

THE TRAGIC IDEA

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Introduction

This book traces the origins of the 'tragic', the modern idea that there exists a distinct quality that can be identified as tragic. Since the 1790s, this quality has been attributed to every domain, feature and function known to humankind, from life to cosmos, and from culture to society. The term has entered the vocabulary of existence and experience, description and evaluation, high reflection and common argument. It has been broadly present in major systems of thought, art and scholarship during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Starting with the Romantics, thinkers and artists have been engaging with the genre of tragedy as both a repertoire of past achievement and a responsibility of future art, while also exploring a dark dimension of life which they call tragic sense, experience, vision, paradox, fate or spirit. Literary Romanticism in the 1790s, philosophical existentialism in the 1920s and political radicalism in the 1960s are three movements driven by particularly forceful tragic views; but interest in the tragic is so common that it has even been attributed to writers who did not embrace it in any explicit way, such as Karl Marx, Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault. In general, it is quite fair to claim that a certain tragic feeling permeates modern thought:

The major philosophical systems since the French Revolution have been tragic systems. ... The metaphors are various: the Fichtean and Hegelian concepts of self-alienation, the Marxist scenario of economic servitude, Schopenhauer's diagnosis of human conduct as harnessed to coercive will, the Nietzschean analysis of decadence, Freud's narrative of the coming of neurosis and discontent after the original Oedipal crime, the Heideggerian ontology of a fall from the primal truth of Being. To philosophize after Rousseau and Kant, to find a normative, conceptual phrasing of the psychic, social, and historical condi-

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tion of man, is to think 'tragically'. It is to find in tragic drama ... the 'opus metaphysicum par excellence'.

Steiner 1984: 2

The currency of the idea of the tragic has made it difficult to remember how modern this usage is. Indeed, before the early German Romantics the tragic pertained to tragic drama alone: from Aristotle to Lessing, tragic figures, events or lessons were recognized only on the stage, and were meaningful within this particular dramatic genre alone. No theorist from Hellenistic Greece, Renaissance Italy, Baroque Spain, Neo-classical France or Enlightenment England would have used the term in a literal sense outside the theatre. The tragic is abstracted from drama and its circumstances for the first time at a fascinating moment in history when moral, political and artistic demands converge in the German confrontation with modernity. A complex quest for justice, freedom and beauty creates the new ancients, the Greeks – the ancients of modernity. The tragic idea represents an integral part of the modern Greek project as it is first formulated in Germany and gradually spreads around the world. Since the French Revolution made palpable the ethical tensions of modern freedom, the tragic has come to represent the difficulties of resolution. What can account for this impressive trajectory? What exactly is the import of the term that makes it deeply meaningful to so many directions of feeling and inquiry?

Following a few introductory reminders of pre-Romantic dramatic theory, this book traces the first century and a half of the tragic, from Schiller to Heidegger, while in the epilogue it glances at its fate since the 1930s and speculates on its future. It does not consider classical drama (Cartledge 1997, Rehm 2003) or the theory of tragedy, ancient (Halliwell 1998) and modern (Carlson 1993), and as a result it does not discuss the Romans (Erasmio 2004), since the abstract tragic quality has been always derived from the Greeks. Neither does it consider the presence of ancient drama on the modern stage in terms of revival, adaptation or influence (Patsalidis and Sakellaridou 1999, McDonald and Walton 2002, Wetmore Jr 2002, Hall et al. 2004). It limits itself almost exclusively to writers who named and discussed the tragic as such.

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This project owes much to Peter Szondi's landmark *An Essay on the Tragic* (2002 [originally 1961]), and it gladly acknowledges its debt by adopting that book's ingenious structure. At the same time, it diverges from it in crucial respects, such as the breadth of geographical and chronological coverage. In his book, which stands as an unacknowledged memorial to the exhausted German tradition, Szondi attempts an explanation of the notion's history:

The history of the philosophy of the tragic is itself not free from the tragic. It resembles the flight of Icarus. The closer thought comes to the general concept, the less that the substantial, the source of thought's uplift, adheres to it. Reaching the height of insight into the structure of the tragic, thought collapses, powerless. At the point where a philosophy, as a philosophy of the tragic, becomes more than the knowledge of the dialectic around which its fundamental concepts assemble, at the point where such a philosophy no longer determines its own tragic outcome, it is no longer philosophy. It therefore appears that philosophy cannot grasp the tragic – or that there is no such thing as *the* tragic.

