

## General Introduction

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ONE COULD ALMOST BEGIN a book on this period of Hölderlin's life (roughly, from 1797 to 1800) by saying that it was the best of times and the worst of times. That would be true in terms of both European politics, dominated by the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution, and Hölderlin's private life, his life of love, dominated by strife. Those best and worst of times in Europe and in the life of the twenty-seven-year-old struggling poet encroached on one another.

On April 16, 1797, the French army crossed the Rhine, bringing with it not only cannon fire but also the ideas that had long been firing the hopes of all young Germans. In Hölderlin's home state, Swabian Württemberg, as in the more northerly cities of Coblenz, Bonn, and Cologne, opposition to the local autocratic princes became more outspoken. Hölderlin and his circle of friends could dare to hope, and to hope realistically, that the *ancien régime* in Germany too was about to collapse. The Imperial Peace Conference in Rastatt, focusing on the conflict between Revolution and Regression (also called the Restoration), met from 1797 to 1799; Hölderlin attended the conference for ten days at the end of November 1798. There his friend Isaak von Sinclair, who was the representative of the relatively enlightened Duke of Hessen-Homburg, introduced the poet to the leaders of the south German reform movement. Although they all rejected the Reign of Terror, their revolutionary fervor and republicanism remained intense. Hölderlin returned to Frankfurt excited once again by the conflict between the forces of political and religious tyranny and the spirit of Rousseau in the German lands.

Once back home at White Hart, the estate of Susette and Jacob Gontard, where he was tutoring their son Henry, Hölderlin worked hard on the first draft of a project he had sketched out more than a year earlier and begun in earnest some weeks before. It was a tragedy or "mourning-play," *Trauerspiel*, on the death of the early Greek thinker, poet, rhetorician, and physician, Empedocles of Acragas.

Hölderlin had been tutoring young Henry Gontard since the beginning of 1796.<sup>4</sup> During the evenings he performed chamber music—he was a good pianist and an excellent flutist—with Henry’s mother Susette and her friends. Within six months of his employment on the estate he confessed his admiration of Susette Gontard in a letter to Christian Neuffer:

I am in a new world. I used to think I had insight into what is beautiful and good, but now when I see what all my knowledge amounts to, I have to laugh. Dear friend! there is a being in the world on whom my spirit can and will dwell for millennia, and still it will live to see how puerile all our thinking and comprehending turn out to be in the face of nature. Loveliness and loftiness, tranquillity and vitality, spirit and heart and form—they are all blessedly one in this one being. You can believe me when I say how rare it is to have even a premonition of such a thing, and then again how much more difficult it is to find it in this world. You know, of course, how I was—how completely I had disabused myself of every form of familiarity; you know how I lived without faith, how austere I was with my own heart, and therefore how wretched. Could I have become what I am now, as happy as an eagle, had this one, this very one, not appeared and transformed a life that had become pointless to me, rejuvenating, encouraging, cheering, and glorifying it in her vernal light? I have moments when all my old troubles seem entirely foolish to me, as incomprehensible to me as they would be to children.

It is actually often impossible for me to think the thoughts of mortals when she is in front of me. That is why so little can be said of her.

Perhaps I will be able to capture here and there in a felicitous line an aspect of her being, and then nothing would be held back from you.

Yet it would have to be an hour without disturbances of any kind, an hour of celebration, were I to write of her. (CHV 2:624–25; RA 14–16)

“In the face of nature . . . spirit and heart and form . . . vernal light . . . celebration.” Hölderlin’s colleague on the estate, Marie Rätzer, the tutor of the three Gontard girls, confided her worries to a friend: “Frau Gontard is with Hölderlin all morning up in the pavilion and in her private quarters; the children leave them alone there, while the servants and housemaids are all over the house at their chores; and if *he* were to come home and notice it, things

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4. The following materials on Hölderlin and the Gontards are taken from the factual fiction *The Recalcitrant Art: Diotima’s Letters to Hölderlin and Related Missives*, ed. Douglas F. Kenney and Sabine Menner-Bettscheid (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 14–34, which cites the relevant sources. In what follows I refer to this book by the code RA, with page numbers.

wouldn't go well." *He*, of course, was Hölderlin's employer, Jacob Gontard, a wealthy Frankfurt banker—and Susette's husband.

By early July 1796 the French Republic's Sambre-Maas army was advancing on Frankfurt. Jacob Gontard remained in the city under siege in order to protect his interests, while Hölderlin left with Susette and the children to greater safety in Kassel. By this time Hölderlin was composing magnificent poems to "Diotima," the priestess of love in Plato's *Symposium*, the principal female character in his novel *Hyperion*, and now the principal female human being in his life. Near Kassel, in the resort town of Bad Driburg, Hölderlin and Susette Gontard presumably confessed their love for one another. When the siege of Frankfurt ended, the family and the tutor returned to White Hart. Tensions within the Gontard household grew during the coming months, the town gossips tsk-tsked, and Hölderlin exulted—once again in a letter to Neuffer, this one dated February 16, 1797:

Since we last wrote to one another I have circumnavigated the globe of joy. I would gladly have told you how things are with me had I been able to stand still for an instant, had I been given a chance to look back. The wave swept me forward. My entire being was so absorbed in life that it didn't have a moment to think about itself.

And it is still that way! I am still entirely happy, as I was in the first moment. It is a friendship—eternal, joyful, and holy—with a being who somehow strayed into this poor, dispirited, disorderly century of ours. My sense of beauty is now secure from all disruption. For all eternity it will be oriented by this bust of the Madonna. My intellect attends her school and my riven inmost heart daily finds repose and good cheer in her all-sufficient peace. . . . My heart is full of desire. . . . I can readily imagine, dear brother, that you crave to hear me say more about my happiness, and in greater detail. Yet I dare not! I have often enough wept and berated our world, where the best thing in it cannot be named on a piece of paper one will send to a friend. I shall enclose a poem to her written toward the end of last winter.

