

## **Tragedy**

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### **Keywords**

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### **Summary**

From Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics* onwards, tragedy has loomed large in the genealogy of literary theory. But this prominence is in many regards paradoxical. The original object of that theory, the Attic tragedies performed at the Dionysian festivals in 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens are, notwithstanding their ubiquitous representation on the modern stage, only a small fraction of the tragedies produced in Athens and themselves torn from their context of performance. The *Poetics* itself and the plays that served as its objects of analysis would long vanish from the purview of European culture. Yet when they returned in the Renaissance as cultural monuments to be appropriated and repeated, it was in a context largely incommensurable with their existence in Ancient Greece. While the early moderns created their own poetics (and politics) of tragedy, and enlisted their image of the Ancients in the invention of exquisitely modern literary and artistic forms (not least, opera), it was in the crucible of German Idealism and Romanticism, arguably the matrix of modern literary theory, that certain Ancient Greek tragedies were transmuted into models of 'the tragic', an idea that played a formative part in the emergence of philosophical modernity, accompanying a battle of the giants between dialectical (Hegelian) and anti-dialectical (Nietzschean) currents that continues to shape our theoretical present. The gap between a philosophy of the tragic and the poetics and history of tragedy as a dramatic genre is the site of much rich and provocative debate, in which the definition of literary theory itself is frequently at stake. Tragedy is in this sense usefully defined as a genre in conflict. It is also a genre *of* conflict, in the sense that ethical conflicts, historical transitions and political revolutions have all come to define its literary forms, something that is particularly evident in the place of both tragedy and the tragic in the drama of decolonisation.

### **Between ethics and poetics**

The entrance of tragedy into the purview of Ancient Greek philosophy took two very distinct modalities, which would leave an important mark on its afterlives as an object of literary theory. Following Jacques Rancière's account of the different regimes for the identification of art, we can refer to these as *ethical* and *poetic* theorisations of tragedy, respectively consolidated in Book III of Plato's *Republic* and in the first and only extant half of Aristotle's *Poetics*. While both philosophers interrogated tragedy in terms of the concept of *mimesis* (roughly: imitation), Plato's preoccupation was principally with the compatibility of imitative practices with the constitution of a just city (*polis*), while Aristotle sought to locate tragedy within a broader classification, analysis and normative criticism of the varieties or genres of poetry.

The question of genre emerges in the *Republic* in the prescriptive context of a dialogue centring on the pedagogical suitability, for the raising of the city's ruling class (the

‘guardians’), of different imitative practices. As Socrates declares to his interlocutor Adeimantus: ‘One kind of poetry and story-telling employs only imitation—tragedy and comedy, as you say. Another kind employs only narration by the poet himself—you find this most of all in dithyrambs. A third kind uses both—as in epic poetry and many other places.’<sup>1</sup> Now, while this tripartition originates in Plato’s doctrine of ideas<sup>2</sup> and his dialectical method, it is also grounded in a political anthropology (or political psychology) of *mimesis*, in which what we could call a principle of *specialization* reigns supreme and for which certain varieties of imitation can divert or weaken a capacity for just action.

Foreshadowing later castigations of actors and comedians for corrupting the ethos of citizens, Plato sees imitation as a dangerous source of inconstancy and diversity. Given the principle that an individual can only carry out a single occupation with excellence, an imitator should not imitate multiple kinds of action. This is why no one, according to Socrates, can be at one and the same time a good tragic and comic actor. If imitation is to be allowed, it is only to be directed at civically appropriate models, namely ‘people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free, and their actions’; the maturing rulers of a just city ‘mustn’t be clever at doing or imitating slavish or shameful actions, lest from enjoying the imitation, they come to enjoy the reality’.<sup>3</sup> This striving after a stringent civic pedagogy, capable of blocking any fount of mutability or strife, is accompanied by the prescription of particular modes of imitation, narrative and music – down to the identification of proper rhythms and modes of music. So, just as tragedies are destabilizing, along with Homeric epics, by their depiction of amoral or metamorphic deities, so they are objectionable because of the centrality of mourning in their plots, which are antithetical to the education of courageous citizens and soldiers. As Socrates declares, ‘we no longer need dirges and lamentations among our words’.<sup>4</sup> In Book X, Socrates makes an incisive comparison between the different standards of value that his contemporaries apply, on the one hand, to lamentation over one’s own fate, which is to be curtailed and is viewed as a sign of unmanliness, and, on other, to the pleasure taken in the poetic imitation of the weeping and wailing of others. He notes that the risk of such a twofold criterion is that the absence of shame ‘in praising and pitying another man who, in spite of his claim to goodness, grieves excessively’ leads to a potential loss of control over one’s own lamenting part. Mimesis is here potential contagious and disruptive, and the pleasures of representation can always foreshadow a slackening of one’s capacity for just action: ‘enjoyment of other people’s sufferings is necessarily transferred to our own and ... the pitying part, if it is nourished and strengthened on the sufferings of others, won’t be easily held in check when we ourselves suffer’.<sup>5</sup>

The primacy of the ethical (and the political) over aesthetics or criticism in Plato’s account of tragedy is evident in how the intention to banish the tragedians from the city is accompanied by repeated acknowledgments of its artistic excellence, in keeping with

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic* III, 394c (trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve) in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper with D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1032.

<sup>2</sup> Enzo Melandri, *I generi letterari e la loro origine* [Literary Genres and their Origin], pref. Giorgio Agamben (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2014 [1980])

<sup>3</sup> *Republic* III, 395c, 1033.

<sup>4</sup> *Republic* III, 398d, 1035.

<sup>5</sup> *Republic* X, 606b, 1210.

contemporary Athenian taste. In Book VII of the *Laws*, Plato also scripts an ironic provocation into the dialogue, namely that the tragedians cannot be let into the philosopher's city, because its legislators are in direct competition with them: 'we are poets like yourselves, composing in the same genre, and your competitors as artists and actors in the finest drama, which true law alone has the natural powers to "produce" to perfection'.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely because tragedy, as another dialogue of Plato has it, 'is that form of poetry which most delights the populace and most seduces the soul',<sup>7</sup> that a philosophically-grounded political psychology, an alternative normative and pedagogic nexus of *polis* and *psyche*, must ultimately clash with it. As Rancière has observed, the 'arts' as such do not exist for Plato, only different ways of doing and making, together with a discriminating distinction between true arts that produce knowledge by imitating a model (an idea) and arts that imitate mere appearances. In choosing among the latter, the criterion is not epistemic (do they provide us with correct knowledge?) but pedagogical and ethical (do they contribute to shaping a good character?). In Plato's ethical regime, therefore, 'it is a matter of knowing in what ways images' [and spectacles' and texts'] mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities'.<sup>8</sup>

The shift from this ethical regime to a 'poetic' or 'representative' one in Aristotle's *Poetics* – by some lights the first treatise of literary theory, and one almost entirely devoted to tragedy in its surviving half – is underscored by Aristotle's explicit distinction between criteria of correctness in the poetic and civic domains.<sup>9</sup> The privilege of tragic action to Aristotle's poetics, as Rancière notes, shifts the issue from one having to do with the ethico-political adequacy of a copy to a model, and its associated communal pedagogy, to the pragmatic classification of different modalities of imitation and their effects. Or, in the French philosopher's interpretation, from the 'essence of the image' to the 'substance of the poem, the fabrication of a plot arranging actions that represent the activities of men'.<sup>10</sup> This understanding of a shift in regimes chimes with the perception of the *Poetics* as a treatise in which the *polis* is palpably absent,<sup>11</sup> a feature that some attribute to Aristotle's effort to depart from the particularities of Attic tragedy in order to produce a universalisable theory of a poetic genre independent of its ritual or political context.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Laws* VII (trans. Trevor J. Saunders), 817c, p. 1484. See also *Republic* VIII, 568a, 1178.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Minos* (Malcolm Schofield), 321a, 1317.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 21. On the difference between Plato and Aristotle as concerns the notion of the tragic, and their afterlives, see also Evina Sistikou, *Tragic Failures: Alexandrian Responses to Tragedy and the Tragic* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 1-9.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. and trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> See Edith Hall, "Is there a polis in Aristotle's *Poetics*?", in M.S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 295–309; and the helpful discussion of the debate generated by Hall's thesis in Johanna Hanink, *Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 215–220. Hanink is especially interesting on the ways in which by the time of Aristotle, tragedy had become a pan-Hellenic rather than restrictedly Athenian phenomenon. She also helpfully reminds us that elsewhere in his vast oeuvre, Aristotle dealt with the history of Athenian tragic performance, as well as with the biographies of tragedians. Among lost works attested to in commentaries are a *Victories at the Dionysia*, an *On Tragedies*, a *Didascaliae* (an annotated list of victors and competitors at tragic competitions), as well as *On Poets*.

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm Heath, "Should there have been a polis in the *Poetics*?", *Classical Quarterly* 59 (2009): 468–85.

