

TRAGEDY AND REPETITION

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Let us now imagine Socrates' one great Cyclopiian eye turned on tragedy, an eye in which the lovely madness of artistic enthusiasm never glowed, let us remember how that eye was debarred from ever looking with pleasure into the abysses of the Dionysiac; what was this eye actually bound to see in the 'sublime and renowned' art of tragedy, as Plato called it? Something quite unreasonable, with causes which apparently lacked effects and effects which apparently lacked causes, while the whole was so varied and multifarious that it was bound to be repugnant to a reflective disposition.

Friedrich Nietzsche

1 The Death of Tragedy

Can the tragic conception of fate still truly tell us something today? Can the classical, Greek tragedy still teach us, when we turn to her in an attempt to understand the human condition in light of the technological culture that has established itself globally? Or is tragedy doomed to be an echo of a world that has become completely alien for (post)modern man? In *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872) Nietzsche argues that classical tragedy had become an entirely incomprehensible phenomenon even before Socrates and Plato (Nietzsche 1999, 68). Aristotle, in his rational conception of tragedy, undervalues its fatal and sublime character, too. Therefore, it is not surprising that Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy* argues, in line with Nietzsche with an undertone of regret, that the time of tragedy lies definitively behind us (Steiner 1961). In *Tragic Ambiguity. Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone* Lardinois and Oudemans also claim that (post)modern man no longer has access to the tragic. It constitutes "a gap in our cosmology, which neither has the power to pass tragedy on nor to eliminate it" (Oudemans and Lardinois 1987, 353). The various authors' analyses of how the death of tragedy came about differ in several respects.

However, there is one remarkable aspect on which they all agree: they all state that tragedy's death is marked by the transition from *mythos* to *logos*. Tragedy has died from a fatal overdose of technical rationality and optimism.

The position I am defending in this contribution radically opposes this view. My position is that tragedy can still teach us something today, and maybe even more so now than in the many intervening centuries that separate us from her days of glory in the fifth century B.C. The tragic reveals itself once more in (post)modern society, and nowhere more clearly than in the domain in which we believed tragedy had been eliminated. It is precisely in (post)modern technology that we experience the rebirth of the tragic. To be sure, since (post)modern culture differs from the Greek culture that produced tragedy in many respects, what we encounter is inevitably a repetition with a difference. But nevertheless it is a repetition – which is, therefore, tragic.

2 Christian and Modern 'Elimination' of the Tragic

When George Steiner argues, in *The Death of Tragedy*, that the age of tragedy is behind us, he is not merely referring to the extinction of the dramatic art form that found its classical expression in the fifth century B.C. in the works of poets such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and briefly reached spectacular heights once more in the sixteenth century in the work of Shakespeare and Racine. He is also referring to the disappearance of the tragic conception of life that was expressed in tragedies. The tragic art form articulates the idea that suffering is an integral part of human existence, and is therefore unavoidable:

Any realistic notion of tragic must start from the fact of the catastrophe. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This again is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy. (Steiner 1961, 8)¹

In fact, Steiner argues, this tragic conception of the world has been in a comatose state ever since the rise of Christianity. The Christian tradition is based on the belief that man will be relieved of his suffering in the end. The Bible, to be sure, contains a number of tragic

¹ As is more often the case Steiner's assertion is a bit dogmatic. Not all classical tragedies end in catastrophe. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* the main character Orestes, who is prosecuted by the Furies for killing his mother (because the latter had murdered his father together with her lover), is found not guilty by the oracle at Delphi in the last part of the story. In the sequel *Oedipus at Colonus* Oedipus also dies a peaceful death in the end, after he had poked out his eyes in Sophocles' *King Oedipus* (after discovering that he had killed his father and married his mother). For these heroes suffering is also an unavoidable part of life, though, which oftentimes cannot even be mended by a 'happy end'.

moments – think for instance of Job, whose faith is subjected to a severe trial by Satan, or of Jesus, suffering on the cross, who believes his Father has abandoned him –, but since there is always compensation and justice in the end², the tragic is silenced. Tragedy as an art form also has no place anymore in those days, according to Steiner. It briefly reawakens from her coma in early Modernity. This is a time in which Christianity loses its self-evident authority, without a “reasonable alternative” being at hand already. This crisis turns out to be a perfect breeding ground for a renewed awareness of the tragic (which has become more internalized in the intermediary era of Christianity in comparison to the tragic age of the Greeks). But as soon as the newfound, modern faith in the scientific explicability of the world and its technical manipulability fills the empty void that had emerged in the wake of the death of the Christian God, then the definitive death of tragedy is inevitable.