. . . I only wish I could show you her image, for then I wouldn't need any more words! She is beautiful, as angels are beautiful. A tender, intelligent face, with all of heaven's charms! Oh! I could gaze on her for a thousand years, forgetting myself and everything else: how inexhaustibly rich is the silent, undemanding soul in this image! Majesty and tenderness, gaiety and seriousness, sweet playfulness and lofty mournfulness, life and spirit—all this is united in her, in her it all becomes one divine whole. . . . "Great joy and great sorrow come to those whom the gods love." It is no art to sail a brook. Yet when our heart and destiny plunge to the seabed and then soar to the sky—that is a pilot's education. (CHV 2:649–51; RA 22–26)

The pilot's education became quite stressful during the summer of 1797. By that time the gossip was in full blossom and *he* had become aware of it. When Marie Rätzer married at White Hart on July 10, Jacob Gontard saw to it that Hölderlin was not invited to the ceremony even though Hölderlin and Marie were friends. On that same day Hölderlin wrote once again to his friend Neuffer: "I am torn asunder by love and hate" (CHV 2:658; RA 28). It was as though the two cosmic forces of which the ancient Empedocles had spoken, Φιλία καὶ Νεῖκος, Love and Strife, had invaded and possessed Hölderlin. Worse, it was as though he could never simply choose love over strife, inasmuch as strife seemed to be at home in the very sphere of love. It also seemed that those whom the gods love reap both great joy and great sorrow as their reward—again, beyond their own power to choose and the desire of others to lay blame.

The final test in Hölderlin's sentimental education came during a terrible scene at the Gontard household in the last week of September 1798. Jacob, with Susette at his side, excoriated and expelled the tutor. Susette felt forced to concur—it would be best for him to go. Hölderlin, wounded perhaps more by Susette's complicity, or apparent complacency, or abject surrender, than by Jacob's sarcasm and self-righteousness, but wounded perhaps most of all by his own indecisiveness and passivity, fled Frankfurt. With the help of his friend Sinclair he found sanctuary in nearby Bad Homburg vor der Höhe. Now that the second volume of *Hyperion* was all but complete, he planned to begin work on his mourning-play, *The Death of Empedocles*, interrupting that plan in November for the trip to the Rastatt conference.

We know that Hölderlin's first stay at Bad Homburg (1798–1800, the years of *The Death of Empedocles*) was one of retreat, rest, and recuperation—without rest, however, and without recuperation. Suddenly he was deprived of his job, of young Henry, his devoted pupil, and of "Diotima" herself. Now there were only letters to and from her, exchanged during brief clandestine meetings. Hölderlin tried to lose himself in his work. The work in question would no longer be a discourse on "aesthetic ideas," no longer a commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus*, nor would it involve Fichte's lectures at Jena.<sup>5</sup> Hölderlin's ambivalent

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5. On "aesthetic ideas" and Plato's *Phaedrus*, see the letter to Christian Neuffer dated October 10, 1794 (CHV 2:550–51). On Hölderlin's reaction to Fichte's lectures in Jena, see Hölderlin's letters to Neuffer and to Hegel dated November 1794 and January 26, 1795, respectively (CHV 2:553 and 568–69). In the first, Hölderlin calls Fichte "the soul of Jena," and he affirms that he has "never encountered another man with such depth and energy of spirit." Several months later, to Hegel, his judgment is more critical:

At the beginning I strongly suspected him of dogmatism, and if I may be so bold, he really was standing on the cusp of it, and perhaps still is—he

attitude toward theoretical work in general, that is, his suspicion that philosophical speculation distracted him from his genuine poetic work, had been expressed years earlier in a letter to Schiller dated September 4, 1795:

My displeasure with myself and with what surrounds me has driven me into abstraction. I am trying to develop for myself the idea of an infinite progression in philosophy. I am trying to show that the relentless demand that must be made on every system, namely, the unification of subject and object in an absolute—in an ego or in whatever one wants to call it—is possible, albeit aesthetically, in intellectual intuition. It is possible theoretically only through an infinite approximation, as in the squaring of the circle. I am thus trying to show that in order to realize a system of thought an immortality is necessary—every bit as necessary as it is for a system of action. I believe that I can prove in this way to what extent the skeptics are right, and to what extent not. (CHV 2:595–96; TA 218–19)

The ambivalence he felt toward theoretical systems and the “infinite progression” of philosophy is most strongly manifested in a letter to Immanuel Niethammer dated February 24, 1796: Hölderlin confessed that philosophy was “once again” his “only preoccupation,” as he read Kant and Reinhold and heard Fichte reverberating in his brain: “Dame Philosophy is a tyrant, and it is more the case that I put up with her compelling me than that I voluntarily submit to it” (CHV 2:614). On Christmas Eve of 1798 he expressed his doubts about the possible progress of philosophy to Isaak von Sinclair. The letter is important because it begins with a reference to Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*. Hölderlin was reading Book VIII of Diogenes, on Empedocles, and was already at work on his mourning-play. The letter goes on to invoke the tragedy of philosophical systems as such:

wants to take as his point of departure the *factum* of consciousness for all *theory*. Many of his assertions show this; that *factum* is just as certain and as conspicuously transcendent for him as it was for prior metaphysicians who wanted to transcend the existence of the world—his absolute ego (= Spinoza’s substance) contains all reality; it is everything, and outside of it is nothing; thus there is no object for this absolute ego, for otherwise all of reality would not be in it; a consciousness without an object, however, is unthinkable, and if I myself am this object, then I am necessarily limited, if only by my being in time, hence not absolute; thus in the absolute ego no consciousness is thinkable; as absolute ego I possess no consciousness, and to the extent that I have no consciousness I am (for myself) nothing, so that the absolute ego is (for me) nothing.

