Szene in Hölderlins Trauerspiel ‘Der Tod des Empedokles’”, 102.

40 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 896. “Enwreath your head and decorate / The sacrificial beast that does not fall in vain.” See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 183.

But in the *rhexis* (speech) which follows, Manes questions the legitimacy of Empedocles' speculative death and it is his auto-sacrifice which is exposed as a "Trugbild".⁴¹

Nicht unbesonnen, wie du bist, hinab –
Ich hab ein Wort, und diß bedenke, Trunkner!⁴²

Manes' doubts whether Empedocles is the savior of his time:

Der Eine doch, der neue Retter faßt
Des Himmels Stralen ruhig auf (...)
Die Menschen und die Götter söhnt er aus (...)
Bist du der Mann? derselbe? bist du diß?⁴³

Empedocles' sacrifice would merely be a vain death, and Manes calls it a black sin: "*Nur Einen adelt deine schwarze Sünde.*"⁴⁴ Empedocles replies in what may be the most enigmatic passage of the play. He speaks of the retreat of the god of his people, and his country's demise:

Denn wo ein Land ersterben soll, da wählt
Der Geist noch Einen sich zuletzt, durch den
Sein Schwanensang, das letzte Leben töne.⁴⁵

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- 41 Hölderlin uses the same phrase in the "Grund zum Empedokles" when he describes the very moment of organic and aorgic unification: "Aber die Individualität dieses Moments ist nur ein Erzeugniß des höchsten Streits, seine Allgemeinheit nur ein Erzeugniß des höchsten Streits (...)" so daß der vereinende Moment, wie ein Trugbild, sich immer mehr auflöst (...)", see Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 869. "Yet the individuality of this moment is but a supreme strife, and its universality is but a product of that supreme strife (...) the outcome will be that the unifying moment, like a mirage, will dissolve more and more (...)", see Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 145.
- 42 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 897. "Abandon me and go down thoughtlessly, not as you are; I have a word that you must ponder, my besotted friend!" See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 184.
- 43 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 897. "The one, however, the newborn savior, grasps/ The rays of heaven tranquilly (...)/ The human being and the gods he reconciles;/ Are you that man? the very one? are you this?" See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 184.
- 44 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band 1, 897. "Only one is ennobled by your black sin."
- 45 Ibid. 899. "For when a country is about to die, its spirit at the end/ Selects but one among the many, one alone through whom/ Its swan song, the final breaths of life, will sound." See Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles; A Mourning Play*, 186.

In spite of Manes' disapproval, Empedocles claims his right to the forbidden fruit (*“verbotne Frucht”*) of his suicide. However, when Manes inquires in resignation about Empedocles' intentions (*“So gehst du nun?”*) the answer is *“Noch geh ich nicht, o Alter!”*⁴⁶

The postponement of the act of suicide is to be read as a sign of hesitation and fundamental doubt.⁴⁷ At this point, the third version is aborted and this also marks the deadlock of Hölderlin's entire project.

7 After Tragedy

Hölderlin's project to create a tragedy for modern times fails: all three versions remain unfinished and fragmented. But this very stagnation also represents a turning point in Hölderlin's thought. In his exemplary analysis, Lacoue-Labarthe characterizes Hölderlin's standstill as a *“césure du spéculative”*, an interruption which opens new perspectives and which will eventually allow him to breach the dominant mimetic scheme of his time. We will explain this in the following.

While Hölderlin gives up on Empedocles, he starts translating the work of Sophocles. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, this return to the ultimate Greek tragedy is a fruitful 'regress' through which Hölderlin develops his answer to two elemental questions: first, the problem of theatre (is tragedy still possible?). Second, the difficulty of translation (do the Greek still talk to us and how can we make them speak to us?).⁴⁸

Both questions are inherently linked to – and can be interpreted as a more precise investigation of – a broader issue, which preoccupied all leading intellectual figures at the end of the eighteenth century. It is the problem of mimesis and the search for a modern identity which more than anything haunts contemporary Germany. A first answer to the obsessive quest for a German identity is given in the widely influential work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768). For Winckelmann, the only possibility of a unique German identity lies in the imitation of the Greeks, as he expressed in the famous formula:

46 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band I, 900. Manes: “So, you will go now?” Empedocles: “Not yet do I go, old man!”

47 Joseph Suglia rightly emphasizes the fact that in the play, “which announces the death of a tragic hero – death takes place nowhere in the space of its presentation.” Suglia, “Empedokles and the Absence of Sacrifice,” 11.

48 Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'imitation des Modernes*, 78.

