

“In the Face of All the Glad, Hay-Making Suns”: Schelling and Hölderlin on Mourning and Mortality

David Farrell Krell. *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xxi + 432 pp. Bibliography and index.

David Krell's *The Tragic Absolute* testifies to the influence of force and chance, of finitude in all its guises, on the thought of Schelling and Hölderlin. Krell brings to light the way in which the experience of limit, the pull of Ananke, and the simple fact of mortality shapes the work of Schelling and Hölderlin in both style and content. The waning “ontotheological absolute, . . . traditionally defined in terms of . . . its ‘groundlessness, eternity, [and] independence from time’”¹ gives way, in the case of both authors, to a concern with the tragic. Schelling's treatise on human freedom (*Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*), the 1811–1815 drafts of *Ages of the World*, Hölderlin's *Death of Empedocles*, the latter's translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, and lesser-known texts by Schelling, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Nietzsche are examined. The readings that Krell offers of these texts are “peripheral,” which is to say his primary concern is not to elicit from the texts under consideration their “central” speculative claims. Questions such as that of “freedom, necessity, images, the proto-real, the ground, and the concept, issues on which Schelling's entire philosophy hangs” (161), are in some cases dismissed (“too much for us to decide here, here or perhaps anywhere else” [ibid.]). Krell thus avoids pretensions to completion and finality, revealing instead the ambiguities of the texts and the hesitations that beset their authors with regard to their more radical insights. His uncanny claim is that their ambivalence regarding the ubiquity of the finite has as its counterpart a “fall” within being itself. Human conflict and anxiety is mirrored in an “ailing” absolute. Krell tends to illuminate the latter by way of Greek myths involving

¹ David Krell, *The Tragic Absolute* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1; cited hereafter by page number in the body of the text. Krell's citation is of Schelling's 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. See *Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*, vol. 7 of *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Karl Schelling (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1959), 350.

mortals' seduction of the gods, who are thus affected by and infected with temporality. It is perhaps no accident that this student of Heidegger's thought can so well depict subject-object "contagion,"² but it is in any case a remarkable vision, and one that is decisive for Krell's reading of both Greek tragedy and German Idealism.

Krell is, of course, not the only thinker concerned with the problematizing of metaphysics in the wake of Kant. The title of his work calls to mind Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's *Literary Absolute*, and the texts under consideration are strikingly parallel to those discussed in Dennis Schmidt's *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life*. Krell is generous in his acknowledgment of these and other sources. No fewer than seven Ph.D. dissertations from DePaul University are cited in the text. Established scholars are also accorded their due, with Christoph Jamme's work on Hegel and Hölderlin,³ Roberto Calasso's reading of Greek mythology,⁴ and Jean-Pierre Vernant's theoretical work on tragedy⁵ most prominent. In highlighting the work of others, and by hiding neither his sympathies nor his debts, Krell creates the effect of ongoing dialogue. *The Tragic Absolute* itself opens with a manuscript of uncertain authorship—a gesture towards the limits and undecidability of human agency.

Chapter 1 of Krell's text is a reading of the fragment "The Oldest Program Towards a System in German Idealism" and a review of the scholarly dispute surrounding its authorship. Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin (the "Tübingen triumvirate") have each their champion. The fragment itself (written on a single folio sheet, purchased at auction by the Prussian State Library in 1913, and recovered from a library in Krakow thanks to the efforts of Dieter Henrich) calls for a revival and reconceptualization of the sciences along the following lines: the subsumption of metaphysics under ethics, the shaping of a physics capable of positing a nature suitable for a free being, and the abolition

² Krell, *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease, and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

³ Christoph Jamme and Helmut Schneider, eds., *Mythologie der Vernunft: Hegels "Ältestes Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus"* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984); and Christoph Jamme and Frank Völkel, eds., *Hölderlin und der Deutschen Idealismus*, 4 vols. "Specula 3" (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2003).

⁴ Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

of the state and existing religious institutions on the ground that they are divorced from all living feeling (the cog-in-a-machine critique leveled earlier by Schiller). The Program culminates in the claim that the supreme act of reason is an aesthetic one and calls accordingly for a sensuous religion.

