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### The Tragicomic Absence of Tragedy

The distinguishing features of an epoch can often be recognized by analyzing not only what is contained within but also what is absent. Virtually absent in contemporary European and American literature is tragedy. My paper discusses and evaluates four reasons for this absence, two having to do with broader social and intellectual-historical developments and two more directly connected to aesthetic considerations. I then consider this absence within the broader rubric of tragedy and comedy.

First, tragedy requires an individual subject who experiences responsibility and guilt, but the modern era has increasingly questioned the individual as an agent of history (owing to the elevation of broader economic, social, and political forces) and has tended to divorce guilt from the realm of metaphysics and viewed it increasingly in psychological terms. In the wake of this portrayal of the individual as a victim, we see instead of tragedy an elevation of comedy and what we might call the drama of suffering, a serious portrayal of suffering divorced from greatness.

Second, tragedy requires normative moral positions. The contemporary world increasingly questions whether we can ground a hierarchy of moral values. Without such values tragedy becomes difficult, if not impossible. Whereas some recent attempts at tragedy do embrace moral values, they often recognize only one value, not a more complex hierarchy of values. This weakens the moral and aesthetic intensity of the tragic conflict.

Third, if the essence of tragedy is greatness that inevitably leads to suffering, then tragedy functions in tandem with an understanding of art as organic, a view that has been increasingly criticized as either fascist or musty or both. This critique of the organic is misdirected for a number of reasons.

Fourth, the avant-garde has increasingly seen itself as being in opposition to the age and has thus sought to create art that is no longer to be identified with tradition or with the norms of society, which has resulted in fewer tragedies. However, an interesting paradox emerges, such that we can recognize in central aspects of contemporary literature a hidden and unintentional mimesis. Surprisingly, if one wanted to counter the tendencies of the age, tragedy would be a fitting genre.

The absence of tragedy could be viewed as itself tragic, and it certainly shares an element of tragedy, namely, loss. However, the dissolution of tragedy

is more complex and not without elements of comedy. Let me now turn to each of these issues in greater detail.

## I.

I define tragedy as an action in which the hero's greatness leads inexorably to suffering.<sup>1</sup> Tragedy contrasts what is substantial and great with the negative consequences of this greatness. By substantial I mean that which is aligned with virtues, ambition, charity, courage, or justice, for example. As Kurt von Fritz has argued (3-14), the concept of *hamartia* is best understood not as a tragic flaw but rather as action according to an immanent necessity that nonetheless leads to catastrophe. The tragic hero is not essentially weak, but strong. He is not simply the victim of fate but is responsible for his actions, and to the extent that in doing the good, he also violates a competing good, he is guilty. Hegel 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. Here, too, greatness inevitably leads to suffering. Max Scheler captures this dialectic in his discussion of the tragic knot: whatever leads to greatness and allows the hero to realize a positive value also engenders suffering and destroys the positive value. Icarus is the mythological symbol for this: the very glue that holds his wings together melts in the same degree to which he approaches the sun. Reinhold Niebuhr adds: "The word tragic is commonly used very loosely. It usually designates what is not tragic at all but pitiful. In true tragedy the hero [...] suffers because he is strong and not because he is weak. He involves himself in guilt not by his vice but by his virtue" (156). This organic concept of tragedy allows for a wide variety of ways in which the link between greatness and suffering may be developed, and it can be said to capture the essence of tragedy from the Greeks to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

One of the great insights of the past two centuries has been the extent to which the individual is defined by systemic factors – economic, social, and political forces. As a result of this stress on the external, the concept of individual responsibility has been weakened. Already Hegel recognized that in the modern

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of tragedy, including references to the history of scholarship on tragedy, see my recent book, *Tragedy and Comedy*. For references to other views on the modern dissolution of tragedy, see esp. 403. The topic received much attention from the 1950s to the 1980s but has increasingly been ignored, perhaps because the dissolution of tragedy is now taken much more matter-of-factly and as final. My account is not meant to be exhaustive, but highlights four major obstacles to the resurgence of tragedy. The first two points raised – the dissolution of individual responsibility and of a complex hierarchy of moral values – are frequently cited in appeals to extrinsic factors influencing art, though perhaps not with the particular slant I give them here. The final two points – the abandonment of the organic and the hidden mimetic nature of contemporary art – are less frequently cited and certainly not in the way I develop my argument here.