*“Der einzige Weg für uns, groß, ja, wenn es möglich ist, unnachahmlich zu werden, ist die Nachahmung der Alten.”*⁴⁹

This position is superseded by Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) who proposes a different solution. In his essay *“Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung”* from 1795, Schiller introduces an antagonism between ‘naiv’ and ‘sentimentalisch’, where ‘naiv’ corresponds with nature and the natural, and ‘sentimentalisch’ with culture and the cultural.⁵⁰ This opposition also has a historical dimension: the Greek were ‘naiv’, we moderns on the other hand are ‘sentimentalisch’.⁵¹ A return to the ‘naiv’ is not possible for modernity: this option is sealed. For Schiller, modernity can only achieve reconciliation with nature through a synthesis with its culture and art:

Sie sind, was wir waren, sie sind was wir wieder werden sollen. Wir waren Natur, wie sie, und unsere Kultur soll uns, auf dem Wege der Vernunft und der Freiheit, zur Natur zurückführen.⁵²

This speculative scheme of transcending the opposition between ‘naiv’ and ‘sentimentalisch’ by means of a dialectical resolution constitutes the theoretical framework for Hölderlin’s *Empedokles*. In the speculative nature of Empedocles’ death, overcoming the divide between organic and aorgic, Schiller’s ideas and aspirations reverberate. Only with the impasse of his project, Hölderlin starts to free himself from this dominant Schillerian scheme.

49 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1755/2007), 4. “The only way for us, to become great, or even, if this is possible, to become inimitable, is the imitation of the ancient Greeks.”

50 Friedrich Schiller, *Friedrich von Schiller. Werke in zwei Bänden*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (München: Knaur Klassiker), 642–710.

51 According to Lacoue-Labarthe, this dialectic pair also entails a whole series of philosophical oppositions, derived from Kant: intuitif-spéculatif, objectif-subjectif, immédiat-médiat, sensible-idéal, fini-infini, nécessaire-libre, corps-esprit. Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’imitation des Modernes*, 75.

52 Friedrich Schiller, *Friedrich von Schiller. Werke in zwei Bänden*, 643. “They are what we were; they are what we ought to become once more. We were nature as they, and our culture should lead us back to nature, upon the path of reason and freedom.”

8 The Chasm between Greek Culture and Modernity

In 1801, Hölderlin writes a notable letter to his friend Casimir Böhlendorff. In this letter, the fruits of Hölderlin's immersion in the questions of tragedy and mimesis come to the fore.

While discussing a dramatic idyll of his friend, Hölderlin makes a remark about a deep difference between Greeks and moderns:

Denn das ist das tragische bei uns, daß wir ganz stille in irgend einem Behälter eingepackt vom Reiche der Lebendigen hinweggehn, nicht daß wir in Flammen verzehrt die Flamme büßen, die wir nicht zu bändigen vermochten.⁵³

The tragedy of modernity is its absence of a meaningful death. The pathos of life and therefore the possibility of a tragic and heroic death, which the Greek possessed, are no longer accessible to us. This is why Hölderlin's attempt to carry the meaning of Empedocles' death into modernity was doomed to fail. Elaborating on this lack of fate – or *dysmoron* – in the modern condition, Hölderlin detects an underlying chiastic structure in the divide between Greeks and moderns. While the Greek were naturally endowed with sacred pathos (“*heiliger Pathos*”) in their lives, their art – from Homeric times on – has acquired austerity (“*Nüchternheit*”). These oppositions are reversed in modernity: we can attain pathos in our art, while our lives are imbued with austerity.

Deßwegen sind die Griechen des heiligen Pathos weniger Meister, weil es ihnen angeboren war, hingegen sind sie vorzüglich in Darstellungs-gaabe, von Homer an, weil dieser außerordentliche Mensch seelenvoll genug war, um die abendländische Junonische Nüchternheit für sein Apollonsreich zu erbeuten, und so wahrhaft das fremde sich anzueignen.

53 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band II, 913. “For this is the tragic to us: that, packed up in any container, we very quietly move away from the realm of the living, [and] not that – consumed in flames – we expiate the flames which we could not tame.” See Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, tr. Thomas Pfau, *Intersections* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 150.

Bei uns ist es umgekehrt. Deßwegen ists auch so gefährlich sich die Kunstregeln einzig und allein von griechischer Vortreflichkeit zu abstrahiren.⁵⁴

The chiasitic rupture envisioned by Hölderlin bears far-reaching consequences. Hölderlin discovers a deep-rooted duality in Greek culture itself, which undermines the previous classicistic solutions of imitation. Greek art has achieved an occidental austerity and is itself divided from the archaic, oriental Greece of sacred Pathos. Only imitating Greek art would therefore amount to repeating the appropriation of austerity instead of solving our need to appropriate pathos. Still, Hölderlin's distinction between "*abendländische Nüchternheit*", which is innate, "*Eigen*" to the Occident, and the "*heiliger Pathos*", which is foreign ("*Fremd*") to us, does not eliminate but only changes the relevance of the Greek example:

Aber das eigene muß so gut gelernt seyn, wie das Fremde. Deßwegen sind uns die Griechen unentbehrlich. Nur werden wir ihnen gerade in unserm Eigenen, Nationellen nicht nachkommen, weil, wie gesagt, der freie Gebrauch des Eigenen das schwerste ist.⁵⁵