Whereas the origin of poetic genres in Plato is expeditiously dealt with, and entirely oriented towards political prescription, Aristotle's *Poetics* advances a set of principles of rational classification among forms of *mimesis*, many of which continue to underwrite contemporary approaches to literary theory. Above all, genres of imitation can be distinguished in terms of their *media*, their *objects* and their *mode* (or *manner*).<sup>13</sup> What is imitated are not objects or things, but rather *agents*. In Aristotle's enormously influential definition: 'Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotion'.<sup>14</sup> The definition incorporates the six, hierarchically-ordered components of tragedy which, as much of the *Poetics* will detail, must be considered in judging the quality of a particular tragedy (demonstrating the continuity here between poetic analysis and the normative judgment of literary criticism). These components are 'plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle and lyric poetry'.<sup>15</sup>

Crucial to what could be seen as Aristotle's intellectualistic bias for action, plot (*mythos*) has primacy over all other components and is characterised as the soul of tragedy. This primacy of plot, critical to Aristotle's inauguration of a poetic or representative regime, also has its own 'ethical' rationale. It is because 'the goal of life is an activity, not a quality', that tragedy concerns the mimesis of actions not character, which is subordinate to the former. In tragedy, what characters *do* takes precedence over who they *are*, and character is 'the kind of thing which discloses the nature of a choice'.<sup>16</sup> This predominance of plot is directly linked to key dimensions of Aristotle's poetics of tragedy, namely what we could call, on the one hand, its *textualism*, on the other, its anti-musical, anti-spectacular and anti-ritualistic bias. In a manner which, as we'll explore further below, jars with the deeply ritualised place of tragic performances in the agonistic and religious-political context of the Dionysia, for Aristotle the quality of a tragedy is 'clear from reading',<sup>17</sup> and its central affective dimension is fundamentally carried by plot alone. If the latter is properly constructed – as Aristotle's model, the *Oedipus Tyrannos*, testifies, 'even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens'. Conversely, spectacle 'is attractive, but is very inartistic and is least germane to the art of poetry'.<sup>18</sup> It is on this basis that Aristotle parries the view of tragedy as a plebeian genre inferior to epic, arguing that such considerations are merely a matter of performance, not poetry.<sup>19</sup>

Though the classical or dramatic unities of time, place and action are a retrospective projection onto the *Poetics* – ascribed to the Italian dramaturg Gian Giorgio Trissino,<sup>20</sup> whose *Sofonisba* (1524) is taken to mark the beginning of early modern tragedy – a normative concern with unity and wholeness determines Aristotle's evaluation of tragedies. This preoccupation with what we could term organic form is both spatial and temporal. For

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Edwin Simpson-Baikie, *The Dramatic Unities* (London: Trübner & Co., 1878).

a play to be beautiful its parts must be arranged in the right order and within the proper magnitude. Neither instantaneity or sprawl will do. Rather, and in keeping with the demands of the plot, a beautiful drama will imitate a great and unified action 'up to the limits of simultaneous perspicuity'.<sup>21</sup> A synthetic overview of the tragedy is necessary. While grounding his poetics in a conception of organic form, Aristotle is deeply sensitive to the temporal unfolding of the action, which is marked by change of fortune (*metabasis, metabole*),<sup>22</sup> preceded by the plot's *complication (desis)* and followed by its *resolution (lusis)*. It is the *metabasis* or *metabole*, which in itself is the bearer of that key philosophical affect, 'astonishment', which arises 'when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another',<sup>23</sup> and with the retrospective seal of necessity. The wonder at change sought in the production of tragic drama can occur through *reversal (peripeteia)*, *recognition (anagnorisis)* or *suffering (pathos)*. It is the presence of at least two of these qualitative elements of tragedy together that make a tragedy 'complex'. Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* is a model tragedy for Aristotle, because of the way it masterfully combines *peripeteia* (e.g. the messenger triggers a doomed series of events in the very act of allaying Oedipus' fears), *anagnorisis* (in the devastating passage from ignorance to knowledge) and *pathos* understood as an *action* (and not just a state of body or mind) involving destruction or pain – most memorably, Oedipus's gouging out of his eyes. The complexity of *Oedipus Tyrannos* can be compared to the simplicity of tragedies solely articulated around suffering (Sophocles' own *Ajax*) and devoid of dramatic movement (Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*). It is in the complex plots of tragedy that the superiority of poetry over history is also attested, in that – developing categories central to Aristotle's own metaphysics – they unfold actions according to their *probability* and *necessity*, rather than their mere factuality, thus attaining a superior universality. And yet tragedy is not to be prized for its philosophical lessons but rather for its specific affective operation, for the way in which, by eliciting pity (*phobos*) and fear (*eleos*) through its plots, it makes possible the *catharsis* of those emotions. Catharsis has been the subject of fierce and complex centuries-long debate, made all the more intense by the combination of its centrality to the definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* and its under-determination. Physiological purgation, religious purification and psychoanalytic sublimation have all been advanced as ways of giving it theoretical solidity.<sup>24</sup> If the purpose of catharsis were viewed to be civic edification or conformity,<sup>25</sup> we would of course be returned to Plato's ethical terrain, though it is not by any means evident that this was a primary concern for Aristotle, who some commentators see as minimising the collective or even democratic dimension of tragedy.<sup>26</sup>

## Dividing the city

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<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Later theoreticians of tragedy will associate this change of fortune to the notion of *catastrophe*. While the latter is present in Aristotle's work, it is not a component of his own poetics.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> See Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us* (London: Profile, 2019), 187-195; Peter Thomas, 'Catharsis (Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism)', *Historical Materialism* 17 (2009): 259-264.

<sup>25</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto, 2008 [1974]), 28.

<sup>26</sup> Page duBois, 'The Death of Character', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 21(3) (2014): 301–308.

If Plato suppressed tragedies in an ideal city, and Aristotle absented the city from his poetics of tragic poetry, how are we to approach the formative nexus of politics and tragedy in Ancient Athens? Many historians of Ancient Greece have underscored the role of tragedy as a form of collective self-reflection for a polity undergoing an epochal transition marked by the rise of democratic institutions of citizenship, a crisis of traditional belief systems and recurrent violent conflicts – in the guise of both internecine *stasis* and international *polemos*. For Christian Meier, among the salient functions of tragedy was to represent the new through the old.<sup>27</sup> This meant both framing the unsettling transformations faced by Athenian citizens through familiar myths and legends, and making room for ancient doubts as well as the more opaque or archaic aspects of social reality. The radical novelties of democratisation, secularisation, imperial power and citizenship – innovations that could lead to fear about one's own power – were thus filtered through the *topoi* of traditional myth or legend and presented on the collective and ritualised stage of the festivals, themselves organised as civic competitions (*agon*). This allowed tragedy to carry out a singular work of mediation and reflection on the 'intellectual structure of politics', with a nuance and complexity not available to formal civic discourse. Among its overriding concerns was the haunting of the *polis* by forms of limitless opposition and accumulation of power and wealth. In staging and giving form to these 'unlimits', tragedy could make manifest 'the interdependence of progressive democracy and conservatism'; it could aid in 'making visible the terrifyingly disruptive invisible powers of an interconnected universe', while also showing how they could be integrated within the limits of a politically cohesive whole.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, if tragedy is the art of Athenian democracy, it is so not in the mode of mere celebration or legitimation, but in how it provides a collective and aesthetic form which the *polis* can treat itself as a new and problematic subject – albeit through the anachronism of legendary conflicts. The space of democracy can here be envisaged as one animated or haunted by conflict. This conflict is not only one operating between different citizens, or between citizens and their others (metics, barbarians, women, slaves), but between the city and its past. The world of tragedy is a world in transition, rent by ambiguity and in potential crisis. One of these transitions can be regarded as that between myth and logos – though the linearity of a passage from the one to the other has been amply questioned. In Jean-Pierre Vernant's view, tragedy emerges when myth comes to be interrogated from the standpoint of the citizen. Or, when the civic order enters into shearing tension with archaic or pre-democratic standards of ethics and justice. Notwithstanding his criticisms of the philosophy of the tragic emerging from German Idealism and Romanticism, Vernant here echoes Hegel's view of the *Antigone* as the exemplary tragedy of the clash between ethical orders with equal if incompatible claims to legitimacy. He also presents this as a clash between *ethos* (character) and *daimon* (religious power), or between agency and fate. Most significant in terms of tragedy's poetics is the way in which its language registers contradictoriness. Attic tragedy stages the ethical equivocity of crucial words in the lexicon of the polis, above all *nomos* (law). As Vernant puts it in an incisive formulation: 'the

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<sup>27</sup> Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993). For a Marxist perspective on tragedy as the foremost artistic reflection of the Athenian transition to democracy, see George Thomson, *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980 [1941]).

<sup>28</sup> Richard Seaford, "Introduction", in Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. George Thomson (New York: Everyman's Library, 2004), xxvi-xxvii.

function of words used on stage is not so much to establish communication between the various characters as to indicate the blockages and barriers between them and the impermeability of their minds, to locate the points of conflict'.<sup>29</sup> This observation chimes with Friedrich Hölderlin's encapsulation of tragic drama as 'speech against speech', or Alexandre Kojève's observation, from his 1930s lecture courses on Hegel, according to which: 'In Epic, it is necessary to know what happens; in Tragedy – what is said. In foreign wars (epic), no need to speak; in (tragic) civil war – discourse'.<sup>30</sup> The Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano, writing in her Roman exile about *Antigone*, would refer to the play's concern as 'the labyrinth of civil war and subsequent tyranny ... the double labyrinth of family and history'.<sup>31</sup>

Tragedy, which is envisaged from this perspective not merely as a dramatic or literary genre but as a 'total social fact',<sup>32</sup> explores an ethical (which is also to say a social, political and religious) 'border zone' in a 'universe of conflict'. Its world-view is not dogmatic but *problematizing*. As Vernant's collaborator Pierre Vidal-Naquet suggests, tragedy proceeds with regard to the city like Freudian dreamwork in the face of reality, deforming, renewing, interrogating and interrupting the civic continuity which Athens prized so highly. If tragedy is a mirror of the city, then it is a broken mirror, staging and refracting the *polis*'s multiple tensions and the clashing codes of conduct that threaten its dissolution. This interrupting and questioning of the city is above all a questioning of the very possibility of action. If, following Aristotle, action is the object of *mimesis*, then, as Vernant suggests, that action is split between, on the one hand, the deliberative rational agency of protagonists, 'on the other, placing one's stake on what is unknown and incomprehensible, risking oneself on the terrain that remains impenetrable, entering into a game with supernatural forces, not knowing whether, as they join with one, they will bring success or doom'.<sup>33</sup> The apparent clarity of choice is persistently shadowed by an opaque necessity.