Krell's commentary on the *Systemprogramm* addresses, point by point, the question of likely attribution. While editors at the Hegel Archive have established with reasonable certainty that the document was penned by Hegel, the tone and contents of the document (particularly the claims regarding the primacy of the aesthetic) suggest Schelling, or possibly Hölderlin, as the author. The undecidability of the authorship, anticipating what Friedrich Schlegel was to call *Symphilosophie*, is compellingly depicted by Krell. Seen in juxtaposition with the thicket of scholarly contention as to the document's source, the wonder of the fruitful association of Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin, with all that was to follow in its wake (a Kierkegaard, a Nietzsche, and a Heidegger deeply indebted), is striking. What bearing, then, does the Program or the question concerning its composer have on Krell's tragic absolute, with its emphasis on the limits and boundaries which these young geniuses, however briefly, defied? When Krell sounds the *Systemprogramm*, with its ostensive optimism, for traces of the tragic, he locates these in (1) the document's pessimism regarding the science, politics, and religion of its time and (2) the split between theoretical and practical, which plagues post-Kantian philosophy. He implies, however, that the deeper tragedy may lie in the rarity of such communal ties: "Do we in the age of self-conscious collectives and universally espoused aspirations for community know anything like it?" (41). This parallel between Schelling/Hölderlin's time and our own is a recurring theme in Krell's work, the search, that is, for "a foothold in destitute times, whether the epoch in question be that of Empedocles, Hölderlin, or ourselves" (218).

In "Three Ends of the Absolute," Krell points to loci in the thought of Schelling, Hölderlin, and Novalis that show them to be torn between their insistence on the reality of nature, history, and consciousness, on the one hand, and their residual allegiance to the absolute, on the other. Novalis' proclamation is the classic one: "*Wir suchen Überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge.*"⁶ "We seek something unconditioned in every nook and cranny, and all we ever find are [conditioned] things" (63). To the degree Krell

⁶ Krell is quoting Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Schriften*, ed. Richard Samuel et al., rev. Richard Samuel and Hans-Joachim Mähl. 5 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1981), 2:227.

shares Novalis' view, and he seems to, the subversion of the absolute is not seen as an effect of language but as necessitated by the very nature of existence: hence the “tragic absolute.” In his account of Schelling's *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie*, Krell observes that “[t]he philosophy of organic nature, from Goethe and Kant onward, provides something like a theater in which we observe the failure of the absolute” (47). It is fair to say that what Krell offers his readers is a staging of this drama, rather than an analysis or vindication of the “legitimacy” of the movement itself. And the drama depicted is less that of language, itself positing and deconstructing the absolute, than a drama of (human) existence.

Schelling, like Fichte before him, attempts to do justice to both conditioned and unconditioned by positing the existence of necessary difference within the Absolute itself—both Fichte and Schelling term this difference “inhibition” (*Hemmung*). Krell embarks at this point on a brief but intriguing excursus on the term's usage and calls for “a history of inhibition”: “[I]nhibition is crucial to [Kant's] Analytic of the Sublime, where, arguably, aesthetic and teleological forms of judgment meet—in ‘the feeling of a momentary inhibition of life forces. . . .’⁷ [I]t may well be that what Heidegger calls the mystery (*das Geheimnis*) of self-occluding, self-withdrawing being in the destiny or sending of being. . . lies in an as yet untold *Hemmungsgeschichte*” (49). This notion of a necessary or primal duality in nature renders questionable, in its turn, the existence of unconditioned freedom. *Liberum arbitrium* gives way to a notion of spontaneity less easily distinguished from [natural] necessity.