These days I have been reading in your Diogenes Laertius. I've also experienced there something that I've encountered before, namely, the fact that the transiency and mutability of human thoughts and systems strike me as well-nigh more tragic than the destinies one usually calls the only real destinies. And I believe this is natural, for if a human being in his or her ownmost and freest activity—in autonomous thought itself—depends on foreign influences, if even in such thought he or she is modified in some way by circumstance and climate, which has been shown irrefutably to be the case, where then does the human being rule supreme? It is also a good thing—indeed, it is the first condition of all life and all organization—that in heaven and on earth no force rules monarchically. Absolute monarchy cancels itself out everywhere, for it is without object; strictly speaking, there never was such a monarchy. Everything that *is* interpenetrates as soon as it becomes active. . . . (CHV 2:722–23; RA 36–38)

Finally, in a long letter dated November 12, 1798, addressed to Christian Neuffer, Hölderlin expressed both his ambivalence toward philosophy and his doubts about his own talents as a poet in the context of the mourning-play on Empedocles:

I have been here [in Bad Homburg] for a bit more than a month. I've been working quietly on my mourning-play in the company of Sinclair, enjoying the beautiful autumn days. I was so torn apart by suffering that I have to thank the gods for the good fortune of this calm. . . . What most occupies my thoughts and my senses now is vitality in poetry [*das Lebendige in der Poesie*]. I feel so deeply how far removed I am from achieving it, even though my entire soul is wrestling to attain it, and this realization overcomes me so often that I have to weep like a child. The scenes of my drama are lacking in this or that respect, and yet I cannot twist free from the poetic errancy in which I wander. Oh, from my youth onward, the world has frightened my spirit back into itself, and I still suffer from that. There is one hospital, it is true, to which a botched poet like me can honorably flee—philosophy. Yet I cannot give up the hopes of my youth; I would rather go down with honor than alienate myself from the sweet homeland of my muses, from which mere accident has banished me. . . . I am not lacking in force, but in agility; I don't lack ideas, but nuances; I'm not missing the main tone, but all the other tones of the scale; I've got light, but not the shadows. And all for one reason: I shy away much too much from the common and the ordinary in real life. I'm nothing but a pedant, if you will. Yet, if I'm right, pedants are usually cold and loveless, whereas my heart is overly anxious to be a brother to every person and every thing under the moon. I almost think I am pedan-

tic for no other reason than love. . . . I'm afraid that the warm life in me will catch cold in the frigid history of our times, and this fear arises from the fact that I have proved to be more sensitive than others to every destructive force that has assailed me since my youth. . . . Because I am more vulnerable than many other people I must try to win some advantage from the things that have a destructive impact on me. . . . And, just so you know everything about this moody brooding of mine, I confess to you that for the past few days my work has ground to a halt, so that I have to fall back on ratiocination. (CHV 2:710–12; TA 219)

Hölderlin's mourning-play offered him a chance to escape from the tyranny of *Philosophia*, even if—or precisely because—the play itself was a wellspring of ideas (Hölderlin often used the expression *idealistisch*, “ideational,” to describe its characters), and even if he interrupted work on the second version to write a series of highly philosophical studies on tragic drama. As for the ideas themselves, Hölderlin found his way to them only gradually. Among these ideas, which were the principal ones?

There is only one genuinely philosophical problem, Albert Camus tells us in the first sentence of the first section of his *Mythe de Sisyphe*, only one problem that is truly serious: *c'est le suicide*.<sup>6</sup> According to legend, Empedocles' death is by suicide. Of all deaths, suicide is perhaps the most terrifying to us. We others, the stunned survivors, are always left standing outside of it, forlorn and uncomprehending. (In Hölderlin's play, as we shall see, the character named Pausanias occupies this outside position.) If suicide is the only truly philosophical problem, we may be forced to conclude that philosophy should have nothing to do with conceptual understanding, knowledge, wisdom, or will. The faculties relevant to philosophy may be reduced to a struggling imagination and a mournful memory.

Centuries before Camus wrote, the poet and thinker we call Novalis, Friedrich von Hardenberg, whom Hölderlin had met together with Fichte at the house of Immanuel Niethammer in early summer of 1795, said much the same thing: “The genuine philosophical act is suicide; this is the real beginning of all philosophy; every need for philosophical disciples leads in that direction, and this act alone corresponds to all the conditions and characteristics of the transcendental attitude. . . . Detailed elaboration of this supremely interesting thought.”<sup>7</sup> This “supremely interesting thought” leads almost everyone who takes it up back to Empedocles of Acragas, Empedocles on Mount Etna.

6. Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), 15. It is no accident that Empedocles figures large in Camus' later work, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), which takes its motto from Hölderlin's *Death of Empedocles*.

7. Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel, 3 vols. (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1987), 2:223.

If there is a second genuinely philosophical problem, it may have to do with the suicide of an entire city or people. One could imagine a nation in which religious and political leaders dedicate their mediocre talents to deceiving the people, indeed, to inculcating in them a kind of progressive and fatal stupor. One could imagine a city or a country in which *stupidification*—a new word for a new phenomenon?—is the principal political and social goal, a city or a country in which avarice alone competes with stupefaction for supremacy. One could imagine a place where one does not know which of the two, stupidity or avarice, has won the upper hand, that is, whether the stupidity of the nation is permeated by avarice or avarice itself has driven the nation into sheer idiocy. Empedocles apparently feels this way about Acragas; Hölderlin apparently feels this way about Württemberg. Hölderlin's character Manes, in the third version of the play, speaks of "the one" who believes himself called on to save his city from its demise—even if that demise appears to implicate the gods themselves:

The world around him bubbles in ferment, and all  
 Disruption and corruption in the mortal breast  
 Is agitated, and from top to bottom; whereupon  
 The lord of time, grown apprehensive of his rule,  
 Looms with glowering gaze above the consternation.  
 His day extinguished, lightning bolts still flash, yet  
 What flames on high is inflammation, nothing more;  
 What strives from down below is savage discord. (ll. 364–71)