era the individual is not in as strong a position to change the course of events as in earlier, more heroic eras before the advent of rationalization and bureaucracy. According to Hegel, the strength of any one individual is limited by ties to the existing order. After discussing justice, morality, and law, he states: "Der Einzelne ist jetzt nicht mehr der Träger und die ausschließende Wirklichkeit dieser Mächte wie im Heroentum" (13:255). In another passage he suggests: "Der gleichen allgemeine Weltzwecke, wie sie Karl Moor und Wallenstein verfolgen, lassen sich überhaupt nicht durch ein Individuum in *der Art* durchführen, daß die anderen zu gehorsamen Instrumenten werden, sondern sie setzen sich durch sich selber teils mit dem Willen vieler, teils gegen und ohne ihr Bewußtsein durch" (15:558; cf. 7:179-80 and 12:45-46). In *Theaterprobleme*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt extends Hegel's reflections, persuasively arguing that the individual in today's complex, bureaucratic, and decentralized society has even less chance to assert power and assume responsibility. According to Dürrenmatt, in such a world only comedy is possible. The development Hegel and Dürrenmatt describe makes responsibility more complex, power more difficult to wield; it does not, however, eliminate the two.

The diminution of responsibility and with it the loss of tragedy relate not only to objective developments but to changes in world-view. The concept of identification with a higher cause, which is integral to tragedy, has met resistance by way of the contemporary overvaluation of particularity; few today are willing to identify with heroes who sacrifice themselves for the universal. This is related to what Richard Sennett has called "the fall of public man": the public sphere, the realm of social action, has lost prestige and been partially replaced by persons reflecting on their private psyches and unable to transcend a "tyranny of intimacy," that is, a life ruled by singularities, particularities, and a preoccupation with one's own private identity. Even those ostensibly concerned with the public are often viewed or view themselves not by way of their impersonal relation to substance but by way of their emotions, style, and personal intentions. Such characters often border on the comic.

In this century, tragedy has increasingly given way not only to comedy but to what I call the drama of suffering. This genre presupposes that suffering is primarily the result of external forces and that guilt is related to psychological imbalance. In the drama of suffering we may see a tragic flaw but rarely tragic greatness, and so I do not consider such works tragedies. The hero is the victim of bad luck or arbitrary whims. The turn of events may be ironic, but it does not derive from greatness. Camus' *Le Malentendu*, in the author's own view "an attempt to create a modern tragedy" (vii), is a good example. After twenty years a son returns home to help his mother and sister, does not reveal his identity, and is murdered for his money. The hero dies despite his goodness, but not as a result of his goodness. At play are the arbitrariness and absurdity of fate, forces that have been evoked in literature from ancient times onward but which seem to have gained increasing attention in modernity, especially when reconfigured as the weight of institutional forces on the individual.

Ludwig Marcuse elevates the modern drama of suffering, which he calls "die tragische Tragödie," insofar as suffering is given no meaning, no context, no reason: "Die absolute Tragik der tragischen Tragödie ist das Leid ohne Sinn" (17-18). Marcuse continues his definition: "die moderne Tragödie ist nur noch ein Schrei der Kreatur; nicht Überwindung, nicht Abschwächung des Leids: nur Verdichtung und Formulierung, als letzte, einzig noch mögliche Reaktion" (20). Tragedy becomes simple suffering – removed from greatness, from causality, from its position within any overarching narrative. Recognizing neither an overarching order nor any normative values that might give meaning to suffering, many contemporary theories of tragedy, like Marcuse's, along with an abundance of contemporary "tragedies," elevate suffering and the broader forces that elicit suffering. Suffering becomes the whole of tragedy.