In the nineteenth century, Laplace announced that God was a hypothesis of which the rational mind had no further need; God took the great astronomer at his word. But tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God’s presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie. (Steiner 1961, 353)

Where modernity’s rational optimism continues the Christian “faith in a happy ending” (and therefore, in this respect, belongs more to the genre of comedy than to that of tragedy), this involves not so much a radical break with Christianity, but rather a continuation of it by different means. In modern culture both the dominant scientific-technological worldview (in the varying guises of positivism and scientism) and the dominant political ideologies (Marxism, fascism, liberalism) all promise mankind future happiness.³

3 The (Post)Modern Resurrection of the Tragic

Steiner’s thesis about the end of tragedy has struck a sympathetic chord, but it can be challenged on different grounds. *New Literary History* devoted a special issue on tragedy in 2004, in which we find a nice overview of the various lines of critique on Steiner’s thesis. The

² After his trials Job was amply compensated by the Lord: “So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters. (...) And in all the land were no women found [so] fair as the daughters of Job. (...) After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons’ sons, [even] four generations. So Job died, [being] old and full of days” (Job 42:12-17). Jesus’ martyrdom and his death on the cross was followed by resurrection.

³ And for this reason there is no room for tragedy within the aforementioned ideologies. Referring to a famous expression by Marx and Engels, that necessity is only blind to those who don’t understand it, Steiner discusses the impossibility of tragedy within a Marxist worldview in detail in his book (Steiner 1961, 342).

issue opens with an article by Steiner, in which he shows that he still underwrites the central ideas of *The Death of Tragedy* forty years after its publication. While he meets his critics halfway in acknowledging that the recognition of man's "ontological homelessness" and primordial suffering can also be found in modern thinkers, such as Marx, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss, and while he is even willing to admit that this has found its expression in modern art forms such as the novel, opera, cinema and the documentary, yet he unflinchingly adheres to his position that the radical pessimism of "absolute tragedy" is principally irreconcilable with both Christianity and modern atheism (Steiner 2004, 11, 14).

Steiner's critics accuse him of making traditional, Greek tragedy absolute. In reality this classical guise is only one of the historical appearances of a genre that has continually renewed itself throughout history.⁴ The criticism launched at Steiner is partially politically inspired. In his book Steiner wrongly identifies the tragic, it is said, with the individual struggle of highly placed, white, male heroes in a world that was still populated with gods – an identification that is based on an elitist, conservative-liberal conception of the world.⁵ In March 2004 Steiner still likes to point out that tragedy, in his view, is all about the "aristocracy of suffering" that is engaged in a heroic battle with "the supernatural" (Steiner 2004, 9). Critics point out that this is historically false, since women, strangers and especially the community play a central role in many classical tragedies. Moreover, in the work of Sophocles and even more so in Euripides, the focus shifts more and more from an intervention by the gods to a tragic battle between mutually incompatible passions within the individual, between individuals, or between a person and his circumstances (Heering 1961, 164ff.). Also, Steiner's critics argue that in modernity a fundamental *democratization* and *secularization* of the tragic has occurred. In the risk society the tragic becomes an everyday phenomenon. Williams opens his *Modern Tragedy* with the statement that every man is inevitably confronted with tragic occurrences throughout his lifetime (Williams 1966, 12-15). In *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic* Eagleton points towards the increased freedom of ever larger groups of people to explain the democratization of the tragic. This increase in freedom doesn't necessarily lead to an increase in happiness, but it does enlarge the chances of tragedies, because these occur when fate collides head on and fuses with human freedom (Eagleton 2003, 203-240).

As Felski argues in her introduction to the special issue of *New Literary History*, the tragic appears to be anything but dead, but rather the opposite: there is a *universalization* of

⁴ Some years after the publication of Steiner's book Raymond Williams already extensively argued this point in his book *Modern Tragedy* (Williams 1966). By the way, it is remarkable that Williams does not mention Steiner's book.