Hölderlin's Empedocles replies to Manes:

When brother fled from brother, when lovers passed  
 Each other by in ignorance, when fathers failed  
 To recognize their sons, when human words no more  
 Were understood, nor human laws, that was when  
 The meaning of it all assailed me and I trembled:  
 It was my nation's parting god!  
 I heard him, and upward to unspeaking stars  
 I gazed, the place from which he had descended.  
 And then I went to placate him. For us there still  
 Were many radiant days. It still seemed at the very end  
 We might invigorate ourselves; and thus consoled  
 By memories of the Golden Age, that all-confident  
 And brilliant morning full of force, the frightful melancholy  
 Was lifted from me and from my people also;  
 We sealed with one another free and firm bonds,  
 Appealing to the living gods in supplication.



Yet often when I donned the crown of all the people's thanks,  
 And when the nation's soul approached me ever closer,  
 Crowding me alone, again the melancholy stole upon me.  
 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.  
 I had an intimation, yet served the spirit willingly.  
 And now it has transpired. (ll. 421–44)

Luckily, we who live in a postmodern, postindustrial society no longer need to fret about the atavism of religious leaders and the stupidity and avarice of political leaders; we no longer need to worry about the nation's parting god and the swan song of the god's departure, the final breaths of life.

Empedocles had been an object of Hölderlin's poetic imagination before he began to write his mourning-play. A passage from the second volume of *Hyperion*, written probably in 1798 at the Gontard household, touches on the story of Empedocles' death by suicide—his plunge into the crater of Mount Etna—and seeks an explanation for that suicide. A reference by Hyperion to his lost love "Diotima" precedes and frames the allusion to Empedocles:

I too am at the end of my rope. My own soul repels me, because I have to blame it for Diotima's death; and the thoughts of my youth, which I once held in high esteem, now mean nothing to me. For they poisoned my Diotima for me!

And now tell me, is there any refuge left?—Yesterday I was up on Etna. I recalled the great Sicilian of old who, when he'd had enough of ticking off the hours, having become intimate with the soul of the world, in his bold lust for life plunged into the terrific flames. It was because—a mocker afterwards said of him—the frigid poet had to warm himself at the fire.

Oh, how gladly I would precipitate such mockery over me! but one must think more highly of oneself than I do to fly unbidden to nature's heart—put it any way you like, for truly, as I am now, I have no name for these things, and all is uncertain. (DKV 2:116; TA 56–57)

An equally intense identification with Empedocles, or, rather, with the disciples and admirers of Empedocles, had already been expressed in Hölderlin's lyric poem, "Empedocles." Hölderlin first sketched it in the summer of 1797, at the time of the Frankfurt Plan, which is the first document we have concerning the Empedocles play in Hölderlin's life and work (see the first chapter of the present volume). The lyric poem, in which the theme of love is central, took final form in 1800 and was published in 1801:

## EMPEDOCLES

You seek life, you search, and out of the earth  
 Flows and blazes forth a godly fire to you,  
 And you, in shuddering exaction,  
 Cast yourself down into Etna's flames.

Thus the queen melts the pearls of her haughtiness  
 In wine; let them melt! if only you had  
 Not sacrificed your riches, O poet,  
 In the seething chalice!

Yet you are holy to me, as is the power of earth  
 That swept you away, bold victim!  
 And gladly would I follow into the depths,  
 If love did not hold me back, this hero.  
 (DKV 1:241; TA 220)

The words "shuddering exaction," *schauerndes Verlangen*, are repeated in the first version of the mourning-play, where they have quite a different impact. For there Empedocles himself utters them sarcastically in a moment of hesitation and self-doubt, perhaps even self-contempt. Empedocles has been hearing the pleas of his favorites, Pausanias and Panthea, from the beginning of the play: these disciples and friends worry that the master's planned suicide may be an effect of melancholy or punctured pride rather than a grandiose culmination of his life and teaching, an "ideal deed." Their doubts plague Empedocles increasingly as the three versions of the play succeed on one another. And they are doubts that can only cripple action. In act 2, scene 6 of the first version, Empedocles soliloquizes: "Shuddering / Exaction! What? death alone ignites / My life now at the end, and you extend / To me the terrifying chalice, the fermenting cup, / Nature!" (DKV 2:354; FHA 12:237). Queen Cleopatra may melt her pearls in a chalice of wine, but she does so out of arrogance or haughtiness (*Übermut*). If it is neither idealism nor melancholy that induces Empedocles' resolve, is it haughty ambition that tempts him with "one full deed and at the end"? In the lyric poem, love holds the singer back; the singer's voice is therefore closer to that of Pausanias or Panthea than it is to Empedocles. Why does the love of Pausanias, or that of Panthea, fail to hold Empedocles back? If it is neither idealism nor melancholy nor haughtiness, is it a failure to love that destroys the thinker? These doubts may prevent Hölderlin from successfully completing any of the three drafts. If the historical Empedocles leaps into the crater, Hölderlin's dramatic hero remains perched on the crater's rim forever.