Though the simple depiction of the suffering individual does not necessarily imply great art and though it lacks the truly tragic dimensions of greatness and conflict, it can serve other purposes. Tragedy may include interesting character studies, including the individual's reaction to pain, and social criticism, in particular, analyses of the social forces that trigger suffering; nonetheless, the drama of suffering may be even better situated to develop these spheres. The brilliance of Eugene O'Neill, to take one example, lies in his ability to explore the psychology of trust and suffering and to awaken the emotions of his audience. Having freed himself from the organic link between greatness and suffering, he shifts his focus elsewhere. So, too, the naturalist drama of Europe, which attends far more than traditional tragedy to the social and psychological causes of suffering. Not every depiction of a sick and troubled soul, not every representation of a political and social victim is tragic; suffering that derives from a pathological incapacity or an arbitrary act of oppression hardly derives from greatness. Yet, it may draw our attention to a range of human activity otherwise overlooked.

Several levels of suffering exist. On the lowest level is pathetic suffering: the protagonist suffers needlessly and narcissistically, and he and others take this suffering seriously. Above this and more or less on an equal level with one another are serious suffering without greatness, as in the drama of suffering, and insignificant suffering presented with wit, which corresponds to the transformation of mere suffering into comedy. The greatness of Chekhov lies partly in his ability to hover between these two moments – showing, as for example in *The Cherry Orchard*, sympathy for weak and suffering characters as well as misdirected persons, but also viewing them with an eye to their inconsistencies and so also with irony and humor. Higher still is unearned suffering that is carried with nobility and greatness, and highest of all is tragic or organic suffering, that is, suffering caused by greatness, but this structure is virtually absent in contemporary literature.

## II.

Another anti-tragic dimension of modernity is the tendency to shift values in new circumstances, to abandon, rather than reaffirm, a position in a time of crisis. This derives partly from the shattering of a moral tradition, partly from a sense of liberation. The tendency is also comprehensible in the light of so many positions in the past having been falsely presented as absolute, when in truth they were merely historical and contingent. This understandable skepticism has, however, also led to positions that recognize no moral standards whatsoever. The view that there is no objective validity to matters of right and wrong is inimical not only to moral responsibility but to tragedy as well. Tragedy as a collision of two goods is impossible in a society that sees morality as a matter of mere convention. Though a drama may portray the conflict of two values, tragedy is not possible if these values are viewed, as they tend to be today, as contingent and arbitrary. The concept of one historical norm pushing aside another allows for tragedy only if the moments of validity in the two paradigms are recognized, as in John Ford's beautiful film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

Modernity is wedded to the idea that one cannot ground a hierarchy of moral values. Those who affirm a normative position often do so without recourse to alternatives or critique and without any sense of the shades of value in a complex world of competing claims. In drama goods are often embraced singularly and in melodramatic opposition to evil. The hero is good, and the alternative is simply evil. The result is a weakening of the tragic ideal of a conflict of two values and the elevation of a form of tragedy I call the tragedy of self-sacrifice. The tragedy of self-sacrifice realizes the unambiguous conflict between good and evil, with the good hero suffering because of his goodness but without a sense of competing goods. In works such as T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* or Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, the hero is noble and good, and evil lies clearly on the other side. Though self-sacrifice is morally ennobling, it is dramatically weak – owing to the simplicity and nonambiguity of the conflict. Tragic self-sacrifice is a common form of subplot; this subordination derives primarily from its undramatic and thus inherently economical character. In the twentieth century, this type of subplot is especially frequent. Consider, for example, Katrin in Brecht's *Mutter Courage*, Athi in Brecht's *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti*, Celia in T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, or Lili Tofler in Peter Weiss's *Die Ermittlung*. 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. Indeed, in two of these works the tragic hero never even appears on stage.

The strength of self-sacrifice is its moral legitimacy, its primary weakness the simplicity of conflict. The unambiguous contrast between good and evil often weakens the potential richness of the work, reducing complex art and intricate questions to an almost black and white formula. Not surprisingly,

among the tragedies of the greatest dramatist of all time, Shakespeare, we find not a single tragedy of self-sacrifice; his sense of drama was too intense, his sense of morality too complex. The audience has unadulterated compassion for the hero of self-sacrifice (there is no awareness of the complexity of action or of moral choice) and clear disdain for the enemy (there is no awareness of the good that sometimes lies hidden behind the facade of evil). Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter*, considered by many the one tragedy in postwar German literature, is weakened by the clearly evil nature of the other, in this case the pope. It is an admirable and a good work, but not a great one. Britain's most recent major contribution to tragedy, Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, a play about Sir Thomas More, is likewise a noble but undramatic tragedy of self-sacrifice.

