

4. The deadly-factual word of Greek tragedies: Hölderlin and tragedy's example of fictional reality

Evangelos Kalfopoulos, vankalf@gmail.com

(Post-Doctoral Fellow, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski and Collaborating Investigator at the Institute of Philosophical Studies of Coimbra University)

Abstract: Hölderlin's account of tragedy is among the most subtle and original contributions of philosophical modernity, though it survives only in fragmentary form and is notoriously difficult to interpret. It is also fragmented and notoriously difficult. In this article, we will try to interpret Hölderlin's theory of tragedy with the model of fictional reality as it might be understood in light of Verene. Prominent in this analysis is how Hölderlin understands the language of tragedy as being factual in his "*Remarks on Antigone*. In this work he claims that the symbolic realm of tragedy needs to equal to 0 for real nature to show itself, thus pointing to the sublime and tragic character of nature. Furthermore, Hölderlin's position on the beginning of modernity and his failure to compose a modern tragedy can be seen in the light of technological society's capacity to reproduce works of art which enter into a semiotic realm where they signify each other, instead of something outside this realm. Under the light of these observations, Hegel's position concerning the impossibility of modern tragedy shall be revisited.

Keywords: Tragedy; Fictional reality; Hölderlin; Simulacra

1. Introduction: Fictional reality and Art

For the interpretation of Hölderlin's theory of tragedy as a species of fictional reality to take hold, the broader question of the connection between fictional reality and art needs to be addressed first. This connection is by no means straightforward. Someone might assume that art is the opposite of reality, the common opinion being that the former is created by us and the latter is independent of us. But neither is it the case

that art functions as the primary example of fictional reality, the supposition being that reality can only be understood as fictional, since art is confined to a given time and place in which it presents its own reality. Lacking a uniform definition of art, these attempts are bound to depend on the definition one accepts.

One of the first definitions of art is that it is mimetic in nature. Plato in the *Cratylus* mentions that art, painting and music mimic the secondary qualities of objects but naming aims at the essence of things.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, in the *Republic*, Plato specifically mentions tragic art in particular, and poetic art in general, including them in the mimetic genre. The problem with the mimetic character of tragedy is twofold, according to Denis J. Schmidt: “first it is a potent force in [the?] development of the soul, and second, it is completely unreliable.”¹⁶⁶ What exactly tragedy mimics is clearly stated in Aristotle’s well-known definition in the *Poetics*: “Tragedy is ... a representation (mimesis) of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude – by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions.”¹⁶⁷ The introduction of the word *representation* for mimesis is of the utmost importance here, since it underlines the secondary nature of the work of art, in this case tragedy, but also makes evident the connections to a hierarchy where the real thing, to ὄντος ὄν, is on a higher scale and whose most accurate representation is not provided by art but by theory, by seeing the real being, by contemplating its true essence. This prompted Martin Heidegger to say that since the advent of meta-

¹⁶⁵ Plato, *Cratylus*, 423d: “all objects have sound and shape, and man has colour, have they not? ...Well then, the art of naming is not employed in the imitations of those qualities, and has nothing to do with them. The arts that are concerned with them are music and design, are they not?” in Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 12 trans. Harold N. Fowler. (Harvard University Press; London, 1921). Accessed online at <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0172%3Atext%3DCrat.%3Asection%3D423d>

¹⁶⁶ Denis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks* (Indiana University Press, 2001), 30.

¹⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Aristotle. Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 23, trans. W.H. Fyfe. (University Press 1932) Accessed online at <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056%3Asection%3D1449b>

physical thinking in Plato “the essence of art (τέχνη, ars), and thus the essence of poetic art also, has been determined in accordance with metaphysics.”¹⁶⁸ For Heidegger, Hölderlin’s poetry is a prime example of non-metaphysical art. It is engaged with poetic naming, perhaps in the way that the art of naming that Socrates sought was found in the beginning of metaphysics, particularly Platonism; however, it is not a part of it, and retains some fluidity in searching for and naming the essence of things. At the same time, though, this conception of art as representation, as mimesis, is clearly not congruent with the concept of fictional reality either as it deems all reality fictional; it can only be represented with a degree of arbitrariness by the human subject and the only medium available for us to know and represent reality necessarily relies upon our imagination and artistic capabilities.

