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# Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art, and Thought

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 CAMDEN HOUSE  
Rochester, New York

## 12: Vestiges of the Tragic

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A COMMON REFRAIN TODAY is that tragedy is either not possible or hopelessly unable to do justice to our age. Arguments for this view are diverse. They include, among others, the transition from what the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico called the age of heroes, where one single individual could still direct the course of history, to the age of men, when the due procedure of civic institutions, and no longer the great individual, became the guarantor of order, justice, and historical change.

I, too, believe that tragedy is not as vibrant a genre as it once was, but that claim does not imply that tragedy will not come again (we have had ages without great tragedies, such as the Roman age), nor does it mean that tragedy is not valid as an aesthetic form (our modest number of tragedies may speak against our age). It also does not mean that tragedy is not present in subtle and often overlooked ways.

Vestiges of the tragic remain, I argue, first, in a small number of stage tragedies, albeit with distinctly modern accents, which move away from some of the conventions of traditional tragedy; second, in a form analogous to, but different from, tragedy, which I call the drama of suffering; third, in the parody of tragedy, which may not only mock tragedy but in some instances may indirectly and paradoxically reinforce the value of tragedy; fourth, in literature beyond drama, for example, in novels and films; and finally, outside art altogether.

### I

I take tragedy to be a form that exhibits the organic connection between greatness and suffering, that is, a specific form of greatness necessarily leads to suffering.<sup>1</sup> I note at least three ways in which tragedy can be realized. In the tragedy of self-sacrifice the hero pursues the good despite knowing that she will suffer for it. Prominent examples in modernity include Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* and Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*). In the tragedy of stubbornness the hero exhibits greatness in realizing secondary virtues, such as ambition, courage, and steadfastness, which, however, are in the service of an ultimately unjust or aberrant

goal and which drive her and often others to ruin. Examples would be Schiller's *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*) and Ibsen's *Brand*. The tragedy of collision is a conflict of two goods, such that both cannot survive, even though both are at least partially justified. Modern examples include the figures of Creon in Anouilh's *Antigone* and Shen Te/Shui Ta in Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Person of Sezuan*). Tragedy makes manifest the historical and personal price we pay for boldly confronting injustice (self-sacrifice); for realizing an imbalanced excess of selected qualities (stubbornness); or for pursuing particular forms of justice that engender conflict with other valid claims (collision).

Even if these three forms have supertemporal validity, each age manifests them in different ways. For example, the disappearance of catharsis, a traditional element of tragedy, is a widespread modern phenomenon that has to do with a modern turn against idealism of any kind. Yet the elimination of catharsis does not affect the defining tragic idea of an organic connection between greatness and suffering.

When we see the tragedy of self-sacrifice in modernity, it often occurs in historical drama, underscoring the removal of tragedy from the present age, or in works that engage exceptional and unambiguous evil, such as the Holocaust. Even if tragic self-sacrifice can be noble and inspiring, it is the simplest and most melodramatic of tragic forms. The main weakness of Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* is not that it harks back to a kind of Schillerian, and thus seemingly antiquated, form of drama, but that it belongs to the simplest of tragic subforms.

Another modern characteristic of tragic self-sacrifice is its appearance on the fringes of society. Consider, for example, Katrin in Brecht's *Mutter Courage* (*Mother Courage*), Athi in Brecht's *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* (*Master Puntila and His Servant Matti*), Celia in T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, or Lili Tofler in Peter Weiss's *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*). In these and other twentieth-century works the introduction of a finite tragedy of self-sacrifice derives from the belief, first, that heroic consistency and adherence to virtue are the exception rather than the norm, and second, that the tragic act is accomplished not by the individual at the center of society but by someone on the perimeter. Brecht's Athi is such a peripheral figure that he never even appears on stage. Similarly, though less extreme, the tragic act of Eliot's Celia is only told, not shown. Beyond these ideological issues is a formal consideration. Because of its undramatic and thus inherently economical character, the tragedy of self-sacrifice has been the most frequent form of tragic subplot.