Szondi 2002: 49

Like Szondi's book, however, this account is itself a tragic one, that is, an account based on the tragedy of dialectics. We are left wondering whether the tragic is beyond our grasp or perhaps has never existed. A more adequate explanation ought to be less in thrall to the material it analyses. In this regard, recent volumes (Burke 2003, Grass 1999, Wellbery 2004) with a similar episodic structure have provided excellent correctives. While Szondi composed an explicitly Hegelian essay which saw itself as part of the specifically German elaboration of the idea, this volume offers a genealogy of the concept that incorporates philosophical as well as cultural parameters of its evolution. As a historicist genealogy, it aims to provide sufficient intellectual context (in terms of issues, discourses and trends) for readers to follow the main debates on the tragic. However, adding a broader socio-historical framework or discussion of more writers would have violated the page limit of the Classical Inter/Faces series.

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The volume does not demand to be read sequentially. Although it does tell a story, it eschews organic development in favour of formation, namely, the ongoing reconfiguration of a supreme 'truth', the tragic essence. The genealogy focuses microscopically on representative articulations of the notion, which take the form of aphoristic quotations by successive writers. Such quotations make possible an examination of the tragic in resonant configurations, sometimes moving vertically into other works of the same thinker or laterally into works by other authors. One author does not necessarily lead to the next. Sometimes a thread is dropped and picked up later. Even though the model is not a genetic one of the transmission of ideas (one author's position directly engendering another's), the remarkable density of time (a century and a half), place (Europe) and gender (male) bring to the surface an interesting sociological dimension of the circulation of this concept: namely, that most of those interested in the tragic had strong personal connections among themselves. They were neighbours, friends, fellow students, colleagues, interlocutors, collaborators and the like. Thus the book maps a philosophical conversation that crossed geographical, linguistic, ideological, religious and other borders in order to bring major thinkers together (metaphorically but often also literally) as participants in a common inquiry into the tragic contradictions of liberty.

Initially, within the framework of the antinomies of modern liberty, the tragic stands for contradiction within human autonomy, for the conflict of freedom and necessity, liberation and legislation. Later, once dialectics grows more systematic and absorbs contradiction into its very operation, the idea is also identified with what overflows, surpasses, oversteps human horizons – with whatever exceeds reason, knowledge, understanding, history, justice, kinship and so on. The tragic represents what goes beyond but does not and cannot transcend. Thus throughout its unfolding, the tragic has played an ethical role without acquiring a fixed moral value. Within the speculative and the ontologic, it represents 'the place where the system fails to circle back on itself, where the systematic does not quite succeed in its overlay of the historic, where the circularity (as Szondi says) modifies itself and becomes a spiral' (Lacoue-Labarthe 1978: 72) without return or relief. Very often, it has operated as a supplement to aesthetics. The aesthetic reconciles opposite faculties

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(reason and sensibility, understanding and feeling). Ethical issues that cannot be reconciled or adjudicated by aesthetic arbitration find a haunting expression in the tragic idea.

As first established by Idealism, the tragic signifies constitutive self-division: it announces the necessary split of a primordial unity, the reflective instance of substance, and the emergence of individuation into history. As such, it helps the Moderns come to terms with contingency by relying less on an Enlightenment idea of progress than on the Romantic feeling of destiny. In sum, the tragic idea has opened up the following possibilities:

- (a) ethical possibilities in the face of the internal contradictions of history and freedom;
- (b) political possibilities in the face of the defeat of the revolution and the ensuing dilemmas of justice;
- (c) artistic possibilities in the face of the collapse of Neo-humanist genres and forms and the dissolution of Neo-classical audiences; and
- (d) philosophical possibilities in the face of the incompatible demands of liberalism and scepticism which tested the limits of reason.

‘Indeed, as the love affair between Athenian tragedy and German Idealism clearly exhibits, the “tragic” is one way of reconciling the aesthetic, the ethical and the political’ (Taxidou 2004: 1).

In an effort to keep such possibilities open, the approach of this book is neither essentialist (embracing the tragic as a perennial feature of the world) nor constructivist (rejecting it as an oppressive principle of Eurocentric domination). Rather, it respects the historical specificity of the notion and its ethico-political contributions. Moreover, it does not conclude that the tragic has exhausted its creative potential. Dramatic refunctionings may keep the tragic idea consequential for the coming uncertain times.

In conclusion, a remark of a disciplinary nature for the reader of the splendid series which has honoured this volume by including it in its list. The tragic is an extremely demanding subject for several reasons: for example, it is a very abstract (and not at all practical) issue and it is deeply Germanic too (that is, steeped in the legacy of Idealism). Those who discussed it during the period under examination had a limited, if not idiosyncratic, knowledge of Greek and did

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not always scrutinize the accuracy of the editions they used. The present author (who works in comparative literature, specializing in post-Byzantine Greek as well as Western Hellenism) has made every effort to quote the most reliable and accessible translation of their work and to analyse it for a general, non-specialized academic readership. Classicists may still find the volume demanding though in the end they may be inspired by the polyphonic conversation on the tragic which continues well into the third millennium. Whether they are interested in the classical tradition or not, they may deem the adventures of this uniquely modern view of moral autonomy and responsibility worthy of renewed attention.

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