But Hölderlin’s poetry – and I will also argue the philosophy of tragedy – is congruent with the view that tries to reverse Platonism. As Heidegger already notes with respect to Nietzsche, this reversal, which puts absolute priority on art¹⁶⁹, entails the danger of creating another metaphysics and it is implied therefore that it does not constitute the right framework for understanding Hölderlin’s poetry. This framework though can be taken as a form of fictional reality through the closeness that exhibits with the theory of simulacra. As it is pointed out, by various contributors to this volume, the concept of simulacrum is present in the work of Jean Baudrillard and of Umberto Eco and connected with the concept of hyperreality. But one of the first thinkers who discussed the concept of the simulacrum was Gilles Deleuze. The latter found in it the real reversal of Platonism¹⁷⁰ and also took simulacra to be the defining trait of modernity. For Deleuze the difference between copies and simulacra is that the former are founded upon resemblance

¹⁶⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”*, trans. William McNeil and Julia Davis (Indiana University Press, 1996), 17.

¹⁶⁹ “Nietzsche then says the reverse: Art is worth more than “truth” (The Will to Power, No. 853), that is, worth more than those beings that truly are in thinking. And as a consequence, Nietzsche designates his own philosophy as inverted Platonism. Because Platonism is metaphysics, so too is Nietzsche’s philosophy metaphysics”. Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”*, 25.

¹⁷⁰ “So to ‘reverse Platonism’ means to make the simulacra rise and to affirm their rights among icons and copies”, Gilles Deleuze, Plato and the Simulacrum, in *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (Columbia University Press, 1990), 274.

to the idea, whereas the latter are based on dissimilarity with the idea. Although Deleuze goes on to call simulacra “a Dionysian machine”¹⁷¹, he is in general very careful not to evoke in any straightforward way the concept of the tragic or of tragedy, rather he is elaborating further a Nietzschean view of the Dionysian as affirmative of life. Deleuze has a more nuanced relationship with Hölderlin, but he never goes on to directly offer a reading of the German poet, let alone to try to appropriate him from the predominant reading that Heidegger offered, although Deleuze is often critical of certain premises of Heidegger’s philosophy. Hölderlin’s theory of tragedy can be read in its own right, as falling neither in the Heideggerian reading of naming nor on the Dionysian meaning of the simulacrum, or rather as falling under them both. It is useful here to employ the concept of fictions as conceived by Hans Vaihinger who distinguishes between semi and real fictions, but also between virtuous and vicious fictions. The first are the ones that prove useful whereas the vicious ones lack this characteristic. In this respect, we could argue that Hölderlin’s conception of tragedy is akin to a virtuous fiction that propagates life, whereas the simulacrum, which is based solely on external differentiation, does not take into account this distinction and offers a theory of fictional reality that might be vicious as well.

2. Hölderlin’s theory of tragedy

Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) provided us with one of the most interesting, but also famously complex, theory of tragedy, which is to be found in two texts, the *Notes on Oedipus* and the *Notes on Antigone*, works that were translated by Hölderlin and published in 1804. We can understand that the notes were taken at the time that Hölderlin was working on these translations and that they shed light on his understanding of tragedy. Of course, he was constantly preoccupied with the question of tragedy, as he was part of the movement that led to German Idealism, for which tragedy served as an important topic of study. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes:

“I would like to show that tragedy, or a certain interpretation of tragedy, explicitly philosophical, and above all wanting to be such,

¹⁷¹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 275.

is the origin or the matrix of what in the wake of Kant is conventionally called speculative thought: that is to say, dialectical thought, or to take up Heideggerian terminology, the onto-theological in its fully accomplished form.”¹⁷²

Hölderlin also attempted to compose a modern tragedy centred around the philosopher Empedocles, an effort that was never accomplished but also distinguishes him from the other two figures of speculative thought, namely Georg Wilhelm Hegel and Friedrich Schelling, in the sense that Hölderlin broke with the speculative method by also trying to poeticize tragedy and its contents. According to Peter Szondi in his famous affirmation on the opening of his *An Essay on the Tragic*¹⁷³, speculative thinking inaugurated a philosophy of the tragic, and through his attempt to compose a modern tragedy and through his translations of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, Hölderlin took a distinct turn from the metaphysical thought of his time. Lacoue-Labarthe, following Heidegger, emphasizes this point and even credits Hölderlin with an attempt to go back to Aristotle and his attribution of importance, not to the tragic element as seen by other figures of German Idealism, but to the effects of the tragedy on spectators, first and foremost the effect of Catharsis¹⁷⁴.

This engagement of Hölderlin with the art of tragedy and not just the theory of tragic gives rise to his differences with the speculative and metaphysical views and warrants a reading of tragedy as fictional reality. One first indication for this reading is Hölderlin’s notion of the “deadly-factual” word of Greek tragedies, as it is stated in his *Notes on Antigone*. There, and specifically in the third part, we find a discussion that has to do with the effects of tragic language and the difference of those effects in ancient and modern times. Hölderlin notes that “[t]he Greek-tragic word is deadly-factual, for the body which it seizes it truly

¹⁷²Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Caesura of the Speculative”, in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Harvard University Press, 1989), 208.