⁵ Authors such as Bertold Brecht, who were inspired by Marxism, have called tragedy a reactionary art form, since it would make spectators aware of the inevitability of the existing social structures and the suffering that stems from them (Williams 1966, 190-204).

the tragic (Felski 2004, ix). The contributions to this special issue, of which many discuss the effects of the tragic in popular (youth) culture, point out, moreover, that the tragic has continually found new forms of expression throughout its effective history. Those who are willing to see this will not be tempted to engage in essentialist debates on the question of whether features such as rhyme, dramatic form, the presence of a choir, etcetera belong to the true form of tragedy or not.

While much is in favor of this thesis of universalization, on the face of things it does appear to pass over Steiner's argument as to why there is no room for the tragic in the modern world view a little too easily. Even if Eagleton is right and the feeding ground for tragic occurrences has broadened in modern culture, and even if we acknowledge that the chances of such occurrences have increased explosively in the risk society, that still does not mean that we will necessarily experience such events as tragic. The fact that tragic incidents occur in modern culture does not necessarily imply that a tragic conception of life will emerge along with it. As long as human suffering is viewed from a modern, technical perspective its tragic character – the concurrence of freedom and fate – cannot be experienced as such, but will rather instigate further action.

Modern culture's tragedy, perhaps, can be found in the fact that it cannot face up to the tragic character of her fantasies of manipulability. Miscalculation (*hamartia*), blindness (*atè*) with regard to the tragic reality in which they become trapped and foolhardiness (*hybris*) characterize the behavior of protagonists in tragic events. Eras, too, can be labeled tragic in this sense: not because the actions that characterize them are based on an understanding or an appreciation of the tragic aspects of life, but quite the opposite: because the actions that define them are entirely devoid of any such understanding. While the spectators of a tragedy often see the catastrophe coming, its protagonists often only reach this level of understanding after it has unfolded.

4 Tragic Repetition with a Difference

However, with this conclusion Steiner's statement that "absolute tragedy" is irreconcilable with modern, technological culture, is not properly invalidated yet. Let me clarify this by using the position taken by Oudemans and Lardinois in their *Tragic Ambiguity. Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone* (Oudemans and Lardinois 1987). They argue that while Sophocles' *Antigone* forms one of the foundations of European culture, at the same time it is also part of a cosmology that is "entirely separated" from that culture. Although they deem it possible to gain a deeper understanding of tragedy and its underlying cosmology, which they label as *interconnective*, they argue that it is impossible to get beyond our own modern *separative* cosmology, which has fundamentally shaped all modern-day interpreters. A better

understanding of the interconnective cosmology, moreover, cannot help us in undermining the modern cosmology, according to the authors. The best we may accomplish is pointing out the flaws in our own cosmology, which is, nor could ever be, tragic in any way.

In the introduction to their research the authors clarify their interpretation of *Antigone* by comparing it to three traditional approaches.⁶ The first, *reconstructive approach* aims at reconstructing the original meaning of a tragedy. In other words, the interpreter attempts to *place himself within the horizon* of the classical piece. This requires a never-ending attempt at separating out later interpretations and contemporary examples. We could compare such an approach to the work of a restorer, who removes old layers of varnish from a painting to restore it to its original luster. While such attempts, which are characteristic of classical philology, are incredibly valuable to come to a deeper understanding of classical tragedy, Oudemans and Lardinois argue that it would be an illusion to think that we could completely cast aside our current-day presuppositions. Removing the old layers of varnish, after all, does not mean that we automatically also remove our modern way of interpreting paintings.

The second, *constructive approach*, which is propagated for instance in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, departs from the assumption that an impartial interpretation is impossible, as do Oudemans and Lardinois. Instead, Gadamer assumes that one cannot even have access to a classical work without any presuppositions – they form the *conditio sine qua non* for interpretation. However, according to Gadamer such interpretation does not aim at placing oneself within another horizon, but rather of *fusing* the horizons of the original work and that of the interpreter (Gadamer 1986, 311). In this fusion new meaning arises, and the “effective history” of a classical work such as *Antigone* is simply the never-ending historical process of constructing meaning. This is also where the practical relevance of interpretation can be found, according to Gadamer. We don't read classical works only to come to an understanding of how ‘people’ used to view the world, but also, and especially, to experience the limits of our own horizon and thus to possibly enlarge that horizon. However, Oudemans and Lardinois have serious doubts regarding the constructive approach. Not only is there a danger of burying the classical work in the interpreters' presuppositions, but the fusion of horizons might also involve a repression of precisely those aspects of the classical work that do not fit into the newly gained, merged meaning.