In tragic stubbornness, the greatness of the hero is the consistency with which she adheres to a position, false and one-sided though it may be. The hero has no capacity for, or interest in, moderation or compromise. One thinks of Sophocles's Ajax, Euripides's Medea, or Goethe's Faust. In modernity, with the increasing dissolution of commonly

endorsed objective values and an ascendancy of the formal virtues of personal authenticity and subjective resoluteness, we recognize a worldview that increases the likelihood of tragic stubbornness, that is, characters obsessively pursuing their own (often aberrant) positions. What began in the Sturm und Drang a century and a half ago continues into the twentieth century with works such as Camus's *Caligula* or Arden's *Sargent Musgrave's Dance*. Such characters seek to realize their distinctive individualities while inadvertently wreaking havoc on others, as in Ibsen's *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*).

We also see pathological appearances of tragic stubbornness, an intensification of what was already nascent in Euripides. Think of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* (*Electra*), whose main figure gains her identity only in relation to another, so that the destruction of the other, which is after all her goal, nonetheless leads to the dissolution of her own self.

Hegel famously defines tragedy as the collision of two substantive positions, each of which is justified, yet each of which is wrong to the extent that it fails either to recognize the validity of the other position or to grant it its moment of truth; the conflict can be resolved only with the fall of the hero:

Das ursprünglich Tragische besteht nun darin, daß innerhalb solcher Kollision beide Seiten des Gegensatzes für sich genommen *Berechtigung* haben, während sie andererseits dennoch den wahren positiven Gehalt ihres Zweckes und Charakters nur als Negation und *Verletzung* der anderen gleichberechtigten Macht durchzubringen imstande sind und deshalb in ihrer Sittlichkeit und durch dieselbe ebensowohl in *Schuld* geraten.<sup>2</sup>

[The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a collision both opposing sides, when taken by themselves, have *justification*, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and *damaging* the equally justified power of the other. Consequently, in its moral life, and because of it, each is just as much involved in *guilt*.]<sup>3</sup>

In one form of collision, the hero sees only her own perspective and fails to recognize, as the audience does, that her position is as invalid as it is valid. In another, more modern form, which increases together with the ascendancy of self-reflection in modern art, the hero sees both sides of the conflict. Consider in Anouilh's version of *Antigone* the shift of tragic focus from the blindly willed Antigone to the reflective and tortured consciousness of Creon.

Because of the unity of two positions within a single self, this inner collision may become less dramatic than the other forms; yet it tends to

be psychologically and intellectually more complex. The focus is less and less on the objective conflicts of society and more and more on the psychology of the hero. The tragic dimension deepens, the more conscious the hero becomes, because with the level of consciousness rises the level of innermost suffering. Character, not action, triumphs in such a work, and thus we see less drama, one of the reasons why tragedy shifts to other art forms, such as the novel.

## II

The concept of tragedy as involving an organic link between greatness and suffering increasingly gave way in modernity to an emphasis on suffering that is severe but which does not result from greatness, resulting in what I call the drama of suffering, a kind of paratragedy that has its own distinctive strengths.<sup>4</sup> The drama of suffering elevates the moments of suffering and despair and at the same time severs them from their traditional origin in greatness. Although the drama of suffering can be found across the ages, for example, in Ancient Greece in Euripides's *Trojan Women*, one of the distinguishing features of modernity is the ascendancy of the drama of suffering over tragedy. Consider, for example, Lillo's *The London Merchant*, Gerstenberg's *Ugolino*, Wagner's *Die Kindesmörderin* (*The Child Murderess*), Grabbe's *Herzog Theodor von Gothland* (*Duke Theodor von Gothland*), Büchner's *Woyzeck*, Maeterlinck's *Les aveugles* (*The Blind*), Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* (*Spring Awakening*), O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Sartre's *Huis clos* (*No Exit*), Williams's *A Street Car Named Desire*, and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

What caused this shift? One factor, among others, is modernity's emphasis on this-worldliness and, parallel with the emergence of sociology and psychology as new disciplines and the development of the literary movements of realism and naturalism, an increasing sensitivity to the objective causes of suffering (independently of the great person) and to the effects of suffering and despair on the common person. War, brutality, poor working conditions, racial biases, restrictive social conventions, asymmetrical gender relations—all play roles in these settings. Gerhart Hauptmann is Germany's master of the drama of suffering, with such works as *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (*Before Dawn*), *Die Weber* (*The Weavers*), *Fuhrmann Henschel* (*Drayman Henschel*), *Rose Bernd*, and *Vor Sonnenuntergang* (*Before Sunset*).