In her important contribution to the study of Attic tragedy, *The Mourning Voice*, Nicole Loraux pushes even further the approach of her erstwhile teachers Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, to explore an *unpolitical* or *impolitical* tendency within tragedy itself.<sup>34</sup> Loraux questions a tendency, especially evident in 20<sup>th</sup> century resurrections and repetitions of Greek tragedy (her example is Jean-Paul Sartre's adaptation of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*<sup>35</sup>) to over-value its political import. The theatre of Dionysus, as she quips, was not

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<sup>29</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy", in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 42. For a critique of this perspective from within Marxism, see Vincenzo Di Benedetto and Alessandro Lami, *Filologia e marxismo. Contro le mistificazioni* (Napoli: Liguori, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980 [1947/1968]), 296.

<sup>31</sup> Maria Zambrano, *La tumba de Antígona*, ed. Virginia Trueba Mira (Madrid: Cátedra, 2015), 151.

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Le miroir brisé. Tragédie athénienne et politique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Vernant, 'Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy', 45.

<sup>34</sup> I use this term, whose coinage originates in Thomas Mann's *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, in a theoretical acceptation broadly drawn from contemporary Italian political theories attuned to the problem of tragedy. See Roberto Esposito, *Categories of the Impolitical*, trans. Connal Parsley (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Massimo Cacciari, *The Unpolitical: On the Radical Critique of Political Reason*, ed. Alessandro Carrera, trans. Massimo Verdicchio (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> See also Miriam Leonard, *Athens in Paris: Ancient Greece and the Political in Post-War French Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

located in the agora, and tragedy is not just a reflection of the political but also or especially a way of taking on what the assembly of citizens pushes away. As her work on Greek political rhetoric and funeral orations had also explored, the self-image, legitimation and reproduction of the *polis* is predicated on an effort to limit the divisive effects of practices not just of revenge and retribution, but of lamentation and mourning more broadly – practices which are, as Plato’s own objection to tragic mimesis remind us, associated with femininity.<sup>36</sup> Tragedy is the bearer of an antipolitical element to the extent it challenges the Athenian *ideology of the city*, whereby the city must be united and peaceful and this trumps all other principles.<sup>37</sup> This ideology, which turns the *polis* into an anti-tragic machine, requires a practice of forgetting against what Claudius in *Hamlet* calls ‘obstinate condolment’. The voicing of pain, especially women’s pain, interrupts the city’s orchestration of amnesia. If the city disavows death in the rhetorical invocation of its continuity, its ‘forever’ (*aei*), then tragedies force the city to face suffering in the interjection of female pain, emblematically expressed in the exclamation, recurrent throughout tragedies, *ai ai*. The voicing of pain also reminds us that tragedy is accompanied by a verbalised topography of the body, structured around the places of violent death.<sup>38</sup> What Athenian political discourse tries to hold apart, namely the spheres of civic speech and individual suffering, are mixed together in tragedy; this is reflected in its very dramatic structure, in the alternation of speeches, and in the alteration of speech.<sup>39</sup> This is why for Loraux, tragedy is a *genre in conflict*<sup>40</sup> – not just in terms of its themes or contents, as both Hegel and Vernant, along with many others, would agree – but in its very *form*. To think with tragedy would then be to think it as a dramatic form of contradiction, making simultaneously present an insistent reference to politics with the staging of ‘anti-political behaviours’, a politics that prescribes forgetting with a mourning that revives divisive memory.

### Were Greek tragedies tragic?

In our foregoing discussion, we have considered approaches, whether philosophical or historical, which treat tragedy as a more or less familiar genre of dramatic performance and an analysable literary text. But what if there is something in Ancient tragedies that is ultimately refractory to treating them as ‘literature’? What if our approach to Aeschylus or Sophocles or Euripides is ultimately skewed by anachronism, by the projection of a

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<sup>36</sup> See Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*, trans. Corinne Pacht with Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2006); *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Loraux draws the notion of an ideology of the city from Diego Lanza and Mario Vegetti, ‘L’ideologia della città’, in Diego Lanza et al., *L’ideologia della città* (Napoli: Liguori, 1977).

<sup>38</sup> Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 49. On the question of the body in tragedy, see also William Marx, *Le tombeau d’Oedipe. Pour une tragédie sans tragique* (Paris: Minuit, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> This mixing should not be regarded as a neat transgression or revolution, especially in the domain of sexual difference. As Loraux notes: ‘whatever freedom the tragic discourse of the Greeks offered to women it did not allow them ultimately to transgress the frontier that divided and opposed the sexes. Tragedy certainly does transgress and mix things up – this is its rule, its nature – but never to the point of irrevocably overturning the civic order of values’. Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Nicole Loraux, *The Mourning Voice: An Essay on Greek Tragedy*, trans. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 81.



philosophical concept of 'the tragic' born in late eighteenth-century Germany onto 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens? This argument – which resonates with but is not reducible to earlier arguments for the foreignness of tragic ritual to modern aesthetics – has been forcefully advanced in the past few years by a number of French authors. Drawing on an ethnopoetic approach, the classicist Florence Dupont has argued against the comprehensive neglect, beginning with Aristotle's own *Poetics*, of the musical and ritual performance to which the tragic text is destined.<sup>41</sup> She makes this point with particular force in an iconoclastic study of the theatre of Aeschylus, widely hailed as the 'father' of Attic tragedy. Rather than making our misrecognition of tragedy's musical and dramatic singularity a matter of modern anachronism, for Dupont, the Aeschylus who we think we know, read and perform, was born about a century after his death, with the canonisation of the Greek tragedians. It was with the decree promulgated by the rhetorician and legislator Lycurgus – stipulating that the city produce monuments to Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, along with official versions of their dramatic texts, allowing for repeat performances as part of the city's cultural patrimony – that the ground is laid for the great misunderstanding that still structures our relation to tragedies and tragedians.<sup>42</sup> Lycurgus' decree, by 'fixing the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as paradigmatic and first texts ... contributed to blocking the normal process of their diffusion and scattering towards other aesthetic forms, as well as their own mutation and osmosis with other musical genres'.<sup>43</sup> Before Lycurgus, the texts of the tragedies were neither to be read nor conserved. With him, we have a monumentalisation and nationalisation of Attic tragedy, which is also crucially a textualization – a political precondition for Aristotle's own largely 'apolitical' poetics. Tragedy is no longer a matter of *agon*, festival, acting or music, as much as it is one of texts, works. Its idealisation is a de-dramatisation.

Dupont reminds us that Aeschylus, along with other tragedians, was not a poet or writer in the modern sense. He was nor an *author* but a director of sorts, a *chorodidaskalos* – someone who put on spectacles rather than produced texts. The few written plays we retain from Aeschylus are but mute, immobile archaeological traces of what living tragedies were. And even then, we now see them without their extant musical notation but with acts and scenes that are externally imposed upon them.<sup>44</sup> In antiquity, writing was not a mode of expression but a technique at the service of practices; *contra Aristotle*, *mise-en-scène* had primacy over text. This is an archaeology that seeks to abandon our ideological search for origins and authors, a search elicited by Lycurgus' 'symbolic revolution' and his 'identitarian patrimonialisation', establishing a singularly Athenian birth of tragedy.<sup>45</sup> It also means abandoning the idea of an *essence* or *ontology* of tragedy. Notwithstanding her dismissal of

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<sup>41</sup> Florence Dupont, *The Invention of Literature: From Greek Intoxication to the Latin Book*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); *L'insignifiance tragique* (Paris: Gallimard/Le promeneur, 2001); *Aristote ou le vampire du théâtre occidental* (Paris: Aubier, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> On Lycurgus' decree, see also Hanink, *Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy*, and Jean Bollack, 'An Act of Cultural Restoration: The Status Accorded to the Classical Tragedians by the Decree of Lycurgus', in *The Art of Reading: From Homer to Celan*, trans. Catherine Porter and Susan Tarrow, with Bruce King, ed. Christoph Koenig, Leonard Muellner, Gregory Nagy, and Sheldon Pollock (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Florence Dupont, *Eschyle* (Lausanne: Ides et Calendes, 2015), 29.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* as an 'ontological narrative with no historical relevance',<sup>46</sup> Dupont's anti-Aristotelianism shares with the German philosopher an emphasis on the centrality of festival, music and suffering to Attic tragedies.

The music of tragedy is played by the *aulos*, the flute-like instrument which accompanies death laments, threnodies. Aeschylian tragedy is thus presented by Dupont 'as the sonic spectacle of violence, murder and misery'; the competitions in which tragedies were performed were 'festivals of tears' whose choruses were fictionally composed of cultural groups suited for mourning and weeping (women, the old, barbarians, captives). The redefinition of tragedy breaks with Aristotle's *Poetics* as much as it does with philosophical conceptions of the tragic, whether in German Romanticism or Nietzsche: 'Tragedy is a pathetic and aesthetic variation with its basis in the music of the *aulos* offered up to Dionysus'.<sup>47</sup> Though much more strongly articulated around the aural dimension, this perspective is comparable to the philological assault on philosophical definitions of tragedy advanced by Nietzsche's great adversary, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff who, in his 1907 'Introduction to Attic Tragedy', first published in his 1889 edition of Euripides' *Hercules*, declared that: 'An Attic tragedy is a self-enclosed piece of heroic legend [*Heldensage*], poetically adapted in elevated style [*in erhabenem Stile*] for presentation by an Attic citizen chorus and two or three actors, and intended to be performed as part of public worship in the sanctuary of Dionysus'.<sup>48</sup> Crucially, however, for Dupont tragedy is fundamentally not a narrative, not even of a legend. The concatenation of events in the scenario that serves as the pre-text for performance, has neither necessity nor verisimilitude, drawing tragedy closer to oratorio than drama. Against an anachronistic backward projection of the structure of modern Western theatre on Attic tragedy, in Aeschylus there is 'no plot, no psychology, no coherent character, no ideas, no representation'<sup>49</sup>; without its musical *mise-en-scène*, the text is *unreadable*. Moreover, tragic speech is *performative* not *representative*.<sup>50</sup>

Arguing against the hegemony of a philosophical conception of the tragic over our access to Greek tragedy, the French historian of literature William Marx – drawing inspiration from Wilamowitz's nineteenth-century polemic against Nietzsche – has particularly stressed the distorting effects imposed by the history of the transmission and canonisation of Greek tragedies. The thirty-two extant tragedies by the three playwrights monumentalised by Lycurgus are only a fraction of their contribution to the Dionysian contests (circa 220 plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides), and an even smaller one of a minimum number of 648 tragedies performed over all.<sup>51</sup> This brutal selection, partly accidental and partly political, across Ancient Athens, Rome, Byzantium and Renaissance Europe, is the unfortunate condition of possibility for modelling the generic object 'ancient tragedy' on a very small sample of the plays performed at the Dionysian games. This tendency already

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 230.