¹⁷³“Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic” in Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁷⁴“Tragedy, because it is the catharsis of the speculative, presents disappropriation as that which secretly animates and constitutes it”, in Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Caesura of the Speculative*, 233.

kills”¹⁷⁵, whereas the whole passage focusses on the discussion and the difference between the Greek and the Hesperian (modern) tragic word. Most commentators, as it is logical, follow Hölderlin in underlining the importance of this difference, but for us what stands out here is the designation deadly-factual (in German *tödlichfaktisch*) and this for two reasons: firstly because this term points to a conflation of the sensuous (bodily) and the intellectual (language) realms in a way that can be interpreted in accordance with fictional reality and secondly because this designation implies an effect of the tragic word that seems to be addressed not to the audience – as in the mimetic act of tragedy – but rather to the characters involved in the tragic itself.

To take the first point, the importance Hölderlin ascribes to tragic language, or the role of language in the tragic, is attested to by many commentators. For example, Denis J. Schmidt mentions “What does come forward here [in the passage we are mentioning] as the pulse of tragedy, the point at which we find its beat, is *how* we speak of such matters. Language itself harbors the experience proper to the tragic...The law of the tragic, the nature according to which it unfolds and holds us in its grip, is housed in (or, better, as) the law of the rhythm of language itself...*The caesura in language is thus to be understood as a crisis in time*”¹⁷⁶. But it would be wrong to interpret this importance in a symbolic way, in the sense that tragic language takes its importance from the reality it symbolizes, because such a move could direct us straight to a metaphysical interpretation, which pre-supposes not only an independent reality but also one that is hierarchically ordained. It is against such a reading that Heidegger is trying to salvage Hölderlin. The essence of the tragic word is to create and shape reality, even if we agree with Jeremy Bentham that words have a metaphorical sense that is primary and always overlaps with reality¹⁷⁷. In other words, tragic language reflects the uncertainty of time but provides the necessary and fictional content for us to represent this element of time that is profoundly non accessible to us. Nevertheless, the reality of tragic language is reflected on the fact that is factual. The designator deadly-factual also

¹⁷⁵ Friedrich Hölderlin, Remarks on Antigone, in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (State University of New York Press, 1988), 113.

¹⁷⁶ Schmidt, *On Germans and other Greeks*, 146.

¹⁷⁷ Alexander L. Gungov, “Fictional Character of Contemporary Reality”, *Sofia Philosophical Review*, p. Vol. XIX, no 1, 2026.

points to the fact that tragic language tries to capture and communicate something of the uncommunicable, yet universal, experience of death, but not only through still representations, but also through a real effect on the body the word takes over. The caesura that is one of the most famous remarks of Hölderlin in respect to tragedy points to this fact: it is the moment the tragic element is conserved within tragedy, because the latter is a continuous succession of representations, as is language, whereas the caesura is “the pure word, the counter- rhythmic rupture” where “does not appear the change of representation but the representation itself”¹⁷⁸. In other words, the caesura is the point in the rhythm of language that we can pause and create the new naming, instead of using the inevitably fixed names that all established languages necessarily provide. It is the moment of pause, from where the nature of the word can be thought of and the effects of it on the sensuous bodies take hold. David Farrel Krell notices about these passages of Hölderlin’s text that “[t]he polynomial words of tragedy, whether factually murderous or mortifying, are organs. We should understand these organs as organizational factors, attuned to διάνοια, yet solicited by the more aorgic realm of nature. These dianoetic organs, the dialogues and choruses of any given tragic drama, flesh out the body of the suffering godhead, Dionysos”¹⁷⁹, giving further evidence of the double role of the word for the German poet, both as intellectual and natural element, in other words as fiction and as reality.

To come to the second point, Hölderlin’s introduction of the characterization of the tragic word as deadly factual reveals how he viewed the effects of tragic language. Veronique Fóti translates the German term as “deathly efficacious”¹⁸⁰ and the emphasis for our purposes should lay on the adjective ‘efficacious’, not only in the sense of efficiency but also in the sense of effect. In accordance with Lacoue-Labarthe, this translation reveals the fact that Hölderlin was actually interested on the effect of tragedy in a sense closer to Aristotle, something that makes sense since he was attempting to translate and compose actual tragedies not just to specu-

¹⁷⁸ Hölderlin, *Remarks on Oedipus*, 102.