Hölderlin would have read about Empedocles of Acragas (the Latin Agrigentum, the modern Agrigento, on the southwestern coast of Sicily), who lived *circa* 495–435 B.C.E., in many different sources. His principal source for the fragments of Empedocles' writings was the volume by the famous editor of Plato's works, Henricus Stephanus, entitled *Poesis philosophica, vel saltem, Reliquiae poesis philosophicae, Empedoclis, Parmenidis, Xenophanis, et al.*, published in 1573, to be discussed shortly. Horace's allusion to Empedocles in *Ars poetica* (ll. 463–66) and the more extensive treatment of him in Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (Book I, ll. 714–829) would not have escaped Hölderlin. Lucretius, who admires and emulates Empedocles, celebrates the luxuriant and dramatic Sicilian landscape that is dominated by swirling seas and volcanic Mount Etna. That landscape produces a son who seems more like a god than a mortal:

Here is destructive Charybdis and here is Etna,  
Whose rumblings warn us of angry flames gathering  
In violence to belch forth fire once again from its gorge  
And sear the sky with lightning sparks.  
This mighty region, which seems so full of wonders  
To the nations of humankind, and is famed as quite a place  
To see, bursting with fruits and fortified with men,  
Nonetheless holds nothing more renowned than this man,  
Nor anything more holy and marvelous and well-loved.  
The poems that sprang from his divine breast  
Declare and declaim his illustrious discoveries,  
Such that he hardly seems to be of mortal lineage.<sup>8</sup>

However, the single most important source for Empedocles' *life* that was available to Hölderlin was surely Diogenes Laertius's *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*. Hölderlin did not read Diogenes until his mourning-play was under way, yet once he did read the *Lives and Opinions*, in mid-December 1798, the account of Empedocles in Book VIII left a lasting impression on him, in at least five respects.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, revised by Martin Ferguson Smith, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), Book I, ll. 722–33. I have altered the translation.

9. See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols., tr. R. D. Hicks, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 1972), 2:366–91, which comprises Book VIII, sections 51–77, for this and the following. I shall cite this work as DL, with volume and page number. See also JV 3:354n. 5, and 356–59.

Π Ο Ϊ Η Σ Ι Σ Φ Ι Λ Ο

Σ Ο Φ Ο Σ .

P O E S I S P H I L O

S O P H I C A ,

*Vel saltem,*

Reliquiæ poësis philosophicæ,

EMPEDOCLIS, PARMENIDIS;

XENOPHANIS, CLEANTHIS;

TIMONIS, EPICHARMI.

*Adiuncta sunt*

ΟΡΡΗΕΙ illius carmina qui à suis ap-  
pellatus fuit ὁ Θεολόγος.

*I T E M,*

HERACLITI ET DEMO-

*criti loci quidam, & eorum epistola.*



ANNO M. D. LXXIII.

excudebat Henr. Stephanus.

CVM PRIVILEGIO CAES.

MAIESTATIS.

The title page of Henricus Stephanus, *Poesis philosophica*, 1573, Hölderlin's most important source for the fragments of Empedocles.

First, Diogenes reports that Empedocles was a renowned thinker, poet, and rhetorician. Important for Hölderlin, who since his early youth dreamed of being at least the first two, must have been Empedocles' association with the great masters of Greek thought and poetry prior to him: he is a disciple of Pythagoras—even if Empedocles is reputedly excommunicated from the Pythagorean Brotherhood for having betrayed one of the hermetic doctrines (an important detail for the second of the three versions of Hölderlin's play); Empedocles is also a student of Parmenides, the thinker of “the well-rounded sphere of truth” (DK B1, l. 29). The one, well-rounded sphere will prove to be important for Empedocles' own cosmology: into the Parmenidean sphere Empedocles will inject the opposing forces of Love and Strife, Φιλία καὶ Νεῖκος. Like his predecessors, Empedocles is a poet who composes in hexameters. He is an admirer of Xenophanes of Colophon, the acerbic critic of Homer and Hesiod and the poet of a Zeus whose power resides in his “unmoving thought” (DK B25–26). Empedocles is, furthermore, a rival of Zeno, the inventor of dialectic—inasmuch as Empedocles is the creator of rhetoric. If Empedocles is a master rhetorician, however, he is also a bard: the epithet ὀμηρικός is the superlative encomium for any Greek poet, and that is the word Diogenes uses to describe the Sicilian sage. He elaborates on this Homeric quality when he writes that Empedocles is μεταφορητικός, “well-versed in poetic devices,” and even “powerful in versification to an uncanny degree,” καὶ δεινὸς περὶ τὴν φράσιν. Indeed, Empedocles' skills extend to all the sciences and arts: according to several of Diogenes' sources, he composes both tragedies and philosophical discourses, is both rhetorician and physician, dramaturge and thaumaturge, an expert in all the φάρμακα and all the incantations that influence body and mind.

Second, Diogenes reports some controversy surrounding Empedocles' politics. He notes that after the death of Empedocles' father, Meton, signs appeared that a tyranny was about to install itself in Acragas; Empedocles “convinced the citizens to cease their hostilities and to respect their equality as citizens” (DL 8:72). Empedocles is therefore a radical democrat, thinking only of the welfare of the common people. When in the first version of *The Death of Empedocles* the citizens of Agrigent beg Empedocles to become their “Numa,” that is, to be for them what the legendary Numa Pompilius was for preclassical Rome, a king who settles civil strife and rules justly through laws rather than edicts, Empedocles tells them that the time of kingship has irrevocably passed. Indeed, the Empedocles who calls on the citizens to throw off the fetters of tyranny, especially the tyranny of their priests, also frees his own slaves. Yet a shadow is cast over Empedocles' democratic tendencies. Diogenes reports that, according to some, the poet and rhetorician was actually arrogant and self-seeking, or at least utterly self-centered, ἀλαζόνα καὶ φίλαυτον, and

that he was a recluse who in reality did not care a bit for his people. Empedocles sacrifices himself on the altar not of his nation but of his solitude. And Hölderlin? Like the ancient Empedocles, Hölderlin is a staunch democrat and a believer in the republican form of government, even if affairs in Paris and by now in Germany as well are bloody. Yet he is also a man whose solitude grows deeper daily.