<sup>49</sup> Dupont, *Eschyle*, 60.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>51</sup> For an intense and idiosyncratic reflection on the loss of tragic texts, see the Albanian novelist Ismail Kadaré's essay on Aeschylus, *Eschyle ou le grand perdant*, trad. Jusuf Vrioni and Alexandre Zotos (Paris: Fayard, 1995 [1988]).

was present after Lycurgus' 'symbolic revolution' in Aristotle's *Poetics*, but became especially marked after the Romantic-Idealist birth of the tragic, which leads in its turn to a smattering even of the surviving tragedies becoming paradigmatic – namely Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, and Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*. Marx notes how the survival of Euripides' 'alphabetical' tragedies – named as such because of the organisation of the volume in which they were compiled – allows us to see how a less loaded 'sample' of tragic texts might make our extant models far less viable. To the filtering effects of Lycurgus, Aristotle, and the vagaries of transmission, Marx adds another striking element, namely the suggestion that our identification of tragedies with the question of fate or destiny is a by-product of how the selection of the tragic canon was consolidated in Rome in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, in an ideological climate shaped by Stoic doctrines of *fatum*. Awareness of the historical contingencies attendant on the formation of our understanding of tragedy as a genre makes possible the conclusion that there 'isn't a tragic: there are almost as many as there are tragedies and just a few less than there are philosophies'.<sup>52</sup>

Marx's argument about the transformation of a partial and partisan sample of plays into tragedy as an 'ideal literary object' over-determined by a philosophy of the tragic is a powerful one. So is his reminder that the rooting of tragedies in particular *loci* (e.g. Colonus) is something we cannot retrieve. For Marx, we risk acting like archaeologist who, faced with the Venus of Samothrace, would project back a world of headless, armless human beings. Yet this critique of the collusion of idealism and our modern notion of 'literature' in eclipsing tragedy behind the tragic risks a kind of exoticism, a notion of tragedy as irremediably foreign and other, a lost practice that can only be reconstructed *via negativa* or by analogy with other domains of ritualised performance. As Marx concludes: 'We must look for the truth of tragedy neither in the tragic nor in what the theatre is today – but elsewhere, sometimes very far away: in the Noh play, psychoanalysis, the mass'.<sup>53</sup>

### **From the ancients to the moderns, and back again**

The effort to suspend the domination of the philosophy of the tragic over the reception of tragedies has also been advanced in the context of a re-evaluation of early modern dramaturgy and poetics. In a capacious recovery of the 'lost' world of tragedy between the mid-sixteenth century and the close of the eighteenth, Blair Hoxby<sup>54</sup> reminds us that in the vast span of time between the seventh and the fifteenth centuries, tragedy largely vanished from the purview of European culture, with Euripides misrecognised as a philosopher and the very adjective 'tragic' taking on an uncertain reference. After Giorgio Valla's translation of the *Poetics* at the beginning of the sixteenth century, print editions of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca circulating in printed editions from circa 1520s, and Francesco

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<sup>52</sup> Marx, *Le tombeau d'Oedipe*, 87.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 159. The mention of psychoanalysis is somewhat awkward here, given how much the symbolic revolution that gave birth to 'the tragic' in the 1790s is a condition of possibility for the Freudian appropriation of the myth of Oedipus. The literature on psychoanalysis, tragedy and Oedipus is vast, but see especially Jean Bollack, "Le fils de l'homme. Le mythe freudien d'Oedipe", in *La naissance d'Oedipe. Traduction et commentaires d'Oedipe roi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), and Suzanne Gearhart, *The Interrupted Dialectic: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and their Tragic Other* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> Blair Hoxby, "What Was Tragedy? The World We Have Lost, 1550-1795", *Comparative Literature* 64 (1) (2012): 1-32.

Robertello and Vincenzo Maggi's lectures on Aristotle's poetics, this situation changed drastically. But the poetics and literature arising from this renaissance of tragedy was neither pedantically Aristotelian, nor did it anticipate the Romantic invention of the tragic. Early modern theorists of tragedy drew on an ample set of Ancient Greek and Roman sources, from Apuleius to Vitruvius, Horace to Plutarch. Their theories shaped and were shaped by a tragic repertoire that cannot be boiled down to any univocal theory – including classical and baroque tragedies in Italy and France, the early operas of Monteverdi and Cavalli, Lully's *tragedies en musique*, Jesuit solemn tragedies, and so forth.<sup>55</sup>

Like challenges to our received notions of Attic tragedy, this revisionist perspective on the theory and practice of early modern tragedy takes an anti-intellectualistic cast, putting the question of the spectacle of suffering at the heart of the genre. In terms of the elements of tragedy enumerated in the *Poetics*, in early modern tragedy the construction of complex plots prescribed by Aristotle takes second stage to 'pure displays of pathos [that] were in themselves the primary goal and justification of tragedy'.<sup>56</sup> Greek *pathos* came to be translated in Latin as *affectus*, *perturbatio*, *passio*, giving rise to a whole dramaturgical rhetoric of the passions. Scanning the variegated landscape of this forgotten repertoire, Hoxby proposes that we bracket our Romantic idea of the tragic and allow ourselves to be guided by five counter-intuitive postulates, which systematically counter the building blocks of that idea: great drama need not be *national*; beautiful design need not be subordinated to organic form; tragedy is primarily a matter of theatre not poetry; we need to valorise the 'modern' aspects of ancient tragedy, transcending the contempt for Euripides which marks the philosophies of the tragic; finally, the passions – and not just time, space or the emplotment of action – are the crucial dramatic unities of early modern tragedy.<sup>57</sup>

It is striking how much Dupont or Marx's objections to an understanding of tragedy articulated around the categories of freedom and necessity resonates with Hoxby's conclusions. He encapsulates these in his reading of two tragedies that bookend the 'lost world' of early modern tragedy, Trissino's *Sofonisba* and Giambattista Varesco's libretto for Mozart's opera *Idomeneo*. As he notes: 'Like a great deal of tragic drama written from 1515 to 1795, *Sofonisba* offers its audience this pleasure: it dilates the brutal change from life to death into a rite of passage whose middle terms (dying and mourning) are ritualized, and in so doing it transforms the theatre into a house of mourning'.<sup>58</sup> But this mourning is not the child of *fatum*; both Trissino and Varesco are distinguished from later romantics by 'their belief that tragedy is a meditation on the moral response to haphazardness in this world, not a demonstration of freedom that can succeed only if the hero is crushed by dire necessity'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> On how the effort to create an aesthetic and civic form to match Ancient tragedy (or how it was imagined) in the genesis of opera, see Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (London: Penguin, 2015), 43. The Attic reference was of course crucial to the genesis and theory of Wagnerian opera. See Sandra Mansutti, "Wagner e la tragedia greca", in *Metamorfosi del tragico fra classico e moderno*, ed. Umberto Curi (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991).

<sup>56</sup> Hoxby, "What Was Tragedy?", 5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

A reflection on early modern tragedy also requires a reconsideration of its politics. Departing, in a more historical-sociological vein, from Walter Benjamin's pioneering reflections on the pathos of sovereign indecision in German baroque drama (the *Trauerspiel*, or mourning play), Franco Moretti interprets Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy as a radical problematization (analogous in force to the one identified by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet for Ancient Athens) of the legitimacy of political power. This conception of modern tragedy is both predicated upon the emergence of absolutism and oriented toward the 'deconsecration' of sovereignty. For Moretti, this tragedy played a historically transformative role in giving rise to the kind of public that could envisage the possibility of bringing monarchs to justice. In his lapidary formulation: 'Tragedy disintegrated the absolute monarch to all ethical and rational legitimation. Having deconsecrated the king, tragedy made it possible to decapitate him'.<sup>60</sup> But the radicality of this tragedy can also issue into a kind of nihilism, as in the conclusion of *King Lear*, which 'makes clear that no one is any longer capable of giving meaning to the tragic process; no speech is equal to it, and there precisely lies the tragedy'.<sup>61</sup>

The agonistic dyad of tragedy and the tragic, which as we've seen governs many critical theories of the genre, is directly thematised by Moretti, who tries to articulate a literary analysis of narrative structure with a historical and sociological excavation of normative orders. For him tragedy must be grasped as 'a *structural* concept, capable of simultaneously defining a syntagmatic axis (plot) and a paradigmatic axis (values), and of clarifying the unique relation that obtains between them in tragedy'. This involves a nominalist deflation of the metaphysics of the tragic, in which what comes to the fore is a genre determined by an impasse in the representation of history. There is no tragic only tragedy, as 'a particular form of *representing* that history: a rigorously asymmetrical structure marked by a constitutive lack. Fully realized tragedy is the parable of the degeneration of the sovereign inserted in a context that *can no longer understand it*'.<sup>62</sup> This conclusion resonates with the notion that Jacobean tragedy draws its formal coherence not from an aesthetics of harmony but from 'the sharpness of definition given to metaphysical and social dislocation, not in an aesthetic, religious or didactic resolution of it'.<sup>63</sup> In other words, that this modern tragedy is a desperate effort to give form to the imminence of civil war, to the 'idea of individuals and society being destroyed from *within*',<sup>64</sup> encapsulated in Albany's lines from *King Lear*: 'humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep'. Or, as A.C. Bradley put it, in a distinctly Hegelian formulation: 'the self division and intestinal warfare of the ethical substance, not so much the war of good with evil as the war of good with good'.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Franco Moretti, "The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty", in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, rev. ed., trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London: Verso, 1988), 42. See also Moretti's more recent effort to bring the digital humanities to bear on the (Hegelian) theory of tragedy: "'Operationalizing': Or, the Function of Measurement in Literary Theory", *New Left Review* 11/84 (2013), 116-19.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. Early modern discussions of Ancient Greek tragedy and its poetics faced some embarrassment when having to confront its connections to democracy. See Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 28.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1984), 39. See also Victor Kiernan, *Eight Tragedies of Shakespeare* (London: Verso, 1996).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909), cited in Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, 54.