¹⁷⁹ David Farrell Krell, “A small number of houses in a universe of tragedy: notes on Aristotle’s περί ποιητικής and Hölderlin’s “Anmerkungen”.” In *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks, (Routledge, 2000), 109.

¹⁸⁰ Véronique M. Fóti, *Epochal Discordance: Hölderlin’s philosophy of tragedy* (State University of New York, 2006), 88.

late about the tragic. But the effect that Hölderlin is interested in, is not the cathartic effect the audience of tragedy should experience, alongside the tragedy's hero, according to Aristotle's poetological definition; but it is the effect that the tragic word had on the sensuous body of the one who participates in the tragic moment, the one that is present on that moment. his effect moves Hölderlin past the accusations that were levelled against mimesis from Plato as a secondary source of the real. Here we are not interested just in representing the tragic, but in the moment that the deadly-actual word seizes the body and produces real effects, in that moment we are experiencing the tragic first-hand, despite the mediation of language, or perhaps because of it, necessarily. The moment of caesura precedes the turning of the word in tragic, deadly-factual one, it is the moment when the new naming takes place.

Interestingly, Hölderlin distinguishes between two kinds of tragic words, the Greek one that he calls deadly-factual (in the translation of Thomas Pfau) or deathly-efficacious (in the translation of Véronique Fóti) and the Hesperian, meaning modern, word that he calls *tötenfaktisch*, translated respectively by Pfau and Fóti as murderous-factual and deadly efficacious, respectively. Whichever translation one might prefer, the distinction remains important as it points to the differences between the ancient and the modern as they were understood in the context of the tragic. But again, there is also a continuity of the tragic and of the tragic word, regardless of it being ancient or modern. Hölderlin points to the fact that "the tragic representation, whether more Greek or more Hesperian, is based on a rather violent and irresistible dialogue and chorus...however, the tragic presentation principally consists of the factual word which, being more a relation than something that is stated explicitly, moves by destiny from the beginning to the end"¹⁸¹. There are some remarks to be made here. First, for Hölderlin the modern version of tragedy at this stage of his intellectual road seems still feasible – perhaps he never stopped to think so. The continuity he finds between the ancient and the modern version of the tragic is situated in language, attesting further for the importance he was attributing to it. Secondly, the factual word is not a fixed, metaphysical word, but rather a relation. As mentioned above, the tragic factual word takes on a new meaning, a different meaning that is not explicitly stated from the beginning; it is the moment of caesura that pro-

¹⁸¹ Hölderlin, *Remarks on Antigone*, 114.

vides with the necessary rupture with established representations so that new representations can emerge, and the birth of the tragic word from the caesura is what makes the latter to be never definitely fixed, like a meta-physical name would be.

3. On the impossibility of modern tragedy

If a certain understanding of modernity as an era of fictional reality of simulacra prevails, then tragedy as exposed in the above theory of Hölderlin does not have a place. As Gilles Deleuze states “[m]odernity is defined by the power of the simulacrum”¹⁸². But for him the simulacrum, as a Dionysian machine, is profoundly linked not to tragedy but to the tragic simply as Dionysian, in the sense of the life-affirming chaos of the abyss. He goes on to distinguish the nihilism of the simulacrum that promotes chaos, from the nihilism of the artifacts, stating that both lie at the heart of modernity and are engaged in an antagonistic relationship. Donald Verene notes that “[w]orks of the humanistic imagination take us to a contact with realities that are transcendent, with the forms of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. The desire for these ultimates becomes unnecessary when we are given directly the fascinating reproduction. The reproduction, however, must be continually repeated because there is in fact nothing in it”¹⁸³. Tragedy points to something transcendent too, points to the tragic itself, the double bind¹⁸⁴ of inherent contradictions. If modernity then is the time of simulacra, defined by Deleuze not as a copy but as something that overrides the hierarchy of original and copy, thus reversing Platonism, then Verene’s reproductions cannot be distinguished from the original, turning everything into a reproduction.

If the above holds, then there is no real mystery in the failure of Hölderlin to compose a modern tragedy, because the double bind of the tragic cannot be seen as transcendent in modernity but only as particular. Hegel linked tragedy to the ethical life of ancient Greece in a way that this artform could not be reproduced in modernity, but through the progress of the spirit, elements of the tragic remain in the inner self of the

¹⁸² Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 265.