Also affecting the shift in modernity from tragedy to the drama of suffering is the relative position of such virtues as vision, courage, and determination in comparison with the more democratic virtues of understanding, tolerance, and humility, which less frequently engender tragic conflict.<sup>5</sup> Yet, what also unfolds in modernity is an interesting phenomenon, whereby sensitivity to suffering becomes itself a formal virtue that

can trigger greater suffering. Many forms of suffering can be experienced only because of the insight and sensitivity of the sufferer; to suffer about certain things is a sign of maturity, even greatness. We see in some such cases a reversal of the tragic structure: that is, greatness does not cause suffering, but in suffering a certain greatness is exhibited.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the titular hero's suffering derives not from greatness but from his own bad judgment and the machinations of others. Nonetheless, Lear's suffering engenders layered insights as well as a new sense of self, one focused not on himself but on the fate of the less fortunate, evident in a line such as "take physic, pomp" (act 3, scene 4) and his care for poor Tom, as well as above all his deep love for Cordelia. Here the organic link between greatness and suffering is reversed: suffering leads to greatness. I call a work in which suffering leads to greatness a tragedy of suffering. In modernity, alas, only the drama of suffering rises to prominence. Still, we do find examples of the tragedy of suffering, as in J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. In German literature one may think of Ludwig Thoma's *Magdalena* or, moving beyond drama, of C. F. Meyer's *Das Leiden eines Knaben* (*The Suffering of a Young Boy*).

## III

Third, tragedy surfaces, in a disguised way, in the parody of tragedy, which in most cases turns against tragedy but in some cases mocks the comic character who falsely claims for herself tragic status. Through this double negation, a recognition of the validity of tragedy surfaces *ex negativo*.

The parody of tragedy has a long tradition, beginning with Aristophanes, but its prominence increases in modernity. Such parody may involve a critique of the values or style of a tragic author, or it can mock a particular tragic moment, for example, tragic pathos: consider the ironization of near self-sacrifice in Büchner's *Leonce und Lena* or of suicide in Nestroy's *Der Zerrissene* (*The Torn Man*, published in English as *A Man Full of Nothing*). At times comedy mocks the tragic hero's obsession with greatness and inability to compromise, which leads to a suffering that more balanced individuals might know how to avoid. In some cases the tragic structure seems present; however, the frame is not tragic, but grotesque. Dürrenmatt's *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (*The Visit* [of the Old Lady]) parodies both tragic self-sacrifice and tragic stubbornness. The protagonist in Frisch's *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (*The Firebugs*) seems in a certain sense tragic: divided between actively doing what is right and wanting to appease his guests, he causes his own destruction. The tragic model is evident, however, only insofar as it is parodied: the protagonist is stupid and weak; his conflict is hardly genuine, it is absurd;

and he succumbs to a kind of self-pity. His intentions may be good, but his subsequent action is a comic reduction of what one would expect.

Comedy not only mocks tragedy; in some cases it also contains hidden seeds of the genuinely tragic. Here I draw attention to those tragicomic works where it is unclear whether the hero is a tragic or comic figure, or perhaps both at once, as with Dürrenmatt's Romulus, who must seek the just course of action in an unjust world; Romulus carries a glimmer of tragedy (his continued living seems worse than death) even if he operates in an overwhelmingly comic or grotesque world.