Third, Diogenes reports at least something of Empedocles' central teaching in Περὶ φύσεως, "On Nature," namely, the doctrine of the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water. Empedocles calls them the four roots, or rhizomes, ῥιζώματα. When Hölderlin sends a portion of the second version of his play to his stepbrother Carl, he underlines the four elements in the passage, as though to enhance Carl's education in early Greek philosophy (DKV 2:1098). The four Empedoclean elements are subject to the forces of mixture and separation (μίξις, διάλλαξις), which, as we mentioned, Empedocles more often calls the forces of love and strife (φιλία, νεῖκος). The mere mention of love and strife as universal forces reminds us of Hölderlin's love of nature, as also of Diotima; indeed, the two loves are inextricably—if inexplicably—linked. Hers is, as Hölderlin reports to Neuffer, "the face of nature." Yet these loves are crossed by destiny and permeated by strife.

Fourth, love is a force that the Greeks generally, and Empedocles in particular, associate with Aphrodite. The love (and the strife?) that this goddess instigates in both mortals and immortals plays a role in Empedocles' second book, the Καθαρμοί, or *Purifications*, which Diogenes also mentions. Hölderlin was struck by a reference Diogenes makes twice to a certain woman whom Empedocles the physician reportedly healed. Several such cases may have existed, but the name *Pantheia* is associated with one of them. Pantheia, which Hölderlin will write as *Panthea*, herself a poetess and a companion of Pindar, is in turn associated with a certain Pausanias, who is said to have been the favorite or the beloved (ἐρώμενος) of Empedocles. Pantheia, a victim of the plague, was given up for dead by her father and by all the citizens of Acragas. For thirty days her body had been without respiration or pulse, even though it was still preserved intact. Empedocles the doctor and pharmacologist, and perhaps the thaumaturge as well, reputedly discovered a source of warmth in her belly. Somehow, perhaps through the administration of an elixir, he managed to preserve her life. After having been restored to health, Pantheia became a disciple, albeit only briefly, inasmuch as she is particularly associated with Empedocles at the time of his death. During the sacrifice offered for her recuperation, her doctor and savior reportedly took his life by leaping into the crater of Etna. During the night, Diogenes reports, the crowd heard the voice of a woman or a god cry out, Ἐμπεδοκλέα! Nietzsche, who drew up numerous plans for an Empedocles drama, suspected that this woman who disclosed to the philosopher the meaning of nature in fact joined Empedocles in death;

whether Hölderlin ever entertained the idea of such a *Liebestod* we do not know, but it did not become a part of his play.<sup>10</sup>

Fifth, and finally, the various accounts of Empedocles' death Diogenes Laertius offered must have intrigued Hölderlin. Four years earlier, in October of 1794, Hölderlin had planned to write a tragedy on the death of Socrates. It may be that Plato's *Phaedo* was still in his mind as he was thinking about the Sicilian magus. For, as we shall see, Plato plays an interesting—though utterly anachronistic—role in Hölderlin's play. At all events, the undying fame of the ancient philosophers does not intrigue Hölderlin as much as their free death, their “full” or “ideal” deed at the end of their lives. That mortal deed cloaks them in the mantle of immortality, or at least suggests something of the exceptional and excessive. Yet to say such a thing is to broach the possibility of hubris. Diogenes twice refers to Empedocles' mantic pretensions and places these words in Empedocles' mouth: “As for me, I walk among you as immortal god, no longer a mortal,” ἐγὼ δ' ὑμῖν θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός πωλεῦμαι (DK B112). This is perhaps an extreme form of the statement Hölderlin makes to Neuffer, “It is actually often impossible for me to think the thoughts of mortals. . . .” Empedocles' is the ultimate hubris, one must say, the most nefarious and unspeakable *nefas* that one can imagine—unless his self-willed death outstrips the claim to divinity and is itself the ultimate hubris. At all events, Diogenes delights in the multiple reports concerning Empedocles' death: a fraud perpetrated by the crafty thaumaturge and desperate dramaturge, who sets the scene for the launching of his own legend, who plays the τραγικός up to the very end and yet in that end is finally unmasked, or at least unshod—inasmuch as the crater spews the philosopher's bronzed sandal back onto the rim; or, on the contrary, the authentic hierophant, γεγόνυ θεός, “become god,” having mixed his flesh and blood with the roots of fire, water vapor, volcanic gases, and liquefied earth in Etna.

Hölderlin first mentioned the exact title of his play, *Der Tod des Empedokles*, in a letter to Schiller in late summer of 1799, after the first two versions had been completed; from the outset, however, he had intended to tell the story of the *death* of Empedocles. Indeed, as he moved from the second version to the third, Hölderlin eliminated virtually all the material having to do with the city of Agrigent and its political and religious turmoil: in version three Empedocles is poised for the leap right from the start. As we know, however, he never takes that final step. Hölderlin never brings him to that pass. Why not?

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10. See, however, ll. 261–66 and 462–69 of the third version of the play. For Nietzsche's proposed drama on Empedocles, see D. F. Krell, *Postponements: Woman, Sensuality, and Death in Nietzsche* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), chapter 2.

Before responding to this question—and if the earlier remarks on the restraining force of love are not already a reply that is because this entire volume is in response to the question—we have to return to the matter of Hölderlin's sources, especially his source for the Empedoclean fragments in the collection by Henricus Stephanus.<sup>11</sup> In Stephanus's anthology Hölderlin would have found much of the material that derives from Diogenes Laertius, Aristotle, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, Athenaeus, Galen, Clement of Alexandria, Porphyry, and others. Missing from the Stephanus collection, however, are the important fragments from Simplicius, from which so much of our information about Empedocles' first book, "On Nature," derives. As mentioned earlier, from the sources available to him Hölderlin would have been well informed about Empedocles' doctrines of the four roots (earth, air, water, and the fiery ether or upper air), of the one sphere, and of the two opposing forces, love and strife. Perhaps the most important aspect of these two forces is that the one never banishes the other entirely from the sphere. Two fragments of Empedocles suggest the consequences of this. The first, from Simplicius, which Hölderlin perhaps did not know, encourages us to examine the "witnesses" of Empedocles' words:

Observe the sun, bright to look at and everywhere ardent, which permeates all with its warmth and its glistening rays; observe the rain, which evokes everything dark and cool and causes the earth to release all that is firm and grounding. And in quarrel everything stirs and assumes contrary forms and is discordant, whereas in love these things unite and languish for one another [πoθεῖται]. For from this all else springs, everything that

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11. Hölderlin had other sources available to him, such as Georg Christoph Hamberger, *Zuverlässige Nachrichten von den vornehmsten Schriftstellern vom Anfange der Welt bis 1500*, 1756, Jacob Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae*, 6 vols., 1742, and Ralph Cudworth, *Systema intellectuale huius mundi*, 1680. Yet the volume by Henricus Stephanus seems to have been the most important source, and it will be discussed in detail in what follows (with references to page numbers in the body of my text). The Stephanus text, which is extremely rare, is also difficult to decipher. I have located a number of its fragments in Diels-Kranz, however, and I list these here in order that we may have some sense of the fragments that Hölderlin actually read. I cite the DK fragments in the order they appear in Stephanus, with the page number of Stephanus's text in parentheses: among the fragments in Stephanus are DK B100 (12, 17), B21 (18), B3 (20), B8 (22), B111, B112 (23), B117, B136, B137 (24), B122, B115 (25), B76, B81, B67 (26), B145, B146, B114, B4 (27), B38, B133, B147, B132 (28), B118, B125, B124, B119, B128 (29), B139, B33 (30), B90, B1, B156, B157 (31). This list is not complete, but may serve as a starting point. On this question of Hölderlin's sources for Empedocles, see JV 3:346n. 35 and DKV 2:1097.



was, is, and shall be, trees and men as well as women and animals and birds and water-nourished fish, and gods too, long-lived and richest in honors. (DK B21)

The word ποθεῖται is formed from πόθος, which means mourning and grief. Love itself, it seems, involves mourning, languor, and languishment, as both Hölderlin and Schelling had always suspected. Languishment, while not obviously born of strife, arises as the shadow side of love. The second fragment, which Hölderlin was more likely to have known, comes from Plutarch, who refers to those human beings who are beset by “the languor of love,” or *Liebesehnsucht*, as Diels-Kranz translate πόθος: “Languor of love steals upon him, which through vision awakens a memory” (DK B64). To repeat, while mourning and languishment are not strife as such, they are surely reminiscent of the Νεῖκος that is never entirely overcome by Φιλία within the sphere. Although Aphrodite is the beneficent source of unity among mortals, “the life-dispensing Aphrodite,” “the all-harmonizing Aphrodite,” she hammers into mortals the “nails of love” (DK B 151, B71, B87); she is the goddess who thickens the plot in the way fig juice thickens milk (DK B33); she herself is the goddess of sundered or riven meadows, σχιστοὺς λειμῶνας Ἀφροδίτης, and “of shadowy parts,” γυναικοφυῆ σκιεροῖς γυίοις (DK B61, B66). (Note that the word for “meadows” in B66 is precisely that which Empedocles calls the fields of Ἄτη, that is, “the fields of doom” [see B121]: the meadow metaphor itself implies that love and strife flourish side-by-side, at least on this earth.) Just as the earth enables us to perceive earth, and water grants us the feel of water, and ether shows us ether, so does love enable us to perceive love, whereas strife gives us a view of “wretched strife” (DK B109). And yet we would never be able to contrast the two within the sphere if either were to vanish. If we ask what accounts for the *alternation* of love and strife, Empedocles’ reply is “a broadly sworn oath,” a kind of cosmic contract that enforces the change of epochs “when time has run its course,” τελειομένοιο χρόνιοιο (DK B30). This sort of time is surely different from mere succession, the time from which, as we shall see, Empedocles yearns to escape. The undeniable yet enigmatic relationship between temporal succession in any given human lifetime and historical-epochal time must have disquieted both Empedocles and Hölderlin. An even more severe problem for them both, however, is the fact the alternation of eons is never complete; that is to say, neither love nor strife is ever wholly vanquished in the cycle. That this is so for love undergirds all our hopes for the return of a Golden Age, no matter how discordant our present. That this is so for strife is more troubling—for what would give strife greater pleasure than breaking its contract with both love and epochal time, insisting on controlling the elements within the sphere even after the time has come to give love a chance?

What could be more natural for Νεῖκος? Another fragment recorded by Simplicius—to which Hölderlin may not have had access—will bring this difficulty to light in a particularly stark way. But let us turn our attention for a moment to the sphere, the Parmenidean sphere that seems so snugly, in which both love and strife pursue their respective unifying and disintegrating functions. For this threesome—*love* and *strife* within the *sphere*—presents a classic example of the ancient and modern quarrel between monism (the *one* sphere) and dualism (the *two opposing* forces). Ancient *and* modern quarrel, one must say, and perhaps a modern version will serve as the best way to introduce the problem.

Sigmund Freud, in a late work on the question of limited or infinite analysis, complains that he has been unable to convince most of his associates of the *dualism* that he sees at work in the human psyche, namely, the duality of psychic forces, one of them serving to unify and build, the other to disrupt and destroy.<sup>12</sup> Yet he is consoled, he says, by the fact that he has happened upon an early Greek thinker who shares his exquisite dualism—indeed, one who projects that dualism onto the entire universe. Here is a very long (yet abridged) quotation from section six of his 1937 article “On Finite and Infinite Analysis”:

Empedocles of Acragas, born circa 495 B.C.E., enters on the scene as one of the most magnificent and remarkable figures in the cultural history of Greece. His many-sided personality engaged in activities that went in the most varied directions; he was a researcher and thinker, a prophet and thaumaturge [*Magier*], a politician, philanthropist, and physician who was well-informed about nature; he is said to have freed the city of Selinunt of malaria, for which his contemporaries honored him as a god. His spirit seems to have united within itself the most acute oppositions; precise and sober in his physical and physiological investigations, he nevertheless did not shy from obscure mysticism; he constructed cosmic speculations of astonishingly phantasmatic boldness. . . . Yet our interest turns to that particular doctrine of Empedocles which comes so close to the psychoanalytic theory of drives that the two would be identical were it not for the difference that the theory of the Greek is a cosmic phantasm. . . . The philosopher teaches that there are two principles underlying all occurrences in cosmic as well as in psychic life, two principles in eternal conflict with one another. He calls them φιλία—*love*—and

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12. For the following see Freud, “Die endliche und die unendliche Analyse,” in Sigmund Freud, *Studienausgabe Ergänzungsband, Schriften zur Behandlungstechnik* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982), 384–86.