¹⁸³ Donald Verene, “The Idea of Imagination and Technological Desire”, *Sofia Philosophical Review*, Vol. XIX, no 1, 2026,

¹⁸⁴ “The tragic is always a result of a double bind”. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Indiana University Press, 2003), 3.

moderns too. He notes in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*: “But just as the girl who offers the plucked fruits is more than the nature that presents them immediately, broken up into all their conditions and elements – the tree, light, air, etc. – since she brings all this together in a higher way in the gleam of her self-conscious eye and the offering gesture, thus is the spirit of the fate which these artworks present more than the ethical life and reality of that people, for it is the *Er-Innerung* [memory] of the spirit that was still expressed in them. It is the spirit of tragic fate, which collects all the individual gods and attributes of substance into one pantheon, into spirit become conscious of itself as spirit”¹⁸⁵. The tragic is then sublated into the speculative thought of Hegel for the progression of the human Spirit.

Thus, if the ideal is the real, then all real is a kind of fiction, in the sense of an act of intellect. Hölderlin for his part defines poetologically the tragic as an intellectual intuition, a concept which derives from Kant, where it takes the meaning of the impossible unity of the rational and the sensuous. This impossibility is not to be overcome in Hölderlin but only to be re-presented in tragedy as a metaphor of it. But whereas Hegel overcame the dichotomy of Kant by saying that the real is the rational, Hölderlin kept the unity as a desideratum, and acknowledged the importance of art, and namely tragedy into representing the fact that all of the sensual form such a unity with the intellectual. In Hölderlin’s tragedy *The Death of Empedocles* this unity is represented by the attempt of the philosopher to become one with nature, sacrificing himself in the volcano of the mountain of Aetna. In his analysis of *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, this union is presented as between man and God. He notes that “[t]he presentation of the tragic rests primarily on the tremendous – how the god and man mate and how natural force and man’s innermost boundlessly unite in wrath”¹⁸⁶.

So in modernity three concepts of fictional reality emerge according to the above: one Hegelian, where all of reality is ultimately rationalized and fictions only play a role in ascending to the higher degree of rationality; one Nietzschean – Deleuzean where the simulacra is all that there is, hence everything is fiction, since nothing takes its validation from similarity to an original idea; and one that attributes to the philosophical – poetological remarks of Hölderlin on the tragic an intermediate

¹⁸⁵ In Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 188.

¹⁸⁶ Hölderlin, *Remarks on Oedipus* . 107.

position where the real can only be re-presented with fiction, as a metaphor. This last version was followed by Heidegger and resulted in his famous nostalgia for the philosophical roots before the dominance of the onto-theological. Interestingly, both the Hegelian and the Nietzschean – Deleuzean views attribute no place to tragedy in modernity and move beyond it. On the other hand, nostalgia becomes a mere feeling, when it is not aligned with the epoch in which it appears. The dysmoiron (δύσμοιρον), the lack of destiny, that according to Hölderlin characterizes us moderns¹⁸⁷, is not something that one can overcome with a simple turn to a pre-metaphysical thinking, but rather something that must be lived to its fullest extent in order to be outgrown.

4. Conclusions

We tried to provide a possible reading of Hölderlin's theory of tragedy as a version of fictional reality. Following Heidegger's view that Hölderlin's poetry is best understood as naming, relying on the analysis of the importance of the deadly-factual word in the *Remarks on Oedipus and Antigone*, And also based on Hölderlin's definition of the tragic as the metaphor of intellectual intuition, we sketched a reading that differentiates the German poet both from German Idealism and also from the view of Nietzsche and Deleuze.

Both these views emphasize the fact that the tragic element and tragedy are outdated modes of art. Whereas these views are by and large accurate on this point, it is not that human existence is less tragic in modernity than before. On the contrary, tragedy does find an expression today, albeit as a constant undercurrent, in philosophical thinking. For this undercurrent to become established, as in the ancient Greek society and religion, a new form of fictional reality must prevail, one that consistently points to the double bind of human existence, but does not fool itself that can exhaust it, but only represent it through art. Elements of this new fictional reality are to be found in the work of Hölderlin.

Deleuze hinted at his opposition to Heidegger when he wrote that “[i]t is not in the great forests and woodpaths that philosophy is elaborated, but rather in the towns and in the streets – even in the most artificial of them”. This represents a clear and sharp difference between Heidegger's nostalgia and the philosophical practice of the so-called post-

¹⁸⁷ Hesperians, as he would put it.

modernists, regardless of the debts the latter had to the former. Now that post-modernism seems to have invaded all aspects of modern societies, leading to a world of post-truth, where everything artificial is pushed to become simulacra and shapes what we perceive as reality, all the ideas of Hölderlin on the relationship of man with God or nature should be revisited to shape a new reality, that can only be artistic, thus fictional, but pointing to a tragic understanding of a new era.