Comedy can bring the tragic into appearance in yet another way, when, namely, the parody of tragedy is taken to a meta-level. Here the parody of tragedy targets not the tragic hero but the comic protagonist who claims for herself tragic stature. The comic hero is then undermined and mocked. We see a double negation. We laugh not only at the mockery of tragic pathos and pessimism but also at comic inadequacy, at the unjustified erasure of tragic substance. Such works have a double meaning, insofar as they seem to mock the tragic gesture but are complex enough that they also mock and criticize the comic hero, who is not capable of lifting herself to tragic stature. When, in Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*, Tellheim compares himself to Othello or, in Goethe's *Die Mitschuldigen* (*The Accomplices*), Söller likens himself to Richard III, the comic protagonist unjustly deems his situation tragic; the mockery falls back on the comic hero.

This form of the parody of tragedy increases in modernity to the extent that the intellectual interest in the paradoxical increases. Schnitzler's Anatol cannot rise to tragic stature. Lamenting that happiness is illusory, that nothing is secure, that the forces of the world make chaos of our lives, the comic hero attempts to justify, from a broader perspective, his self-indulgent despair, his inconsistency, his weakness. The comic protagonist is not great, and her suffering is not deep. To suffer deeply and not to speak of it is noble; the comic hero, in contrast, suffers mildly and speaks obsessively of her suffering. Schnitzler's Anatol longs for permanence, for exclusive and symmetrical relations, but is unwilling to act in such a way as to attain these goals. Brecht's Puntila, a drunk who pities himself, likewise lacks the strength and consistency to develop genuine intersubjective relations. Anatol and Puntila deem their situations tragic, but the audience can hardly take seriously the hero who pities himself and is obsessed with his own suffering. In such works the tragic comes to the fore via a double negation. To negate the comic inability to rise to tragic stature hints at the legitimacy of the tragic.

#### IV

Classical tragedy has also to some degree migrated out of drama. Of course, tragedy has long been present in other genres, but when drama

self-consciously shied away from tragedy, other literary forms did not suffer the same unease. Tragic self-sacrifice is evident, for example, in Gotthelf's *Die schwarze Spinne* (*The Black Spider*). Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* is, despite its complexities, still in many ways a classic tragedy of stubbornness. One could see Fontane's *Effi Briest* as a tragedy of collision, albeit, like Sophocles's *Antigone*, with unequal poles. As Hegel expects of a great tragedy,<sup>6</sup> here in this tragic novel we also see a subtle moment of reconciliation, insofar as not only Effi but also Insetten are destroyed in their one-sidedness, and both recognize in the end the validity of the other's position. Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter* (*The Rider on the White Horse*) contains elements of all three tragic structures. On the part of the hero we see tragic stubbornness, yet also a certain legitimacy, which hints at collision; and the inner story ends in an act of mythic self-sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> Beyond prose, we also find tragic structures in radio plays. Consider as an example Joachim Maass's *Das Eis von Cape Sabine* (*The Ice of Cape Sabine*), which exhibits a connection between tragedy and historical contingency, paradoxically illustrating the idea that there will always be conflicts of two goods over which we have no control. Because human knowledge is finite, the conditions for a potential tragedy can never be erased from our universe.

In film tragic structures may be yet more widespread. As a young art form, film is even less inhibited than prose in drawing on more traditional structures. As examples, consider for self-sacrifice Rothmund's *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* (*Sophie Scholl: The Last Days*); for tragic stubbornness Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*), and for the tragedy of collision, with its conflict of two worlds, von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*). Some films contain potential tragic structures, such as *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*), even as they transcend them.

Germany is not alone in exploring tragedy in film. The cinematic freedom from the burdens of tradition and from corresponding taboos on tragic structure is evident also in the United States. Consider such works as Hitchcock's *I Confess*, Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Joffé's *The Mission*, or Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, each of which combines in fascinating and distinctive ways aspects of tragic self-sacrifice, stubbornness, and collision.<sup>8</sup>

#### V

Finally, the idea of greatness inevitably leading to suffering is not only not limited to drama: it is hardly restricted to art. It is simply one way of manifesting a metaphysical principle. Thinkers from Hegel to Scheler and beyond have made the valid claim that tragedy is a visible element also

in life. Not surprisingly, then, one can find manifestations of tragedy in modern Germany itself.