Walter Benjamin's *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* had drawn critically from the writings of the jurist Carl Schmitt on sovereign exception to capture how baroque dramas exploded any notion of a trans-historical essence of the tragic. After World War II, and his own brief captivity and removal from academic positions for his National-Socialist militancy, Schmitt re-opened his dialogue with Benjamin ('suicided' by Nazism at the onset of the war), precisely around the question of tragedy. Schmitt turned to *Hamlet* to identify modern tragedy as the form of a formless time, a period of civil war, revolution and state-formation in which heroic tragedies lost their actuality. Rather than the historical-materialist method adopted by the likes of Moretti or Dollimore (or indeed Vernant and Vidal-Naquet with regard to Attic tragedy), Schmitt provides a political reading of Shakespeare pivoting around the notion of the 'intrusion' of time and history into drama. As he notes: 'In times of religious schisms the world and world history lose their secure forms, and a human problematic becomes visible out of which no purely aesthetic consideration could create the hero of a revenge drama. Historical reality is stronger than every aesthetic, stronger also than the most ingenious subject'.<sup>66</sup> Whereas history had entered through the mediation of myth into Greek tragedy, in Shakespeare it does so as immediately available historical reality.<sup>67</sup> And yet, contra Moretti, for Schmitt grasping this intrusion still requires an idea of the tragic. As he writes: 'Shakespeare's greatness resides precisely in the fact that, in the existing chaos of his time and the quickly antiquated flotsam of daily events and reportage, he recognized and respected the tragic core'.<sup>68</sup> The tragic, here read through the lens of an antagonistic political realism, is a matter of the encounter with something intractable, irremediable. And therein lies tragedy's 'surplus value'. As Schmitt observes, it lies in the 'objective reality of the tragic action, in the enigmatic concatenation and entanglement of indisputably real people in the unpredictable course of indisputably real events. ... All participants are conscious of an ineluctable reality that no human mind has conceived – a reality externally given, imposed and unavoidable. This unalterable reality is the mute rock upon which the play founders, sending the foam of genuine tragedy rushing to the surface'.<sup>69</sup>

## Births of the tragic

It is a striking testament to the pervasiveness of the Romantic idea of the tragic that even such a sworn foe of 'political romanticism' as Carl Schmitt could echo its central element, namely the encounter of human agency with adverse necessity. In his elegant and influential essay on the idea of the tragic, the German literary theorist Peter Szondi identified the 20 year-old F.W.J. Schelling's interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, in his

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<sup>66</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of Time into the Play*, trans. David Pan and Jennifer Rust (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>67</sup> This can be contrasted with Vidal-Naquet's observation that political history does indeed 'intrude' directly into Attic tragedy too, for instance in the way that Ephialtes' political reform of 462BCE was the direct referent for Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. See Vidal-Naquet, *Le miroir brisé*. As Billings notes vis-à-vis the post-1790s reception of Attic tragedy, 'The belief that Greek tragedy was fundamentally about political events transformed the early modern trope of history-as-tragedy into the modern notion of tragedy as a meaningful representation of historical process'. *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 11.

<sup>68</sup> Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 51.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

*Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795), as the ground zero of the tragic, understood in terms of the dramatic form given to ‘the conflict of human freedom with the power of the objective world’,<sup>70</sup> and specifically by Oedipus’ willingness to undergo punishment for a crime he could not avoid.<sup>71</sup> This birth of the tragic must also be grasped in terms of the reciprocal determination of two problems, one political, the other philosophical. The political one relates to the manner in which German Idealism and Romanticism are defined by a complex entanglement of enthusiasm and disappointment, emulation and phobia, vis-à-vis the transformative turmoil of the French Revolution, and especially the terror (and how could one, after 1793, not read Aristotelian *phobos* in the shadow of the guillotine?). The philosophical one, which in its own way transcodes the political impasse of the relationship of German intellectuals without a state to the history-making violence of French liberation, has to do with the relation between a post-Kantian philosophy of autonomy (criticism) and a Spinozist understanding of necessity (dogmatism).<sup>72</sup> The specifically German idea of the tragic can be understood as a manner of thinking through, of *repeating*, the Ancient Greeks in an effort to give *form* to the shattering contradictions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The aesthetic form of the tragic then becomes inseparable from the philosophical form (or style) of the dialectic. And the dialectic can in turn be modelled by the resolution of the clash between the Furies and Orestes in *The Eumenides* (as it was in Hegel’s *Natural Law* essay of 1802),<sup>73</sup> by the conflict of ethical orders in the *Antigone*, or indeed by the moral and cognitive *peripeteia* dramatized in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, what Szondi regards as the ‘most tragic’ (because most dialectical) of plays: ‘At every point in the hero’s fate, he is met with the unity of salvation and annihilation, a fundamental trait of everything tragic. It is not annihilation that is tragic, but the fact that salvation becomes annihilation; the tragic does not take place in the hero’s downfall, but rather in the fact that man meets his demise along the very path he took up to escape this demise’.<sup>74</sup>

One can adopt the broad outlines of Szondi’s analysis without necessarily regarding the young Schelling’s idiosyncratic reading of Oedipus’ crime of freedom as the *incipit* of the tragic. A number of scholars have seen in the writings of Friedrich Schiller of the early 1790s a more pertinent cornerstone, not least because of the manner in which Schiller’s poetics and aesthetics arose out of his own dramaturgical efforts.<sup>75</sup> Schiller’s multiple essays on the tragic are also instructive because, unlike Schelling, or indeed Hegel, they incorporate a sustained reflection on the question of the delight that may be drawn from the spectacle of tragedy. This notion of tragic pleasure allows us both to trace the mutations of catharsis and the genealogy of an idea of the sublime. His work can also show how a reflection on the tragic articulated around the problems of writing and stagecraft can increasingly move towards a speculative idea of the tragic, itself dependent on the increasing separation of

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<sup>70</sup> Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>71</sup> Contrast this sublime figure of moral criminality with Ernst Bloch’s irreverent presentation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* as a forerunner of the detective novel. Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 256-7.

<sup>72</sup> See also Hoxby, “What Was Tragedy?”, 8-11.

<sup>73</sup> See my “Taming the Furies: Badiou and Hegel on The Eumenides”, in *Badiou and Hegel: Infinity, Dialectics, Subjectivity*, ed. Antonio Calcagno and Jim Vernon (Rowman & Littlefield/Lexington Books, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>75</sup> Bernhard Zimmerman, *Europa und die griechische Tragödie. Vom kultischen Spiel zum Theater der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2000), Ch. 8; Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 113-122.

aesthetic freedom from the prospect of political emancipation.<sup>76</sup> It is also in Schiller's work, perhaps better than in Schelling's, that we can begin to grasp the way in which 'the romantic philosophy of the tragic interacted with two other romantic projects: the creation of a new ideal of literary form and the formulation of a philosophy of history'.<sup>77</sup>

A more expansive and detailed genealogy of the idea of the tragic may also suggest some scepticism regarding the suddenness of its birth. Among the preconditions for the emergence of the Idealist or Romantic conception of the tragic was a sensitivity to the difference between ancient and modern tragedy. In the late seventeenth century *Querelle des modernes et des anciens*, the difference could be the object of a largely static appraisal, in which ancient literary productions could be studied in 'parallels', much as Plutarch had once penned his *Parallel Lives*. It was in the context of the *Querelle* that André Dacier translated the *Poetics* into French, a feat repeated half a century later in Germany by Michael Conrad Curtius. Tellingly, the translation of the *Poetics* here preceded the translation of Greek plays, which in any instance existed not as scenarios to be acted but as literary monuments of sorts (it was only some while *after* the emergence of the tragic that the production of Greek tragedies became a staple of the European stage). As the eighteenth century wore on, the recognition of the difference between ancient and modern tragedies developed into a reflection on their historicity. Here the dis-analogies between modern and ancient drama could be envisaged in terms of the effort to attain a common idea (of the tragic). The emergence of bourgeois tragedies with Lessing and Diderot was predicated on the notion that repeating the tragic for the present might require jettisoning the Aristotelian frame. According to Billings, prior to the emergence of the Romantic idea of the tragic, it was in the long-neglected polemic of the French Hellenist Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort against the philosopher Charles Batteaux, and in the rejection of normative Aristotelianism in Herder's writings on Shakespeare – produced in the context of the *Sturm und Drang* movement and his collaboration with Goethe – that a notion of the tragic intimately linked to the notions of historicity and historicisation could be born. In this sense, the 1770s can be seen to represent as much of a periodising rift as the 1790s.<sup>78</sup>

A sensitivity to this temporal dislocation, as refracted in drama and poetics, is thematised in the most advanced products of the symbolic revolution that had its epicentre in Jena in the 1790s. For both Friedrich Hölderlin and G.W.F. Hegel, albeit in divergent ways, tragedy is not just a genre of conflict, it is a *genre of transition* – a privileged form through which to think historical temporality.<sup>79</sup> In Hegel, tragedy is 'a representation of, and reflection on historical process ... an inquiry into temporality itself ... a figure for understanding historicity'.<sup>80</sup> For both thinkers what is at stake in tragedy – in the wake of the revolutionary rupture of 1789 and its aftermath – is the very possibility of collective ethical and political life. For Hegel, whose historicisation is also a way of circumscribing the pertinence of the tragic to its

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<sup>76</sup> Vassilis Lambropoulos, *The Tragic Idea* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 30-6.

