

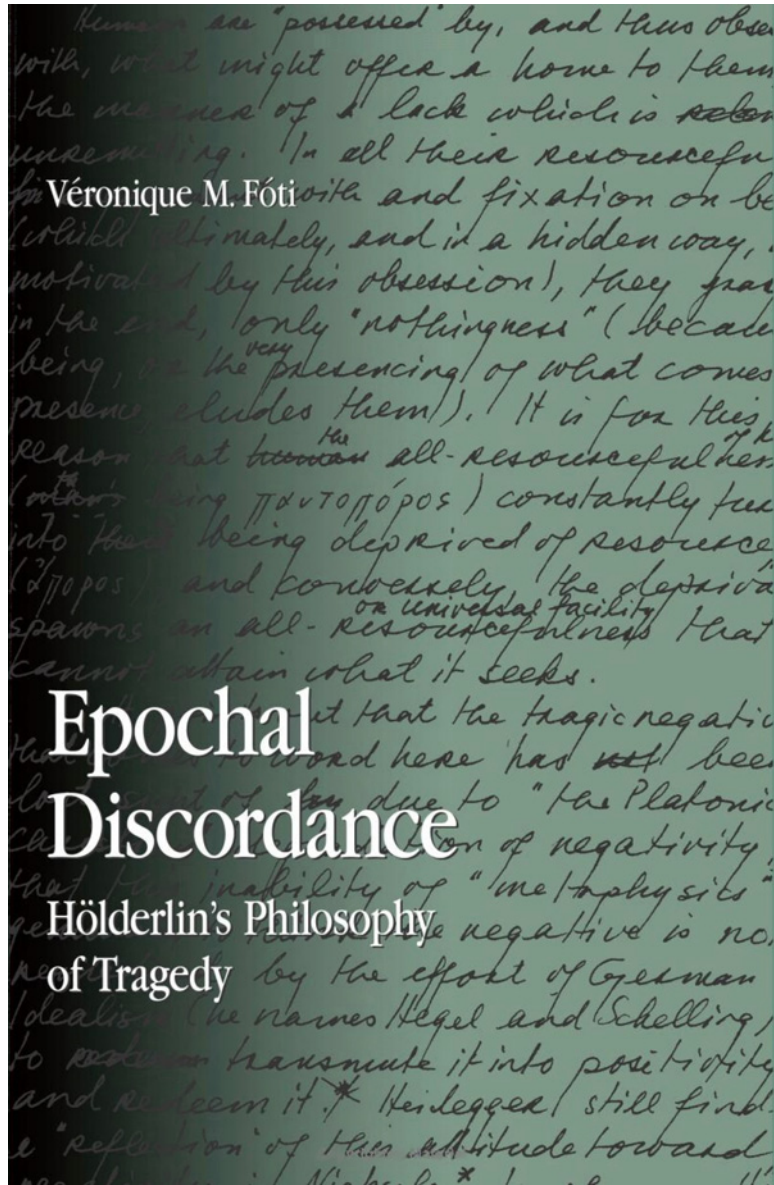
Epochal Discordance

reviewed by Rosa Slegers

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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



Epochal Discordance: Hölderlin's Philosophy of Tragedy

Véronique M. Fóti

SUNY Press, 2006

reviewed by Rosa Slegers

In this short work on an often overlooked part of Hölderlin's oeuvre, Fóti provides an in-depth account of the poet's

unfinished tragedy of Sophocles' *Empedocles* and his philosophical commentaries on these translations. Fóti convincingly argues that Hölderlin's work was essential to the "tragic turning" in German thought at the end of the eighteenth century, and later resurfaced with Heidegger in the mid-twentieth century. With clarity and nuance, Fóti establishes Hölderlin as an original philosopher whose commitment to the theme of discordance both influenced the thought of his own time, and provides a welcome critical perspective on contemporary Continental Philosophy.

In this short work on an often overlooked part of Hölderlin's oeuvre, Fóti provides an in-depth account of the poet's unfinished tragedy *The Death of Empedocles*, his translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Antigone*, and his philosophical commentaries on these translations. Fóti convincingly argues that Hölderlin's work was essential to the "tragic turning" in German thought, which began at the end of the eighteenth century, continued well into the nineteenth century, and later resurfaced with Heidegger in the mid-twentieth century. With clarity and nuance, Fóti establishes Hölderlin as an original philosopher whose commitment to the theme of discordance both influenced the thought of his own time, and provides a welcome critical perspective on contemporary Continental Philosophy.