According to Peter Szondi, this passage by Hölderlin has been widely misinterpreted and has given rise to a distorted image of the poet. In his groundbreaking and authoritative interpretation of the *Böhlendorffbrief*, Szondi mentions Wilhelm Michel as a representative of a reading of the letter as a formulation of a historical mission ("*historischer Auftrag*").⁵⁶ Hölderlin's words are understood as a call to the Occident to obtain a new superiority by means of capturing the foreign pathos – "*Leidenschaft*" in Michel's terms – in a struggle against its own austerity ("*Bestimmtheit*"). Evidently, such an "*abendländische*

54 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band II, 912. "Hence the Greeks are less master of the sacred pathos, because to them it was inborn, whereas they excel in their talent for presentation, beginning with Homer, because this exceptional man was sufficiently sensitive to conquer the *Western/Junonian sobriety* for his Appolonian empire and thus to veritably appropriate what is foreign. With us, it is the reverse. Hence it is also so dangerous to deduce the rules of art for oneself exclusively from Greek excellence." See Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, 149–150.

55 Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Band II, 913. "Yet what is familiar must be learned as well as what is alien. This is why the Greeks are so indispensable for us. It is only that we will not follow them in our own, national [spirit] since, as I said, the *free* use of *what is one's own* is the most difficult." See Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, 150.

56 Peter Szondi, *Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 350.

Wendung” would be foremost a German task, which would make Hölderlin a sanctified German leader.⁵⁷

Against such an interpretation, Szondi emphasizes Hölderlin’s doubts of equaling – let alone surpassing – the Greek example. The poet has the double task of learning to use the innate freely (“*das Eigene frei gebrauchen*”) and of appropriating the foreign (“*sich das Fremde aneignen*”). Only a fruitful balance between both, *Eigenes* and *Fremdes*, can produce the tension and interplay in an artwork that guarantee its life (“*Lebendigkeit*”) and meaning.

9 A Shattered Foundation of Tragedy

In 2007, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy delivered a lecture in Gießen, entitled *Nach der Tragödie*.⁵⁸ In this lecture, held in memory of his close friend and collaborator Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy alludes to the modern condition (“*abendländische Conditio*”) as nihilistic in its ultimate consequences.⁵⁹ The origin of tragedy for Nancy – as it was for Hölderlin – coincides with an irreversible loss. Tragedy is a departure from the archaic cult which produced the presence of the gods through sacrifice: “Tragedy itself, already, comes *after*. It comes after religion, that is to say, after sacrifice.”⁶⁰ This results in a distorted relationship of the Occident with death: “It is the relation to death that it has – or believes it has – lost or unsettled through sacrifice, and later through tragedy.”⁶¹

We started with a poem of Hölderlin which seemed to suggest a clear solution to this modern predicament. The quest for a meaningful death (“*Umsonst zu sterben, lieb’ ich nicht*”) is answered by the choice of sacrificing oneself for a

57 Szondi also cites Michel’s qualifications of Hölderlin as “Wortführer des Nordens” and “Gesetzsprecher des Deutschtums”.

58 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Nach der Tragödie*, tr. Jörn Eetzold and Helga Finter (Stuttgart: Jutta Legueil, 2008). Nancy held the same lecture in April 2008 in NYU. An English translation which is to be published was provided by Micaela Kramer. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Tragedy*, (ed. Micaela Kramer, *Catastrophe & Cesura*; *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe Today*; New York: New York University Press and Cardoso Law School, April 10–12, 2008).

59 In words which bring to mind the famous last stanza of Hölderlin’s *Schicksalslied*, Nancy states: “But we do not emerge (or extricate ourselves) from anything, nor do we head towards anything. We are given no origin, no destination, and we are promised no way out.” See Nancy, *After Tragedy*, 3.

60 Ibid., 10.

61 Ibid., 18.

higher ideal. The violent and heroic act of dying for the fatherland (*“doch Lieb’ ich, zu fallen am Opferhügel”*) seems to hold the promise of reawakening the sacred pathos.

A similar promise appears to have inspired Hölderlin’s attempt to create a tragedy for modern times. The death of Empedocles can only be meaningful if it is understood as a sacrifice for a higher purpose, be it as an act of atonement between the gods and the community, or as a heroic surrender of individual existence to reach an all-unifying synthesis. When the possibility of Empedocles’ sacrifice (*“Das Opferthier, das nicht vergebens fällt”*) is radically questioned, the foundation of the tragedy is shattered. This aporia inevitably forces a radical reconceptualization of modernity and national identity.

What remains is an attitude of retreat. Hölderlin’s poetry can no longer lead us out of modern despair or provide guidance to (national) identity.⁶² But Hölderlin’s questions and groundbreaking insights have the power to profoundly enrich our understanding of sacrifice.

62 As Götz Schmitt convincingly demonstrates, even the identity of the Fatherland in Hölderlin’s *“Der Tod fürs Vaterland”* is far from self-evident. Schmitt refers to Hölderlin’s unbroken belief in the ideals of the French Revolution and the possibility to accomplish reforms under French authority. Instead of a contemporary historical reference for *“Vaterland”*, he lists a number of alternatives such as *“die Hermannsschlacht, die Schweizerkriege, Marathon und die Perserkriege.”* See Schmitt, *“Der Tod fürs Vaterland; Hölderlin’s Ode und die Geschichte”*, 361.