Several other potential deficiencies can be recognized in the genre. Tragic self-sacrifice can become sentimental and melodramatic because of the weakened conflict and occasional introduction of a moment of self-pity. Self-sacrifice can become antidramatic in the additional sense that the hero follows his course with an almost automatic progression. The last minute frailty and humanness of such tragic heroes as John Proctor and Riccardo Fontana try to guard against this uncomplicated structure, but the tendency of the subgenre is clearly undramatic. Moreover, the tragedy of self-sacrifice can easily be misread to be presenting what Vittorio Hösle has criticized as an inverse power positivism: if you suffer, you are just (63). The lesson of the tragedy of self-sacrifice differs: if you recognize what is just, then you must follow through, even if it means that you will suffer for your actions. In the tragedy of self-sacrifice we recognize the morally good but not a more complex and nuanced sense of competing goods. The philosophical complexity and aesthetic intensity of tragedy are thereby diminished.

### III.

Tragedy has traditionally been associated – and justly so, I would argue – with a concept of art as organic. Not only is there in tragedy a causal relation between greatness and suffering, but also the various parts of the tragic artwork stand in an organic relation to one another. The concept of the organic has at least three interrelated dimensions. First, all the parts of an artwork have a certain autonomy, which renders them interesting to us in and of themselves. When we see a dramatic performance, the individual scenes have intrinsic value and contain diverse features. Second, each part of the work is connected to the others; they fit or belong together such that there is no part that is not expressive of the whole. The word microcosm is fully appropriate here. Everything necessary is present; everything superfluous is absent. Third, and this brings together the truth of the first two moments, the artwork is not just a set of relations, it is more than the sum of its parts; every part belongs to the whole and contributes to the whole such that, despite the interest they garner as parts, their full meaning evolves only from their position within the totality of the artwork and slowly

becomes recognizable in this way. The partial dimensions of the artwork are interesting in and of themselves; they appear completely independent and contingent, but in the process of exploration and interpretation, they assume an element of connectedness and necessity, such that the parts gain a richer identity in the whole. What may appear to be simple chance and externality reveals itself for the interpreter to be interconnected. Any alteration of a part would imply an alteration of the whole, and the many find their truth in the one (cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 7).

The organic relationship of part and whole is reminiscent of living biological structures; in this sense the interdependence of the organic suggests vitality and dynamism. The elevation of the organic also relates to the sequential development of a work. Aristotle privileges organic over episodic plots (*Poetics*, ch. 9). His argument is simple, but compelling: that which is probable or necessary has a more privileged status than that which is arbitrary, which is not to say that art must be predictable. On the contrary, Aristotle elevates those plots that, even as they follow the law of cause and effect, are still able to surprise us. He privileges an action that is whole and complete and resembles a living organism in all its unity (*Poetics*, ch. 23). This elevation of the organic begins already with Plato and extends beyond Aristotle to the classical literary criticism of Horace and Pseudo-Longinus and into the period of German idealism. It fades, however, or is directly countered, in the modern and contemporary eras, which tend to elevate the arbitrary and contingent, two categories that are more frequently associated with comedy than tragedy.

In tragedy the organic expresses itself above all in the structure whereby greatness leads inexorably to suffering; the two are not accidentally related. In modernity, as I have suggested, this connection is often severed, such that suffering has no intrinsic connection to greatness; it is arbitrary. This weakens the organic and thus the aesthetic dimension. In many cases we recognize a movement of the aesthetic away from the organic, as in open drama, which has its place within the variety of aesthetic expressions but which seems to lack a requisite element of great art. However, the hermeneutic process sometimes leads to recognition of common themes and motifs in the individual scenes; the organic remains, although it is initially hidden and ultimately looser. One of the tasks of a critic is to show how the various parts of an artwork relate to one another, if often in very complex ways.