The reading of Schelling's *Freiheitschrift* presented in chapter 3 takes its point of departure in the “ontological distinction” posited in the former work “between *existence* and the *ground of existence*” (78). This notion of a sundered absolute, which performs the same function as the idea of inhibition did earlier, is never wholeheartedly embraced by Schelling. Krell's account of Schelling's ambivalence on this issue sheds light on what for me have been the most perplexing passages of the text. Krell deftly traces Schelling's awkward maneuverings, his attempts to flee an otherwise all embracing finitude, the ubiquity of “longing and languor,” first “backwards” (to the indifferent *Ungrund* that “precedes” the fatal duality in essence) and forward to a final separation that will free essence from its dark ground, isolating and incapacitating evil. Krell cites Schelling's wrestling with his unwieldy *eschaton*:

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Gerhard Lehmann (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 1966), B75, 129.

Then [... in the final, total scission] it [... the ground] is dissolved, as in the human being, when it is transfigured and is established as perdurant essence, when the incipient languor dissipates, inasmuch as everything true and good in it is elevated to buoyant consciousness, but everything else, namely, the false and impure, is sealed off eternally in gloom, in order to remain back behind as the eternally dark ground of selfhood, as the dross of its life-process and as a potency that can never proceed to act. (99)⁸

One need not be a Freud scholar in order to question whether such troubling remnants will remain “sealed off.” Schelling comes to the same conclusion, Krell argues, in his early drafts of *The Ages of the World*.

Chapters 4 through 6 reveal the continued ambivalence regarding the ultimacy of finitude, desire, and sexual difference in Schelling’s 1811 draft of *The Ages of the World*. The narrative continues to “fight against... two powerful currents, one wanting to sweep it up and away into the remote past, the other threatening shipwreck on the familiar shores of Christological consolation and Salvationist delights” (123). Krell places emphasis, however, on those passages in which Schelling’s philosophical defenses fail, so to speak, and he is once again swept forth into the flux. Schelling’s pursuit of a Golden Age of harmony between matter and spirit (present in each draft of *The Ages of the World*) leads him, ironically, to the centrality of “suffering and fatality. It is as though the way up were the way down” (130). If the Golden Age promises perfect unity of male and female, of matter and spirit (with gold, the malleable flesh-like metal—raw matter on the verge of quickening—a fitting figure for the synthesis), this is nevertheless an impossible dream of an impossible purity, a dream that is indistinguishable from the human “illness,” its tragic flaw, as evident in our unending search for the unconditional. If this dream of a Golden Age has its dark side, as Krell makes clear, such “re-valuing of values” shows Schelling to be Nietzsche’s true forerunner. Myth is the mother of reason, and matter the very support of the godhead.

Schelling’s remarks on God’s footstool (again in the 1811 printing of *The Ages of the World*) is the privileged illustration of this (proto-Nietzschean) reversal of the ideal and the natural: “God, as what properly is, surpasses his being. Heaven is his throne and earth his footstool. Yet even that which in relation to his supreme essence is nonbeing is so full of force that it irrupts into a life of its own.”⁹ The comparison of this passage with others like it (the 1810 *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* and the 1827–1828 lecture course, *System of the*

⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, 7:408.

⁹ F. W. J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter Fragmente. In den Urfassungen von 1811 und 1813*, ed.

Agnes of the World, together with an analysis of the artistic references contained therein) supports Krell's vision: the feet of Schelling's deity "twitch... nervously on a footstool which has suddenly burst into uncontrollable life" (165). The creator perches uneasily atop a creation that he can neither encompass nor destroy. Little wonder that anxiety and conflict are not limited to the domain of the human.