<sup>77</sup> Hoxby, "What Was Tragedy?", 10.

<sup>78</sup> Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 45-71.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 167, 193. On Hölderlin's poetics of tragedy, and the way in which it cuts into and across the emergence from the tragic of a speculative dialectic, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Caesura of the Speculative', in *Typographies: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 162, 164.



Athenian site, tragedy allowed the Greeks to think the inadequacy of their forms of religion to their ethical life, while also revealing the one-sidedness and immediacy that beset the Greek *polis*, notwithstanding its dazzling achievements. This circumscription of tragedy could allow Hegel to stress the deep discontinuity between Attic tragedy and its modern epigones, but also to assert the superiority of comedy as an aesthetic form capable of responding to the everyday life of modern spirit. For Hölderlin, instead, the formal lessons of Greek tragedy, namely what he presented as an interruptive dialectic of ‘caesura’ and ‘transport’, provided a unique glimpse into how poetic form could accommodate time’s upheavals. For the German poet and playwright, the difference between the ancient and the contemporary was not a matter of sequence or progression, but demanded a kind of parallax view, in which the singularity of the Greeks could be brought into contact with the uniquely problematic character of the present. As Billings observes: ‘Greek tragedy for Hölderlin is the depiction of historical process itself, affording a glimpse into the way the individual exists in a changing world. Greek forms, then, ultimately teach what it is to be modern ... the death of Greek tragedy is the birth of the tragic’.<sup>81</sup> The decline of classical tragedy could thus also be linked to the end of ‘periodic rhythm’, to the fact that in modernity, as Hölderlin had it, ‘beginning and end no longer let themselves be rhymed’.<sup>82</sup> Not the timelessness of (Greek) tragedy, but the particular and alien timeliness of its form, is what allows it to be such a resource for the present, but only as long as the *transition* it embodies is subjected to a practice of *translation*. This matter of translation in Hölderlin – whose reflections on tragedy accompanied his renderings of *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Antigone* – is intimately linked to the manner in which he foregrounds, unlike his post-Kantian peers, how the language of tragedy, the ‘tragic word’, is drastically performative. In his striking formulation: ‘The Greek tragic word is deadly-factic, because the body which it seizes really kills’.<sup>83</sup> By the time that A.W. Schlegel’s *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* consolidated the idea of the tragic into a consumable and influential set of precepts,<sup>84</sup> Hölderlin’s eminently elusive notion of the ‘national’<sup>85</sup> and his treatment of specific tragedies as ideational models of sorts would congeal into the kind of *doxa* that the likes of William Marx and Blair Hoxby have recently sought to dislodge.

Later reactions to Romantic and Hegelian legacies would put different stresses on the tragic cut between the ancient and the modern. For Kierkegaard, in a critical appropriation of the Hegelian apparatus, it was the implosion, under the sign of subjectivity, of the ‘substantial categories’ of state, family and destiny, and the complete separation from any epic tradition, that made for the difference of modern tragedy. The disanalogy between ancient and modern tragedy is made particularly acute by the fact that they stage radically dissimilar kinds of guilt, as well as dissimilarities in the modes of compassion. For the Danish philosopher, in the Ancients there is greater sorrow but lesser pain, while modern tragedy – arising in an age with a tendency towards the comedy of everyday life – is a tragedy of

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>82</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, From, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>83</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Adler and Charlie Louth (London: Penguin, 2009), 330; *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 207.

<sup>84</sup> *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 225.

<sup>85</sup> Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters*, 330.

*anxiety*, which ‘looks at sorrow in order to desire’.<sup>86</sup> In deep debt to this Kierkegaardian framing, George Lukács, before opting for dialectical realism in a Hegelian-Marxist vein, would sound one of the most striking notes of reflexive despair over the loss of the tragic – what we could conceive as a kind of ‘loss of loss’. In the essay on the ‘Metaphysics of Tragedy’ from *Soul and Form* (1908/1911), the modern tragic is concerned not with the contradictions of action, but with its impasse or impossibility. The contemporary condition is marked not by the clash but by the abyss, the incommunicability, between being and value, ontology and morality, ethics and politics. For the young Lukács, historical existence ‘is the most unreal and unliving of all conceivable modes of being; one can describe it only negatively – by saying that something always comes to disturb the flow. ... Real life is always unreal, always impossible, in the midst of empirical life’.<sup>87</sup> Paradoxically, modernity is properly tragic to the extent it is refractory to tragic *form*, understood in clear contrast with the ancients.<sup>88</sup>

Four decades earlier, as a university lecturer in philology at Basel, and prior to composing, under the dual influence of Wagner and Schopenhauer, his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche would underscore the obstacles to the experience of Ancient tragedy – or rather to its imaginative as well as textual reconstruction – spawned by the Romantic idea of the tragic, establishing in the process the bases for a modern metaphysics of the tragic distinct from those of Schiller, Schelling or Hegel.<sup>89</sup> Like for Lukács, it was the *form* of tragedy, not its subject-matter, which was key. Anticipating some of the themes we encountered earlier in Dupont and Marx’s iconoclastic critiques, Nietzsche’s lessons on Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* would stress the ‘irreducibility of the tragic to the moral scheme guilt-punishment’ and polemicise against the moralist-rationalist interpretation of tragedy as a display of immanent poetic justice, anticipating his later assault on Christianity and its juridical imagination.<sup>90</sup> For Nietzsche too, like critics of the tragic that followed him, it was *pathos*, or more precisely the ‘transfiguration of suffering’ which makes for the singularity of tragedy’s form, with *catharsis* here understood, in a musical vein, as ‘a necessary consonance in the world of dissonances’.<sup>91</sup> Perhaps more unique, also with regard

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<sup>86</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern”, in *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, ed. Victor Eremita, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1992), 153.

<sup>87</sup> Georg Lukács, ‘The Metaphysics of Tragedy’, in *Soul and Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 176.

<sup>88</sup> For the place of tragedy between the epic and philosophy in the young Lukács, see Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. A. Bostock, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 29. For Lukács’s views on the possibility of modern tragedy as a dramatic form, see his précis of his Hungarian study on the subject from 1909: “The Sociology of Modern Drama”, trans. Lee Baxandall, *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Summer, 1965), 146-170.

<sup>89</sup> On Nietzsche’s thinking of the tragic beyond his early writings, see Nuno Nabais, *Nietzsche and the Metaphysics of the Tragic*, trans. Martin Earl (London: Continuum, 2006). In the early 60s, the Nietzschean conception of the tragic was revived in an anti-dialectical vein by Michel Foucault, in his *History of Madness* (1961) and Gilles Deleuze in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962). See the astute comments in Warrant Montag, “Foucault and the Problematic of Origins’: Althusser’s Reading of *Folie et déraison*”, *borderlands*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2005), available at: [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2\\_2005/montag\\_foucault.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/montag_foucault.htm). See also Andrew Cutrofello, “Foucault on tragedy”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31 (5-6) (2005): 573-584.

<sup>90</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Introduction aux leçons sur l’Oedipe-Roi de Sophocle / Introduction aux études de philologie Classique*, trans. Françoise Dastur and Michel Haar, ed. Michel Haar (Fougères: Encre Marine, 1994), 15.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

to Nietzsche's anti-democratic animus (some of which has been traced to the trauma of the Paris Commune<sup>92</sup>), is the way in which his Basel courses do not just chastise the moralist-rationalist figure of tragedy, but repeatedly stress the collective, mass mysticism lies at the heart of Greek tragedy. Tragic action is subordinated to the lyrical and pathetic lament of the chorus. The widely disputed idea of an emergence of tragedy from the cult of Dionysus, in the dissolution of individuation within a cosmic order, the initiation to transcendence through extreme fright, is here bound to the fusional-democratic character of the Dionysian games, which Nietzsche calls 'a great festival of freedom and equality in which the servile classes recovered their original right'.<sup>93</sup> Tragedy draws on 'popular mass poetry' which the dithyramb masters.<sup>94</sup> As the young Nietzsche declared: 'The dithyramb is a popular chant, even one principally issuing from the lower classes. Tragedy has always conserved a democratic character; just as it was born from the people'.<sup>95</sup> Modern tragedy is modelled after the law court and was never really able to recover its popular base, which is a precondition of the truly tragic. While ancient tragedy is a 'dramatised hymn', modern tragedy is a 'dramatised novel'.<sup>96</sup>

It is noteworthy that Nietzsche's excavation of a tragedy beyond the moral-rationalist vision could serve as a resource for thinking the tragic outside of a Eurocentric ambit. For the Nigerian playwright and theorist Wole Soyinka, the nexus between ritual loss of individuation and an aesthetic of communal immersion is also paramount. Writing of the God Ogun in Yoruba tragedy, Soyinka describes how he 'surrender[s] his individuation once again ... to the fragmenting process; to be resorbed within universal Oneness, the Unconscious, the deep black whirlpool of mythopoietic forces'.<sup>97</sup> Tragic drama is incomprehensible without a cosmic orientation, without a 'communal compact whose choric essence supplies the collective energy for the challenger of chthonic realms'.<sup>98</sup> Note how this Nietzschean inspiration is explicitly bound up in Soyinka with a rejection of historicism and an affirmation of an unabashedly metaphysical conception of the tragic, which shows 'man's recognition of certain areas of depth-experience which are not satisfactorily explained by general aesthetic theories; and, of all subjective unease that is aroused by man's creative insights, that wrench within the human psyche which we vaguely define as "tragedy" is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources. There, illusively, hovers the key to the human paradox, to man's experience of being and non-being, his dubiousness as essence and matter, intimations of transience and eternity, and the harrowing drives between uniqueness and Oneness'.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Peter Thomas, 'Over-Man and the Commune', *New Left Review* 31 (2005), 139.