The modern critique of the classical dictum that all elements should relate to one another in such a way as to be like a living being (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 264C) or to form a single organism (Pseudo-Longinus, *On the Sublime*, ch. 10) intensified in the postwar period, primarily in the wake of the national socialist elevation of organic art. This critique has not been without its impact on tragedy and can be countered with a variety of arguments. First, the abuse of a theory cannot be taken as an argument against the theory itself, unless there is a necessary connection between the two, which is lacking in this case: not all organic art stems from cultures that revoke human rights, as is evident from the importance of organic art both for the literature of German classicism, with its elevation of

humanity and cosmopolitanism, and in the revival of classical architecture in the early American republic; and not all fascist regimes privilege classical art, as is clear from the connections between the avant-garde and fascism in Italy. Second, advocates of organic art have often failed to recognize that many seemingly dissonant and negative works are in fact organic, but organic in a complex way and on a metalevel, insofar as dissonance serves a higher meaning or insofar as an artwork may be the negation of a negation; in short, such critics often fail to grasp the complex beauty of much of modern and contemporary art. This failure of perception does not mean that the works of modern art rejected by the National Socialists are not in a complex way organic. Third, the particular manifestation of organicism in national socialist art tends to involve an elevation of the whole at the expense of the integrity of the particular: the creation of types, rather than individuals, mirrors the political effort to submerge, rather than sublimate, the individual within the whole; in this sense national socialist art lacks the balance of a desirable organicism. This lack of balance between part and whole is sometimes reinforced by a lack of measure; one thinks of the elevation of the monumental. Fourth, there are at least two uses of organic, which must be distinguished: the first concerns itself with artwork aesthetics; the second belongs in the realm of production aesthetics and has to do with the idea that art is generated through an organic process of growth, of ripening. This second form of the organic is not a necessary corollary to the first (a work can integrate part and whole and have been developed by any number of means), and it is truly unimportant from the perspective of artwork aesthetics. Yet precisely this concept of the organic, as defined by the sphere of production, developed into the vague idea of a privileged destiny for the German nation. The organic in the sphere of production is not equivalent to the organic in the artwork, nor is it necessary to recognize the organic in production. The separation between production and artwork aesthetics is brought home by the fact that the National Socialists virtually ignored the organic in the autonomous artwork and stressed instead the organic in the historical development of the German nation. And even if one should want to retain the idea that the past history of an entity has an organic unity or developmental logic, one needn't equate this with nature or with nationalism. Fifth, art includes among its possibilities not only dissonant art, ruled by the negation of negativity, but also the creation of models with which one can identify and which contribute to the formation and cultivation of a collective identity; there may be a valid human urge toward a more affirmative art of this kind, and it would be both morally irresponsible and strategically unwise to leave the creation and appreciation of such art solely in the hands of those whose world-view violates universal principles of justice.

The more original the work, the more difficult it is to recognize the constituent moments and their meaningful interconnections. We must be very broad in our capacity to grasp new interconnections, but we needn't endorse everything that calls itself art. Indeed, the greatness of the organic model is that it mediates between what one might call the arbitrarily mechanical and the arbitrarily autonomous. The increasing abandonment of the organic has been reinforced