In disregarding Hölderlin's importance as a philosopher, current studies of the German Idealism have also glossed over the prominence of Sophoclean tragedy in the tragic turning. Sophocles' inheritance, however, is at the heart not only of Hölderlin's work but of the renewed interest in the tragic as it emerges in the late eighteenth century. Though *Epochal Discordance* is a work aimed at readers familiar with the concerns characteristic of Continental Philosophy, Fóti's careful engagement of classical themes in Sophoclean tragedy like katharsis, blindness, insight, hybris, and the struggle between the human and the divine allows her to open up what would otherwise have been an interesting but rather obscure argument to a wider readership of those interested in tragedy generally and Sophocles in particular. Furthermore, the questions she raises (but does not answer) along the way about the importance of Hölderlin's thought

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The "epochal transition" at the heart of Hölderlin's philosophy of the tragic centers around the tension between Nature and Art. Föti takes us through the different versions of *The Death of Empedocles* to show that Hölderlin continuously subverts his own thought and emerges as a surprisingly honest thinker. As a poet, Hölderlin is interested in the singular, but this interest is contrasted with his tendency, as a philosopher, to "efface the singular in a union with Nature." (31) While, in the First Version, Empedocles' testament to humanity consists in the almost joyful advice to give oneself over to the elements, thereby reconciling "organic" human singularity with the excessive, "aorgic" nature of the divine, Hölderlin ultimately abandons his Third Version of his tragedy because he realizes that reconciliation is unattainable and that the tragic is an essentially separative force that defies all unification.

Föti artfully transitions from the difficult discussion of the different versions of *The Death of Empedocles* in the first half of the book to an analysis of Hölderlin's treatment of *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Antigone*. These later chapters help bring into focus Hölderlin's preoccupation with the primacy of separation over reconciliation. In Hölderlin's comments on *Antigone*, Nature has become a hostile force, destructive in its excess, rather than the beautiful and maternal power found in the First Version of *Empedocles*. Nature's

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tendency to unify, to absorb the individual into a whole that obliterates all difference, is linked to what Hölderlin sees as the major shortcoming of philosophy. "For the late Hölderlin," Fóti writes, "philosophy itself is intrinsically limited, as compared to poetry, due to its predilection for reductive unification." (75) Here we find another locus for discordance, this time between philosophy and poetry. Fóti, understandably, does not pursue this parallel, but once again we find that her book invites further discussion, taking the theme of epochal discordance beyond its proper scope.

The epochal turning Hölderlin finds in the Sophoclean tragedies is the transition from the Greek to the Hesperian configuration, i.e., from classical antiquity to modernity. The Greek "natal gift" consists in the "power of the element" or Nature and "passionate intensity" marked by excess. To harness and counteract this dangerous (because potentially destructive) gift, the Greeks focus on clarity and lucidity of presentation. The modern (Hesperian) natal gift, on the other hand, is one of restraint and clarity and, taken to its extreme, extinguishes all passion and grandeur. The challenge in modernity therefore is to cultivate the "formative drive" toward passionate intensity. What is a natal gift in one epoch must be artificially cultivated in the other, a balancing act that can never result in reconciliation. It is at this point that Hölderlin's concerns about his own time resonate with the concerns of Fóti's readers. Fóti writes that "the epochal disjunction between Greece and Hesperia can, he thinks, point the way, for moderns attentive to its tragic dynamics, to a salutary transformation of ethical and political life." (83) The question we are invited to ask and try to answer is how, exactly, epochal discordance can inform

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In the last chapter, Fóti looks at Heidegger's discussions of Sophocles as they relate to the main themes in Hölderlin's thoughts on the tragic. Central to Heidegger's discussion is the theme of *Unheimlichkeit* or the "uncanny unhomelike": *Dasein*, for Heidegger, is not at home among beings and cannot come to rest. Similarly, Hölderlin's Greek-yet-modern Empedocles is torn between singularity and the desire for unity and cannot reconcile art with nature, the organic with the aorgic. But, Fóti notes, where Hölderlin warns against the potential destructiveness of an unchecked formative drive, Heidegger appears to embrace it, just like Antigone embraces passion at the expense of the Hesperian natal gift of order and clarity – an observation that of course raises many interesting questions about the sociopolitical implications of this difference between the two thinkers.

Fóti remarks that though the notion of the tragic in German Idealism has been the topic of extensive debate, Hölderlin's influence has been largely ignored because of a failure to regard his thought as philosophy. The question of the tragic, however, is at the very heart of Hölderlin's work, and the many "discordances" outlined in Fóti's book convince the reader of Hölderlin's role in bringing about the tragic turning. If Fóti's work leaves something to be desired, it is only because her decision to restrict her focus to Hölderlin's thought proper and the most immediate ways in which it influenced (and was influenced by) other thinkers leaves the reader wanting more. What are we to make of the disappearance of all female characters

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