νεῖκος—*strife*. One of these powers . . . strives to compress the primordial particles of the four elements into a unity, the other, by contrast, tries to cancel all these intermixtures and to isolate the elements from one another. He conceives of the cosmic process as a continuous, never-ending alternation of periods in which the one or the other of the two fundamental forces is victorious, so that at one time love, but at another time strife imposes its will and rules the world, at which point the other, defeated party rises up and wrestles its opponent to the ground.

The two fundamental principles of Empedocles—φιλία and νεῖκος—both in name and in function are the same as our two fundamental drives *Eros* and *destruction*. The one endeavors to bind everything at hand into ever-greater unities, the other to dissolve these unities and to annihilate the configurations that they have brought into being. . . . We no longer think of the mixture and separation of material substances, but on the fusion and separation of drive components. We have also in a certain way provided biological support for the principle of “strife” by tracing our destructive drive back to the death drive, namely, the compulsion of living creatures to revert to lifelessness. Naturally, that does not mean to deny that an analogous drive already existed earlier on; it does not mean to assert that such a drive first came into being with the appearance of life. And no one can predict in what sort of guise the kernel of truth contained in the doctrine of Empedocles will show itself to later investigators.

What might have soured Freud’s consolation, which rests on the supposition that even if his contemporaries will not accept his dualism of drives, *Eros* and the *death drive*, Empedocles of Acragas might well have, is the thought that the Empedoclean dualism may revert to a monism. If the principles of love and strife are engaged in strife within the sphere, wrestling one another to the ground, then strife haunts the sphere during both periods. In Freud’s world, this might mean that the *Eros* on which therapy counts—the drive to unify and to resist destruction—may itself be invariably contaminated by the destructive drive. The resulting tragic monism would draw psychoanalysis into its turbulence. But let us return now to Empedocles’ own monistic Parmenidean inheritance, that is to say, his inheritance of the one sphere in which the two forces strive against one another—*strife* being the name of *one* (the *monos*) of the two contending powers.

That Empedocles is a disciple of Parmenides becomes clear when we hear his words concerning the one sphere, words reminiscent of the well-rounded sphere of truth to which Parmenides refers. Empedocles describes the sphere as being “perfectly round, everywhere equal and endless, filled with enormous pride over the solitude that rings it round” (DK B28). Empedocles’ Parmenidean strain also shows itself in his denial of birth and death for

humankind: “There is birth of particular beings among mortals just as little as there is an end in accursed death; rather, there is only mixture and exchange, ‘birth’ being but the name human beings commonly use for this” (DK B8). Of course, human beings are not the only living beings that undergo mixture and exchange instead of birth and death. Empedocles’ denial of human exceptionality and superiority is radical. In more than one place he insists that consciousness and the power to make ethical decisions—what Aristotle was to call φρόνησις—is a matter of Good Fortune, Τύχη, and in any case belongs to many orders of living things besides humankind: “For you must know that everything has consciousness [φρόνησις ἔχει] and participates in thinking [καὶ νόματος αἴσαν]” (DK B110; cf. 103). As we read the *Καθαρμοί*, however, it becomes apparent that Empedocles himself has committed some dreadful crime against the unity of life and the collective consciousness, whether wittingly or not. Fragment DK B115, which Hölderlin knew, reads:

It is a proclamation of Necessity, a decree of the gods, ancient, prevailing since time immemorial and sealed with broad oaths: when one has besmirched his own members with the blood of murder and thus has incurred guilt, and when one has furthermore sworn an oath to some one among the daimons, who are allotted a very long life, they must wander remote from the blessed for three times ten thousand years, whereby in the course of time they assume the shapes of all sorts of mortal creatures, treading one weary path after another. For the power of the air chases them to the sea, the sea spews them onto the land, the earth hounds them to the beams of the blazing, inexhaustible sun, and the sun pursues them into the vortex of the air. Each takes him from the others, but they all hate him. Among these I too now belong [τῶν καὶ ἐγὼ νῦν εἶμι], a fugitive from gods and a vagabond [φυγὰς θεόθεν καὶ ἀλήτης], because I put my faith in raging strife [νείκει μαινομένωι πίσυρος].

Empedocles knows strife not simply as one of the two cosmic forces; he knows it as his own life story and as his fate. Hölderlin also had access to the following three fragments, the first from Diogenes Laertius, the second and third from Clement of Alexandria (via Stephanus). First, the famous brief biography of Empedocles’ former lives: “For I have already been, once upon a time, boy, girl, plant, bird, and mute fish diving in the briny sea” (DK B117; Stephanus 24). Second, Empedocles’ account of one of his many births on the plains of doom: “I wept and howled as I looked about the unfamiliar place” (DK B118; Stephanus 29). Finally, third, the outcome of these multiple births here on earth: “From how vast a height and from what great happiness I have been cast down!” (DK B119; Stephanus 29). The “plains of doom,” cited in DK B121, although not in Stephanus, Hölderlin knew in any case, inasmuch as he alludes to them in *Hype-*