by the mistaken sense that the organic involves a constraining and mechanical concept of art. The mechanical, which is to be distinguished from the organic, does prescribe certain formulas for an artwork, which may involve precepts concerning diction, plot, length, types of characters, or numbers of acts. The artist is expected to fulfill these criteria and is essentially beholden to the notion that the parts of the work are primary to the whole. Such a model allows little room for the creativity of the individual artist and the modulation of convention. A second model moves to the extreme opposite end, elevating the autonomy of each work and bracketing its relation to any and all aesthetic principles. The autonomous model rejects even the idea of the interconnection of parts; art is free of constitutive elements and of the integration of parts into a meaningful whole. Instead, whatever we call art is art. Not only does this theory eliminate any possibility of evaluation, in an age of overproduction it steals our attention from truly great works and makes us slaves to whatever is produced or thrust before us. Its transformation of a given model into infinite, arbitrary possibilities is characteristic of a negative or an antithetical stance. Justly recognizing that some poetic constraints are arbitrary, the autonomous model mistakenly fails to recognize anything that transcends the arbitrary. The organic, in contrast, suggests that the constituent elements of a great artwork – from language, to theme, to structure – are variable, but that what remains common is the transformation of the elements into a meaningful whole. In this sense it allows for the freedom of creativity but guards against the arbitrariness of absolute autonomy. All great art has an organic dimension, however complex, and tragedy is especially tied to the organic by way of the connection between greatness and suffering. In this sense it contrasts with comedy, which tends to have a looser structure and often thematizes and elevates the accidental and coincidental.

#### IV.

A fourth reason for the disappearance of tragedy is the idea that tragedy is too idealizing a form of art. The idea is mistaken. Tragedy is not idealizing in the sense of consistently portraying only what should be. Its characters, though admirable, are not perfect and suffer for their actions. Further, tragedy wrestles with difficult, often troubling, circumstances and events. Also tragedy is not necessarily connected to socially elevated heroes, as was once stipulated by poetics. Many modern and contemporary works justly extend the range of our sympathy to characters earlier not treated in tragedy. It is essential to distinguish the arbitrary convention of the superiority of rank from the legitimate elevation of moral worth and formal strength and the just recognition that even a humble person can be the carrier of extraordinary virtues. Likewise, realistic drama in the formal sense, drama without verse, is entirely compatible with tragedy.

Moreover, there is a paradox at the core of the argument that art should not be idealizing. It reduces art to what is, thus evoking the question, in what way is art then avant-garde? Art can relate to reality in at least three ways. First, art

might be beholden to external reality, in which case we recognize a stress on mimesis as correctness or fidelity to reality, on art as the mirror of nature and society. This definition of art initially makes one wonder, what value or justification art could possibly have. However, if we recast this definition as art's exposing those parts of reality that are otherwise veiled to us, we can readily embrace it. Second, art might negate reality by measuring it as deficient against a higher moral standard; in this relationship, satire in the broadest sense is operative. Art may make conscious for its audience the errors of an age. Third, art may be attentive to a higher reality. In this sense it is neither a lens onto the hidden aspects of reality, nor directly critical of reality; it sketches an ideal to counter reality.

The dissolution of tragedy is related to a paradoxical and unacknowledged elevation of the first form of art, the mimetic model. If the contemporary age is chaotic and without meaning, the elevation of the arbitrary is a derivative mirror of the age, not an act of opposition. In this way seemingly avant-garde art may merely reproduce a less than desirable reality. In a more complex sense as well the extreme elevation of autonomy, including the severing of a connection between beauty and truth, contains a mimetic dimension. Autonomous art, which may not reveal a higher truth of any kind, mimics the broader historical development, whereby a holistic universe is split into autonomous subsystems of value, "war is war," "business is business," "l'art pour l'art." The autonomous artist does not resist his age as much as participate in the general subsplintering of values. Much of contemporary art sees itself as being independent of reality, but this is illusory. Our age is characterized by the proliferation of multiple subsystems of culture, of which art is one, and the artist's would-be distance from society only fulfills the expectation that he operate within his own autonomous sphere. The idea that art is not beholden to any normative definition but is instead whatever the artist and his recipients decide to call art also reinforces the idea that art is ironically mimetic of the age, which can hardly be characterized by its emphasis on normative values. Indeed, we recognize in this aesthetic autonomy a mirror of not only the non-normative thinking of the age, but also the non-organic structure of contemporary ethical life: the autonomous spheres do not relate to any overarching concept of morality.