With the transition to Hölderlin's work, the question arises as to the sustainability of this tragic vision. "[T]he realization that consciousness is always and everywhere finite" is a recognition which must, it seems, remain fleeting, glimpsed from the periphery, if the categories by which existence is normally guided are to remain in force (4). Desire (or love) which ventures beyond the limits of existence cannot be distinguished from hate. Empedocles' leap into the crater of Etna is equally a failure of love and its climax. Krell recalls the *aporiai* present in Schelling's notion of a love which gives birth to multiplicity only to once again return to unity by divesting itself of all that eludes the centripetal force of the center: "The mystery and enigma of love is that it freely fuses the duality that it itself inaugurates; or, to put it the other way around, love initially severs that which it is destined to anneal. Original violence, nihilation, is the secret life of love" (97). Hölderlin's references to love betray a similar ambiguity. A letter from the poet, composed in 1798 during the gestation of *The Death of Empedocles*, reads: "I shy away too much from the common and the ordinary in real life. . . . I'm afraid that the warm life in me will catch cold in the frigid history of our times."¹⁰ Can "love and languor . . . hold one back from the edge," asks Krell (4), or does desire have the opposite effect, edging invariably toward the impossible? At the risk of embarking on a peripheral reading of my own, it is clear at this point in the text that a certain momentum is gathering. Hölderlin and, in his wake, Krell are inching towards Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which Oedipus' sister/daughter steps onto the stage, the race already run.¹¹ Freud's *Triebvermischung* has little advantage over Ismene's prescient observation of her sister: that hot heart for cold things. But let us track Krell's account more closely.

Manfred Schröter, Nachlaßband to the Münchner Jubiläumsdruck (Munich: Biederstein Verlag and Leibniz Verlag, 1946), 20–21; quoted in Krell, 153.

¹⁰ Michael Knaupp, ed. *Friedrich Hölderlin Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1992) 2:710–712; quoted in Krell, 219.

¹¹ Lacan's phrase is "the-race-is-run" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Potter [New York: W. W. Norton, 1992], 254).

If Hölderlin detected something hostile to life in the “frigid history” of his time, the insight bears generalizing: the repeated refrain of Krell’s treatment of Hölderlin and Sophocles is that “sheer succession—time tearing ahead and tearing us away with it—suffices for tragedy” (292, 314). Tragic heroes set themselves up against the divine order of things.¹² And what they oppose is, above all, the ravages of time:

Oedipus wants to be present at the origin, wants to be giving birth to himself; he wants to hand himself over to himself, and not be handed over to some servant who will carry him off to desolation and death on Mount Cithaeron. . . . He wants to undo what was done in his own house prior to his birth. He wants to challenge the ‘it was’ of time, which Nietzsche calls the source of all rancor and resentment. Like Zeus, the father of time, Oedipus wants to annihilate time. He wants, Lacan will say, the *ex nihilo*, the secret of all creation and generation. He wants what Schelling calls the pristine, remote, elevated age of the world, the storied yet uncounted and unrecounted time that preceded all the times of the world. He pursues that desire the only way it can be pursued, namely, through annihilation. (352–53)

But however much heroic personages may resist the “it was” of time, not even immortals elude it. Krell’s image for this is drawn from Hölderlin’s translation of *Antigone*: “She [Danaë] counted off for the Father of Time / The strokes of the hours, the golden” (332). The lines are translated more literally as “entrusted by Zeus with the gold-flowing seed,” and the context is the attempt on the part of the chorus to console Antigone as she retreats to her tomb. Imprisonment may have its consolations, suggests the chorus, retelling the myth of Zeus’ passion for Danaë. In Hölderlin’s (second) retelling, Krell would have us notice, a woman teaches a god to count the hours, to feel the beat of a passionate heart, to mark the hours that bear us toward death. Hölderlin is “fascinated by the striving of the absolute to enter into the world of mortals” (312). But with both gods and mortals suffering the ills to which flesh is heir, with nothing to serve as the backdrop to tragedy’s accelerating movement toward annihilation (“the god. . . is nothing other than time” [309]), the significance of catharsis would seem to be eclipsed.

¹² Krell credits Reinhardt with recognizing the revolutionary qualities of Hölderlin’s *Antigone*: “Hölderlin’s reading involves a reversal. . . of the usual (i.e., Hegelian) assignment of roles: not Creon but Antigone herself is identified as *antitheos*, that is, as an opponent of the gods, whereas Creon is seen as the one who honors the established god of law and shows piety in the face of destiny” (330), citing Karl Reinhardt, “Hölderlin und Sophokles,” in *Tradition und Geist: Gesammelte Essays zur Dichtung*, ed. Carl Becker (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 384.