<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche, *Introduction aux leçons sur l'Oedipe-Roi de Sophocle*, 37.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. Contrast with Giorgio Agamben's recent suggestion of tragedy's origination in the satyr play. Reminding us of the fact that the latter capped the performance of tragic trilogies at the Dionysian festivals, Agamben states that 'satyrs are more ancient than the heroes of tragedy, and in replacing – or pairing – human protagonists with satyrs, satyric drama [*satirikon drama*] reconnects itself with the non-human origin of all theatre'. Giorgio Agamben, *Pulcinella, or, Entertainment for Kids in Four Scenes*, trans. Kevin Attell (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2018), 38.

<sup>97</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1976]), 153.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

The Italian philosopher Gianni Carchia, investigating the relations between Greek Orphic cults and the development of theories of tragedy, criticised the Nietzschean perspective on the tragic for dissolving its specific literary and artistic form too quickly into the de-individuating element of ritual. Echoing Hölderlin's 'caesura', for Carchia tragedy is an aesthetic arresting of, and differentiating, from life. It is neither a progressive obliteration of myth nor its repetition. Rather, 'the specific aesthetic physiognomy of tragedy can be grasped only in the oscillating space of its blocked agonistic dialectic, in the unresolved tension in which there face off myth and reality, visible and invisible, chthonic underground realities and Olympian surface, matriarchy and patriarchy. In philosophical-historical terms, tragedy thus seems to configure itself as the first autonomous work of art in the history of Western aesthetics precisely in the way it posits itself as a kind of ineffective, suspended ritual, idling, turning in the void. In between sacred rituality and fully secularised politics, it thus realizes in aesthetic-juridical terms the same exit from the alternative between myth and *logos* that orphism realised instead in aesthetic-religious terms.'<sup>100</sup>

### **The form of transition: tragedies of revolution and decolonisation**

Declarations of the end or decline of tragedy have accompanied the genre ever since the fourth century BCE, recurring in the early modern period as well, when, for instance, Thomas Rymer wrote *A Short View of Tragedy: Its Original Excellence and Corruption* (1693).<sup>101</sup> But, as we noted with reference to the young Lukács, the twentieth century brought with it a particularly intense reflection on the supposed impossibility of tragic form under contemporary conditions. In the domain of literary theory, George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* provided an eloquent if contestable case for the genre's modern decline. For Steiner, the tragic genre is radically incompatible with Christian narratives of salvation or the rational hope borne by Marxism, neither of which can truly grasp the 'irreparable'. As he declares: 'Tragedy can occur only where reality has not been harnessed by reason and social consciousness'.<sup>102</sup> There is a certain irony in Steiner's contention – belied by most historical studies of the context of democracy and dissensus in which Attic tragedy emerged – that the genre depends on a landscape of social stability, only emerging in situations where 'the hierarchies of worldly power were stable and manifest'.<sup>103</sup> Like any theory that hitches the mutation in literary forms to a linear tale of secularisation, Steiner's is beset with methodological and historical problems, but the arc of tragedy's demise could also be treated in a more persuasive vein – in terms of the difficulty of replicating the figure of tragic *action* in a modernity increasingly dominated by the deeply anti-tragic models of agencies promulgated by political economy.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Gianni Carchia, *Orfismo e tragedia. Il mito trasfigurato* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019 [1979]), 55-6. On the juridical dimension of tragedy, it is interesting to recall Walter Benjamin's observation, in his *Trauerspiel* book, that the unity of place, time and action closely matches the unity of the tribunal, the court day and the trial. Benjamin was here in dialogue with his friend Florens Christian Rang's observations on theatre and *agon*. Carchia's criticism of Nietzsche is also modelled largely after Benjamin.

<sup>101</sup> Richard Halpern, *Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>102</sup> George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961)

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>104</sup> Halpern, *Eclipse of Action*.

Tragedy need not be an impossible or failing representation of the contemporary criteria for action for the genre to be in question. We've already noted Hegel's valorisation of comedy. But we could also recall the 'deliberate unseating of the supremacy of tragedy and tragic inevitability' effected by Brecht as both dramaturg and theorist.<sup>105</sup> As Benjamin noted about his friend and collaborator's momentous contribution to European drama: 'in the secular drama of the West, too, the search for the untragic hero has never ceased. Often in conflict with its theoreticians, such drama has deviated time and again, always in new ways, from the authentic form of tragedy - that is, from Greek tragedy. This important but badly marked road (which may serve here as the image of a tradition) ran, in the Middle Ages, via Hroswitha and the Mysteries; in the age of the baroque, via Gryphius and Calderon. Later we find it in Lenz and Grabbe, and finally in Strindberg. Shakespearian scenes stand as monuments at its edge, and Goethe crossed it in the second part of Faust. It is a European road, but it is a German one too. If, that is, one can speak of a road rather than a stalking-path along which the legacy of medieval and baroque drama has crept down to us. This stalking-path, rough and overgrown though it may be, is visible again today in the plays of Brecht'.<sup>106</sup> Tragedy, from this vantage point, could be repulsed for its ideological function. As Roland Barthes's quipped: 'Tragedy is only a way of assembling human misfortune, of subsuming it, and thus of justifying it by putting it into the form of a necessity, of a kind of wisdom, or of a purification'.<sup>107</sup>

But where a radical political orientation could counsel abandoning the tragic, it can also lie behind the effort to recover and repeat it in a contemporary frame. If we can justifiably view tragic poetry as 'synonymous with the organic crisis of a political and cultural order',<sup>108</sup> as 'genre of transition', then we are in a position to understand how the organic crises that birthed forth communist revolutions and decolonising movements could serve as ferment for powerful re-imaginings of tragic theory and practice. Raymond Williams's incisive corrective to Steiner's essay, *Modern Tragedy*, revisited 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century dramaturgy on the basis of the conviction that: 'Tragic experience, because of its central importance, commonly attracts the fundamental beliefs and tensions of a period, and tragic theory is interesting mainly in this sense, that through it the shape and set of a particular culture is often deeply realized. ... Tragedy is not a single and permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions'.<sup>109</sup> This supple and capacious approach to the question of tragedy was intended both to do justice to its literary history and to link this history to the 'common sense' or 'structures of feeling' that made tragedy a matter of everyday life, not just high theatre, or high theory. To capture the nature of that experience, as manifest in the structure of contemporary culture, was perforce to think the tragic dimension of contemporary revolutions too. Against those who would see an age of revolutions as an anti-tragic age, one whose belief in the possibility of progress makes it

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<sup>105</sup> Stanley Mitchell, 'Introduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, ed. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), xii.

<sup>106</sup> Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 17-18.

<sup>107</sup> Cited as an epigram to Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Nature, Humanism and Tragedy', *New Left Review* 31 (May-June 1965), which unpacks the consequences of Barthes's Brechtian position, by way of a critical engagement with the 'tragified universe' of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*.

<sup>108</sup> Moretti, 'The Great Eclipse', 71.

<sup>109</sup> Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, ed. Pamela McCallum (Toronto: Broadview Encore, 2006 [1966]), 69.

inhospitable to the irreparable, Williams argues that ‘the revolution is an inevitable working through of a deep and tragic disorder, to which we can respond in varying ways but which will in any case, in one way or another, work its way through our world, as a consequence of any of our actions. I see revolution, that is to say, in a tragic perspective.’<sup>110</sup> It is pertinent to note in this regard, that the concept of tragedy was part of the discourse of the Bolshevik Revolution,<sup>111</sup> and that figures as diverse as Leon Trotsky and the novelist Andrei Platonov envisaged the possibility of a rebirth of tragedy in the context of a revolutionary socialist culture.<sup>112</sup>

But if we can argue about a real rebirth and mutation of the tragic, understood both as a dramatic genre and, with Williams, as ‘a series of experiences and conventions and institutions’, it is in the long arc of decolonization more than in the furnace of socialist revolution that we may want to look for it. David Scott, in critical dialogue with C.L.R. James’s seminal history of the Haitian Revolution, has argued that it is to tragedy that we should turn if we want to shift from the ‘romance’ of the anti-colonial to a post-colonial predicament inimical to progressive heroics.<sup>113</sup> Scott’s recovery of a tragic perspective on decolonisation, and especially of C.L.R. James’s contribution to it is of vital significance. It is James in fact who provides one of the most compact and incisive characterisations of tragedy as the contemporary ‘genre of transition’. For James, tragic form has an anticipatory quality, it registers the blockage of an idea of emancipation before a necessary mutation in objective possibility, in actuality: ‘Form is the conflict complete, the contradictions tearing away – but before the stage of actuality, of the revolution. It carries through the possibilities to the limit, but objective condition, purpose and activity have not yet all come together’.<sup>114</sup> For James, an avid reader of Aeschylus and Shakespeare alike (as was Marx before him), the struggles of the masses of Saint Domingue/Haiti against slavery and colonial capitalism, brought together so many of the elements of tragedy we’ve touched on hitherto: the relation between the individual leader and the masses as an analogue of the dialectic of hero and chorus<sup>115</sup>; the historical *peripeteia* that temporarily turns a struggle for emancipation into its seeming opposite (namely with Toussaint Louverture’s reinstatement of the plantation regime); the inhibiting weight of the old on the chances of the new; and,

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>111</sup> Lars T. Lih, ‘“Our Position is in the Highest Degree Tragic”: Bolshevik ‘Euphoria’ in 1920”, in Mike Haynes and Jim Wolfreys, eds., *History and Revolution: Refuting Revisionism* (London: Verso, 2007).

<sup>112</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005); Andrei Platonov, ‘On the First Socialist Tragedy’, *New Left Review* 11/69 (2011): 30-32. For a discussion of these questions see my ‘The Broken Music of the Revolution: Trotsky and Blok’, *Crisis and Critique* volume 4, issue 2 (2017): 404-426. Available at: <http://crisiscritique.org/2017/november/Alberto%20Toscano.pdf>

<sup>113</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004). For further discussion of Scott’s interpretation of the ‘tragic’ James, as well as for how it relates to the broader debate on the politics of tragedy, see my ‘Politics in a Tragic Key’, *Radical Philosophy* 180 (2013): 25-34.

