

Jeremy Tambling, *Hölderlin and the Poetry of Tragedy: Readings in Sophocles, Shakespeare, Nietzsche and Benjamin*. Brighton, Chicago and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2014. Pp. 310. £65 (hb). £27.50 (pb). ISBN 9781845195878.

To scholars of British Romanticism, Hölderlin tends to fall between the cracks: unknown to the big guns of nineteenth-century Anglophone literature, he was also slow to attain reputation in Germany. It is primarily because of their influence on Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Heidegger that Hölderlin's writings have garnered later critical attention. Tambling is mindful of these figures in this study of Hölderlin's interpretations of tragedy, and of his poetry, which often explores ideas from drama. This is an ambitious monograph that aims to retrieve Hölderlin for the Anglophone reader via generous quotation, translation, and critical analysis, and also draws on Heidegger's and Benjamin's thought to assert the importance of Hölderlin's work amidst philosophies of tragedy more widely.

Tambling's introductory analysis of Hölderlin's poetry is sensitive to the ideas at play. There are useful cross references here to give the newcomer a sense of Hölderlin's voice. Tambling invokes Wordsworth to explain Hölderlin's intimation of the potential crisis implicit in the space between a spot of time and its recollection in verse (4); invokes Derrida, in contemplation of the contradictory association of a river – both divider and constituent of landscape – simultaneously with the violent centaur and the servile Ganymede (7); and Hopkins, in analysis of fire's duality as force of destruction and supportive ether (9). A Romanticist might wish for more substantial reference to other Romantic writers as context. For example, Tambling analyses Brecht's reflections on epic theatre – in which Brecht refers to “caesuras”, as if quoting Hölderlin' (25) – as evidence of direct influence, but with no acknowledgement of relevant theories of dramatic illusion in Fichte or Coleridge. Doubtless Tambling has chosen to contend for Hölderlin's importance by emphasis on his inheritors rather than contemporaries, but the sense of Hölderlin's originality and influence is tacitly exaggerated because of these lacunae. In later passages, by contrast, there is attention to Hegel's reading of *Antigone*, and Schelling's fatalism.

The disruptive devices of caesura and parataxis – central to this study – correspond to Hölderlin's insanity, which Tambling does not romanticise. Hölderlin's interest in tragedy is revelatory: his madness can be communicated by reference to the analogous undoing of Orestes and Pentheus; his own poetry is dense with allusions to psychosis in classical literature. Tambling cites the rage of Achilles to communicate the sense of loss in Hölderlin's anger, the proximity of 'grievance' to 'grief' (50). Sophocles' Ajax laments – not rages – for not being awarded the late Achilles' armour, and is driven finally to suicide. In Hölderlin's poem 'Mnemosyne', such lack of composure is a failure, which leads to the loss of memory, and with it the possibility of grief. Tambling says that Benjamin 'continues the process' by theorising an impersonal melancholy at the heart of *trauerspiel*, wary that loss of the capacity to mourn entails a modern prevalence of 'signs without meaning' (57); madness writ large as a civilisation that cannot communicate.

Some readers might reasonably turn pale at Tambling's poststructuralist approach. Undoubtedly Hölderlin can be interpreted by that method. For example, his implication that sorrow is the best condition in which to poeticise joy invites reinvestigation of the relationship between supposed opposites (58). But this may not be the most effective critical method to contend for Hölderlin's importance *per se*, a stated goal of the monograph. Tambling proceeds systematically through Hölderlin's works, but the argumentative substance feels as though he is ticking off a checklist of Foucauldian and Derridean concepts, whose aggregate persuasiveness will depend on one's commitment to that body of theory.

Considerably long sections adopt poststructuralist perspectives, and consult modern commentators to assess tragedy as a genre, but do not mention Hölderlin at all.

The book is at its best where it focuses on what Hölderlin *does* with tragedy, particularly in his translations – which he theorises as ‘free imitation’ (158) – and explicit commentary on the genre. Hölderlin’s version of *Oedipus Tyrannus* anticipates Freud: the king wonders whether his dream might have killed Polybus, and Jocasta speculates that dreams of incest are common (121). Antigone claims kinship with Zeus, and Creon is an innate rather than an incidental blasphemer; yet Antigone’s recognition of ‘lawlessness’ to the gods ‘makes her the Antitheos’ (167–71). These are radical departures from Sophocles’ texts, demonstrating Hölderlin’s own psychological interpretation of the genre. At the heart of his conception of tragedy is the union of humanity and gods, which necessitates wrathful purgation. Tambling notes that such ‘psychodrama’ is ‘Shakespeare-like’ (198). There is political vision to Hölderlin’s view that modernity lacks a sense of fate; his proposed solution is not to repeat Greek tragedy, but for new literary forms to uncover a national destiny.

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