This realization forms the foundation for the third, *deconstructive approach* to tragedy. This approach, which is closely related to the work of Derrida, resists both the belief in the possibility of reconstructing an original meaning and the violence of the constructive approach. While the deconstructive approach also acknowledges that every interpretation

⁶ The tripartite distinction made by Oudemans and Lardinois, aligns with my own tripartite distinction of the reconstructive, constructive, and deconstructive forms of interpretation, which I have presented in *The Tragedy of Finitude* (De Mul 2004). It is this terminology that I will use below.

necessarily involves grafting new meanings into the 'original' text, it refuses giving into this fact in a carefree fashion, and rather focuses attention to that which inevitably escapes interpretation. For instance, it focuses attention to fundamental ambiguities in the tragic worldview that cannot be understood within a framework of thinking that is based on the principles of identity and non-contradiction. By uncovering such ambiguities the deconstructive approach hopes to accomplish a *dissemination* of horizons instead of their fusion, so that the dominance of modern presuppositions can be undermined and an openness towards other forms of understanding can be accomplished. Think, for example, of Derrida's interpretation of the many, partially incompatible meanings of the word *pharmakon* in Plato (Derrida 1972, 112).

While Oudemans and Lardinois agree with Derrida's starting point that we are inevitable bound to our modern cosmology, they argue that it is an illusion to think that we could leave it behind. Showing the gaps in our own cosmology – by pointing out aspects that cannot possibly be accommodated within it – is the best we can do. Only through this *via negativa* we can experience something of the "radical otherness" of *Antigone*, and only in a distant way.

We shall employ the intellectual tools of separative cosmology, not in order to undermine it, but to point out those aspects of the *Antigone* which cannot be incorporated into our own cosmology. Those aspects apparently do not correspond with anything in our cosmology: we find blanks here. (Oudemans and Lardinois 1987, 4)

Despite this radical otherness the authors still have much to say regarding the cosmology that underlies *Antigone*. This cosmology, according to them, is based on a radical ambiguity, which carries the cosmological order, but constantly threatens to undermine her at the same time: "We believe that this is the fundamental issue of the *Antigone*: the duplicity of human and divine order and the power which both underlies and undermines this order" (idem, 4). Unlike Plato and the metaphysical tradition that is built on it, Sophocles does not attempt to exorcize these conflicts between the cosmological order and the ambiguities .that threatens to undermine this order, but rather tries to "increase the conflicts between order and ambiguity in unpredictable directions" (idem).

Oudemans and Lardinois assume that every culture is based on a number of fundamental distinctions, for instance those between nature and culture, between the human and the divine, life and death, and male and female (idem, 31). That which cannot be distinguished is "uncanny" or "unheimlich" (idem, 29). Modern, separative cosmology is different from the tragic one because in the latter the distinctions remain ambiguous –

because they contain numerous implicit connections –, while these distinctions are made absolute in the former (idem, 32). In the strict division between the natural and the moral order nature does not have moral meaning and morality does not have a basis in nature. Whereas in an interconnective cosmology lightning is not just a natural phenomenon, but also the action of a divine being, in a separative cosmology the natural phenomenon and the divine being belong to radically separate domains. This incommensurability is emphasized time and again through a minute interpretation of *Antigone's* stationary songs and episodes. The final conclusion drawn by the authors is not surprising, therefore:

We can only say that the *Antigone* is part of our innermost being, but that it is also beyond reach. It is a blank in our cosmology which has no power either to propagate or to dislocate it. Our inability to experience this gap in our cosmology is not a tragedy, because our separative life is *untragic*. (idem, 236, emphasis added)