Contemporary art tends to be more critical than idealizing. This tendency may be said to serve an important societal function in an age where much invites critical reflection, but this focus only on critique, this act of remaining within the sphere of a negation of negativity, as it becomes the dominant parameter of art, prevents us from achieving and recognizing the full range of artistic possibilities that contemporaries of other generations have enjoyed more abundantly than we. If our age is dissonant, and dominant art mirrors this dissonance, then a truly non-mimetic, avant-garde art must also portray what is counter to dissonance, a higher reality. We might reformulate a phrase of Hegel's and propose that art is its age captured in sensuous presentation. This would explain the very strong desire toward negativity and the ugly in contemporary art. But just as Hegel's definition of philosophy as its age captured in thought has been justly criticized

as quietistic, so, too, is this definition of art inadequate. One must also show alternatives, and the critic is right to expect of contemporary art both immersion in what is and reflection on what should be. In an age that lacks multiple manifestations of synthesis, this other task is not easy, but it remains desirable. We already know a great deal about evil in its various guises, but we know far less about the ideal good. By sublating the ugly or the dissonant, art can both counter reality and approximate a higher form of beauty. If what humanity needs today is a greater sense of transcendence and insight into human dignity, it does not help when such a large number of contemporary works portray human banality and baseness, especially when they are viewed not in their inadequacy, but cynically as the only alternatives available to humanity. Tragedy is part of what is excluded in this emphasis on the ugly, the dissonant, the particular. Despite its immersion in suffering, tragedy transcends this sphere and points us toward a higher realm.

## V.

One might think that the inability to write tragedies in the present is itself the greatest tragedy and marks profound insight into the genuine suffering of contemporaries and the false grandeur of earlier generations. Is the loss of tragedy itself tragic? The answer must be yes, if one means by tragedy simply loss and abandonment of what is great. If, however, this loss is contingent, certainly understandable, but in no way necessary, then it falls under the category of a large-scale tragicomedy. Loss it is, but it is not without its moments of comedy. Not surprisingly, contemporary manifestations of "tragedy" in the form of the drama of suffering give abundant evidence of comic elements, among them the idea that the individual does not direct events, but is moved around by forces beyond his or her control (in comedy this structure tends to result in harmony, not disaster); the idea that the individual is not strong enough to realize the ends he posits for himself (which may reflect the weakness of the individual as much as the dominance of fate); and above all a preoccupation with one's own private subjectivity, weakness, and suffering. Comic figures tend to extol their suffering not only because they seek to claim for themselves tragic grandeur but also because suffering is an eminently particular sensation, and the comic protagonist is preoccupied with the particular at the expense of the universal. When reflection on the contemporary absence of tragedy envisages itself as tragic, it borders on the comic. The disappearance of tragedy may say more about our own particular limitations than it does about the objective limits of tragedy. I do not want to suggest that we are not enriched by great dramas of suffering or great comic works, but I do want to suggest that we are impoverished when our artists cannot rise to the level of tragedy and that this lack is no more tragic than it is comic.

In a world that has abandoned the concept of the absolute, the more appropriate genre may be comedy, which, it might be argued, has the same telos as

tragedy but reaches it via the backdoor, through its ironization of untenable positions. Comedy evokes via negation the values sketched in tragedy, as the unspoken standards against which we measure the comic hero's follies. Hegel comments insightfully that in comedy a reduced reality is portrayed in such a way that it destroys itself, so that in this self-destruction "das Wahre sich als feste, bleibende Macht aus diesem Widerscheine zeigen könne und der Seite der Torheit und Unvernunft nicht die Kraft eines direkten Gegensatzes gegen das in sich Wahrhaftige gelassen werde" (14:120). Seemingly lost values are recognized after we pass through their negation. Comedy makes explicit for the audience, it objectifies, the errors of the age and so helps society's efforts to transcend them. The comic negation of the various forms of negativity – indulgence, nonmeaning, frivolity, brutality, monotony – leads to truth. Knowledge of error as error frees us from the compulsion to continue to err. Our recognition of the tragicomic loss of tragedy, therefore, may be a first gesture toward its overcoming. Until such a time, the genre of tragedy will remain merely historical and distant, performances of great tragedies will focus on the mere fact of suffering, contemporary artists will have only a reduced sphere of subject matter and forms, and audiences will be kept from experiencing the aesthetic emotions unique to great tragedy.

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