Hölderlin's analysis of *Oedipus the Tyrant* and *Antigone* argues for a caesura in each play that, by slowing the action, creates an interval suggestive of catharsis, with its integration of active suffering and "disinterested" appropriation. Hölderlin's caesura makes possible "a simultaneous *engagement* in the entire sweep of the play and a *reflection upon* the play's representation *as* representation" (203). The caesura "protects the end of the play from being crushed, as it were, by the momentum of the prior scenes" (381).¹³ Art in general, and tragedy in particular, seem to occupy an analogous place in human life—by slowing the onrush of loss sufficiently that it may be presented, by viewing it from a vantage point excentric to life. While the concept of scission (*Scheidung*) refers to the implication of Schelling's Absolute in the realm of becoming, Hölderlin's notion of caesura is its complement, allowing as it does for a standpoint extrinsic to (human) existence.

Tragedy, in Hölderlin's depiction, culminates in the presentation of "god in the figure of death" (269). One aspect of this death is a suffering/passion/languor without end—with no end in time, and with no (known) telos. Vernant sketches another aspect of this death: "It is as if, throughout the spectacle, even as he appears on the stage beside the other characters in the play, Dionysus was also operating at another level, behind the scene, putting the plot together and directing it toward *dénouement*" (278).¹⁴ The dual function of the tragic mask indicates the uncanny merging of human and divine. The mask, which serves to "set the seal upon the presence of a given character, giving him a firm identity" (278),¹⁵ comes to represent, as the plot unfolds, the unknown identity of the "one" acting—an absent god. Antigone is no longer the mistress of her fate; the spectators witness the death of her imagined autonomy. The mask of her identity, transfigured, becomes the mark of Dionysus on us all.

My account here is inadequate to the detail and nuance of Krell's work; I have not touched on major themes of his book: the recurring emphasis on sexual difference, his treatment of the prevalence of the tragic in Aristotle's thinking, the conception of absolute music in Schelling and Nietzsche. And much more. I will close here, nonetheless, with questions. In his opening

¹³ Simone Weil's reference to "that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers" is called to mind. Cf. Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," in *War and The Iliad: Simone Weil and Rachel Bepaloff*, trans. Mary McCarthy (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 15.

¹⁴ *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 381–82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

chapter, Krell makes reference to the “familiar . . . conundrums” inherent in any attempt to dismiss the absolute. Such attempts tend to “repeat and thus to reinstate the gestures of absolute knowing” (46) rather than abandoning them. Krell wisely avoids staking a claim to the “finality” of his languishing absolute. The only things that become “transparently clear” to the tragic spectator, he claims, “is that matters are muddled down there, thinking muddled, talk confused, deeds frustrated, actions backfiring” (13). How is one to live in recognition of this state of affairs? Once “truth becomes a fable,” to borrow Nietzsche’s turn of phrase,¹⁶ and a new day dawns, what does the noon look like? A reviewer of an earlier work by Krell remarked that the latter’s “quiet good humor,” a tone sustained in the face of (that work’s similar emphasis on) errancy and loss, was “a sign that we are really beyond modernity, that we have gone someplace beyond, where what bothered moderns is quite all right with us.”¹⁷ I suspect that Krell might be reluctant to proclaim himself “beyond modernity,” and, though I remain unsure, my sense is that the force of tragedy, and the force and wisdom of Krell’s own magisterial work on mourning (and it is kingly, in spite of its modesty), derives from its recognition of the inevitability and the interminable character of this mourning. Schelling, Hölderlin, and Nietzsche agree, Krell tells us, that, in the face of the waning absolute, “piety is reserved for the fundamental crises of life—birth, childhood, education, eros, and death” (431). Yes. This is our allotted portion, and it is far from nothing. But “what would that beauty be if we did not mourn from the outset the imminent destruction of such radiance” (358)?

Vanessa Rumble
Boston College

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 485–86.

¹⁷ John McCumber, “Infectious Humors: David Krell’s *Contagion*,” *Research in Phenomenology* 30 (2000): 260–64.