<sup>114</sup> C.L.R. James, ‘Rough Notes from Discussion for Melville Book’, p. 3. Quoted in Aaron Love, *The Caribbean Novel and the Realization of History in the Era of Decolonization*, PhD dissertation, New York University, May 2011.

<sup>115</sup> As James wrote in his great historical narrative, ‘it is the tragedy of mass movements that they need and can only too rarely find adequate leadership’. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989 [1963]), 25.

perhaps above all, the notion of tragedy as the form through which to think and dramatize an organic crisis.

But the case of decolonial tragedy embodies a phenomenon that could be applied to the vast and discontinuous history of the genre, namely that much of its theory is elaborated through dramaturgical practice. The Haitian revolution and the figure of Toussaint were not just the object of an effort to emplot history 'tragically' in *The Black Jacobins*, it was also the object of multiple efforts to stage it in tragedies. James himself wrote a play, *Toussaint Louverture*, which was produced starring the great African-American actor and communist militant Paul Robeson. We can find James's own dialectical thinking of the place of *collective* action as crucial to a modern tragedy of the revolution against racial slavery inscribed in his own stage directions: 'they, the Negro slaves, are the most important character in the play. Toussaint did not make the revolt. It was the revolt that made Toussaint'. James's whole political thinking could also be captured through his dramaturgical slogan: 'bringing in the chorus'. In the second edition of *The Black Jacobins*, James saluted the great Martinican poet Aimé Césaire as 'the architect of this [Caribbean] civilization, a commissioner of its blood, a guardian of its refusal to accept'.<sup>116</sup> Césaire himself wrote a compelling if relatively conventional biography of Toussaint but his response as a dramaturg to the Haitian revolution was truly innovative. In *And the Dogs Were Silent*, first produced as a 'lyrical oratorio' in 1946 and in a 'theatrical arrangement' as a 'tragedy' in 1956, Césaire radically revised tragic form, exploding the juxtaposition of protagonist and chorus into a poetic allegory in which the *agon* between characters (the 'rebel-builder', the 'architect') is inhabited by a multiplicity of pasts, and channels a plurality of voices. Not so much a Hölderlinian 'speech against speech' or a clash between ethical orders, but an effort to translate in verse Césaire's vision of the nexus between Black anti-colonial liberation and the legacies of Marxism and communism – the one which had led him, in his letter of resignation from the French Communist Party, to write about the need for a 'universal rich with everything that is particular, enriched and deepened by all particulars, by the coexistence of particulars'.

But a sustained theoretical reflection on the (im)possibility post-colonial tragedy would have to wait for another Martinican writer, Édouard Glissant. Glissant also penned a tragedy of the Haitian revolution, *Monsieur Toussaint*, but it was in his critical and theoretical essays, namely *L'intention poétique* (1969) and *Le discours antillais* (1981) that he broached the issue of tragic form. In brief, we could argue that for Glissant it was the shape of Caribbean history, the ever-deferred transition out of a colonial condition, which made the idea and practice of tragedy as the *form* given to contradiction particularly challenging to attain, or even impossible. Glissant presents tragedy as an art that plays with the relation between unveiling and opacity, with what he poetically captures as the 're-solution of the dissolved', the search for and resignification of a broken or menaced community. By contrast with the notion of tragedy as a matter of organic crisis, or the product of a hierarchically-organised social stability, for Glissant the great moments of tragedy are not ones of crisis. Rather tragedy requires a sense of fermentation and collective advance. Like Vernant, the tragic is here a matter of collective self-reflection: 'In the tragic act a community begins to meditate

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 400.

its own action. It is the sign of a shared possibility of action'.<sup>117</sup> Taking the 'national' focus of the Romantic philosophy of the tragic into the context of decolonisation and post-coloniality, Glissant notes that a people incapable of action does not yet know the tragic 'crystallisation', while conversely those who act already don't need it. It is on this basis that he envisages the possibility of a new tragic cycle that would be driven by what he calls 'denied fighting peoples', a cycle that would no longer require 'national unanimity' but move toward a 'planetary' poetic.

In the essays collected in *Le discours Antillais* this expansive anti-colonial horizon mutates into a *sui generis* argument for the decline or undesirability of the tragic. Glissant anatomises the Martinican 'Toussaint complex', elicited by the islands paralysing absence of iconic heroes, the desubjectivating effects of the 1848 abolition of slavery by the French metropole, and the sequence of sterile revolts that pepper its history. A tragic hero for Martinique would need to be drawn from the unwritten history of the fugitives, of the maroons, but in the absence of this figure, as Glissant muses, others' heroes cannot be our own, while our heroes are perforce the heroes of others (here referring explicitly to Frantz Fanon). But if tragic form is bound up with historical heroism as its content, and if it moreover hankers after totality ('the cosmo-metaphysical question of legitimacy') in a collective adventure aimed at resolving multiple conflicts, what is to be done in a situation where History appears to be elsewhere?<sup>118</sup> As he comes to abandon the possibility of repeating tragedy in the Caribbean, Glissant turns, by way of contrast and flight, to a minor genre, that of the Caribbean tale. The structure, temporality and form of the tale undo the tragic imperative. In the tale there is no trajectory from the obscure to the clear, there is no dating or chronology, and time is not the fundamental dimension of the human. And, perhaps most importantly, given the enduring association of tragic *agon* with the juridical, there is neither the law, nor its writing. For Glissant then, the 'Caribbean tale delimits a non-possessed landscape. It is anti-history'.<sup>119</sup> It allows the cross-pollination of multiple histories, what Glissant terms the infinite dissemination of Relation, without making concessions to the fascination of a sublime History, with its formative obsession with filiation, genealogy, and, one might add, guilt. In thinking Glissant's flight from tragedy with and against C.L.R. James efforts to give tragic form to the struggles for decolonisation – of the former's injunction not to try and recommence the Greek miracle and the latter's call to bring in the chorus – we can grow more sensitive to the enduring stakes of how we theorise a literary genre that continues to exceed, for good and ill, its restriction to particular histories, geographies, or even literary forms.

## Discussion of the literature

Cutting as it does across so many different disciplines – from classics to philosophy, history to comparative literature, theatre studies to ethnopoetics – and ranging across such a welter of textual and institutional objects, literature on tragedy defies synopsis. What's more, and as some of the most illuminating recent studies have detailed, the categories of our literary and theoretical modernity are largely shaped by successive engagements with

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<sup>117</sup> Édouard Glissant, *L'intention poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 197.

<sup>118</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 247.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.



tragedy and crystallisation of ‘the tragic’, potentially leading to a *mise en abyme* of sorts.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, modern European philosophy and literary theory are largely unintelligible if we neglect how interpretations of tragedy and ideologies of the tragic determined their trajectory. As we have suggested throughout this entry, it is nevertheless possible to broadly classify theoretical reflections on the genre in terms of whether their emphasis is primarily on the histories, forms and performances of tragedies, or on more universalisable, or even trans-historical, ideas of the tragic or tragedy. Contemporary discussions are still indebted not just to the Romantic and Idealist genealogy of the tragic, but to the dialectical and historical-materialist theories that were in a sense an immanent critique of that tragic vision formed in and around Jena between the early 1790s and the end of the nineteenth-century’s first decade. The works of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, but also Vincenzo Di Benedetto, Diego Lanza, and others for the Ancients, and Lucien Goldmann and Raymond Williams for the early modern period onwards, remain largely unsurpassed in their totalising grasp, though serious advances have been made, for instance, in the study of the relation between monetised exchange, sacrifice and Ancient tragedy.<sup>121</sup> The vital if ambivalent nexus between tragedy and revolution as categories of modernity has also been the object of concerted treatment,<sup>122</sup> while the hitherto largely neglected connections between tragedy, slavery (both ancient and modern)<sup>123</sup> and revolutions against racial capitalism<sup>124</sup> – intercut by the thematization of gender and sex difference – have also come to the fore as critical foci of research. While the death or decline of tragedy may still be a widespread conviction, albeit one that has been compelling countered,<sup>125</sup> there are few signs that the theory of tragedy is nearing expiry.

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<sup>120</sup> Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard (eds), *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Blair Hoxby, *What Was Tragedy? Theory and the Early Modern Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*; Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*; Jacques Taminiaux, *Le théâtre des philosophes: la tragédie, l'être, l'action* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1995)

<sup>121</sup> Richard Seaford, *Tragedy, Ritual and Money in Ancient Greece: Selected Essays*, ed. Richard Bostock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>122</sup> Miriam Leonard, *Tragic Modernities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>123</sup> Tina Chanter, *Whose Antigone? The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery* (Albany: SUNY, 2011).

<sup>124</sup> Jeremy Matthew Glick, *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>125</sup> Christoph Menke, *Tragic Play: Irony and Theater from Sophocles to Beckett*, trans. James Phillips (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

## Further reading

1. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks (eds), *Philosophy and Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 2000)
2. Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019)
3. Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard (eds), *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)
4. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992)
5. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)
6. T. J. Clark, "Picasso and Tragedy", in *Pity and Terror: Picasso's Path to Guernica*, ed. T.J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2017)
7. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983)
8. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002)
9. Jeremy Matthew Glick, *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2016)
10. Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine* (London: Verso, 2016)
11. Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)
12. Blair Hoxby, *What Was Tragedy? Theory and the Early Modern Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)
13. Miriam Leonard, *Tragic Modernities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015)
14. Christoph Menke, *Tragic Play: Irony and Theater from Sophocles to Beckett*, trans. James Phillips (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009)
15. James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on The Birth of Tragedy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000)
16. David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014)
17. Richard Seaford, *Tragedy, Ritual and Money in Ancient Greece: Selected Essays*, ed. Richard Bostock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)