Viewing life from the lens of tragedy or any genre is a mode of seeing and understanding, of inquiry and comprehending. Bakhtin and Medvedev write that “every genre has its methods and means of seeing and conceptualizing reality, which are accessible to it alone,” and that “the artist must learn to see reality with the eyes of the genre.”<sup>9</sup> One could add that aided by the lens of genre, the recipient can also see reality anew.

An aesthetic consequence of Kant’s ethics is the idea that everyone has the obligation to follow the moral law, even if it means sacrificing happiness; this renders everyone capable of tragedy.<sup>10</sup> Tragedy requires, then, an elevation of virtue, not an elevation of class. For tragic self-sacrifice one may think of those who risked life, property, or reputation across the periods of modern German history in their resistance to oppression and injustice. That such acts may in fact still be unrecognized only adds to the tragedy.

We see an abuse of self-sacrifice in the Nazi ideology that the pinnacle of existence is self-sacrifice for the fatherland. To die for an idea can be ennobling, and tragic, but not if it is a truly abhorrent idea.

Stubbornness is a skewed longing for greatness. Allegiance to a false course is something with which we are familiar in modern Germany—in objections to the Weimar Republic, the backing of law and order in the 1930s, the enforced vision of the GDR, and violent resistance movements, such as the Baader-Meinhoff gang, in the Federal Republic. Tragic stubbornness involves commitment to an ideal, whether triggered by a sense of having been wronged or motivated by a compelling vision. In addition, a moment of consistency is essential. Tragic stubbornness thus captures some, but hardly all, misdirection of secondary virtues, such as ambition or courage or loyalty, in modern Germany.

Collision might be recognized in the brief German speculation on a third way between capitalism and socialism, a conflict of values that could not easily be harmonized. It is present again, as I write this essay, in conflicts over what is needed and what is appropriate to save the Euro.

I recognize the argument that today no one person can carry history, but the flip side of this puzzle is that so many complexities arise in modern society that conflicts of goods are constantly present. Any double bind that requires sacrificing one good for a higher good carries the potential of tragedy. And so what has seemed to erase tragic stature may also have opened up new avenues for tragic collision.

Such conflicts are of course not restricted to Germany. Greatness leading to suffering is evident in such world-historical figures as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mikhail Gorbachev. When many are skeptical about the value of literature for life, the lens of tragedy offers

one way of understanding both, with literature reinforcing our sense of how the world should be and how it is, and life sharpening our sense of what tragedy is and can be today.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I develop this definition of tragedy as well as the concepts of tragic self-sacrifice, tragic stubbornness, and tragic collision in *Tragedy and Comedy: A Systematic Study and a Critique of Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), which contains abundant allusions to the secondary literature on tragedy.

<sup>2</sup> G. F. W. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhramp, 1978), 15:523.

<sup>3</sup> The translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

<sup>4</sup> Roche, *Tragedy and Comedy*, 103–8.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Hegel, *Werke*, 15:524–26 and 15:547.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Roche, *Die Moral der Kunst: Über Literatur und Ethik* (Munich: Beck, 2002), 140–52.

<sup>8</sup> For explicit articulation of tragic self-sacrifice, stubbornness, and collision in *The Mission* and *I Confess*, see Roche, *Tragedy and Comedy*, 126–34 and 264–70, respectively. For analyses of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Gran Torino* that draw implicitly on these three tragic forms, see Mark Roche and Vittorio Hösle: “Vico’s Age of Heroes and the Age of Men in John Ford’s Film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*,” in *Hollywood and the American Historical Film* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 120–37; and “Religious and Cultural Reversals in Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino*,” *Religion and the Arts* 15 (2011): 648–79.

<sup>9</sup> M. M. Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 133–34.

<sup>10</sup> Vittorio Hösle, *Kleine Geschichte der deutschen Philosophie* (Munich: Beck, 2013), 76.