Without wanting to detract from their often brilliant explanation of *Antigone*, Oudemans and Lardinois' radical distinction between tragedy's interconnective cosmology and modernity's separative one does raise a number of serious questions. While they reject an essentialist understanding of cultures, using Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, and while they emphasize that European culture still displays traits of an interconnective cosmology (idem, 33), and while they acknowledge that ever since Hegel tradition has always played an important role in criticizing modern cosmology (idem, 43)⁷, time and again at the critical junctions in their argument Oudemans and Lardinois radically oppose interconnective and separative cosmology.⁸

Besides the fact that this radical opposition is hard to reconcile with their recognition of the overlap, the continuity, and the return of the experience of the tragic, this radical opposition, if it were true, would undermine their entire interpretative enterprise. As Dilthey has noted, interpretation always takes place in the wide area between radical otherness and radical familiarity. In case of the former, understanding is entirely impossible, in case of the

⁷ Oudemans and Lardinois note that it is no accident that the recognition of the fundamental role of negativity leads Hegel to place tragedy in the heart of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (idem, 43). This set the tone for a lasting tradition within German philosophy that also includes Nietzsche and Heidegger. Also see *Philosophy and Tragedy* (De Beistegui and Sparks 2000) and *On Germans and other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life, Studies in Continental Thought* (Schmidt 2001). More recently in French and Anglo-Saxon philosophy an interest in tragedy has also arisen, partially in line with the aforementioned German tradition. See for instance Derrida's *Glas* (Derrida 1974) and Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Nussbaum 1986).

⁸ Moreover, they argue that modern-day Japanese culture has a thriving interconnective cosmology (idem, 41). In the era of globalization this entails that elements of it will also find their way into other cultures. For a remarkable example of such intercultural fusion, see 'Zen and the art of computer maintenance' (De Mul 2007).

latter it is entirely unnecessary (Dilthey 1914-2005, VII, 225). In the case of the development of the tragic interpretation is necessary because it involves both continuity and discontinuity (De Mul 2009). The intention in this enterprise is to gain a deeper understanding of the tragic dimension of the current, (post)modern culture.

It is remarkable that the blossoming of tragedy and of a tragic conception of life arises predominantly in periods that are characterized by turbulent ontological, social and technological revolutions. It doesn't seem to be an accident that the first Golden Age of tragedy coincided with the emergence of the Athenian democracy. This Golden Age corresponded with the transition from the old, mythological worldview to the rationalist worldview, the birth of philosophy and science. And the second Golden Age of tragedy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries marked the transformation from a religious, medieval culture into our modern, technological one. In the (post)modern risk society once more we appear to be developing a sensitivity towards the tragic. The question is whether this is the start of a new, (post)modern attitude towards fate.

It remains to be seen whether this tragic conception of life will fully "become conscious", or whether our Western minds will remain caught in the comatose slumber that has taken hold of us with the rise of Christian faith, and that has been continued by technical means in modern pharmaceutical science and anesthetics. Even if there were a repetition of the 'tragic worldview' of the Greeks, it would inevitably be a repetition with a difference. Karl Marx once wrote that all great individuals and events from history occur twice, first as tragedy, and the second time as a farce (Marx 1971). In fact history doesn't repeat itself, but only those things that do *not* become part of history, because they are left unprocessed. Let us hope that we learn to cope with the painful insights of the tragic poets. Perhaps we might put our hope on the age of 'the old Europe'. After all, as the final words of the stationary choir of *Antigone* state:

Wisdom is far the chief element in happiness
and, secondly, no irreverence towards the gods.
But great words of haughty men exact
in retribution blows as great
and in old age teach wisdom.

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Abstract

According to writers such as Nietzsche, Steiner, and Oudemans and Lardinois the tragic culture of the Greeks has become entirely alien to us. They argue that within the Christian and modern worldview there is no place for tragedy anymore. In this article it is claimed that this does not entail in any shape or form that tragic events cannot take place anymore within Christian and modern culture. In modern culture this particularly happens, with no lack of tragic irony, precisely in the domain in which we believed tragedy had been eliminated: (our interaction with) technology.

Although technological tragedies differ in many respects from classical tragedies, they also show deep continuities. Just as in the case of their classical models, the behavior of the tragic heroes of our time is characterized by miscalculation (*hamartia*), blindness (*atè*) with regard to the tragic reality and foolhardiness (*hybris*).

Now, tragic events do not automatically raise tragic awareness. Tragedies are characterized by the fact that the tragic heroes – unlike the spectators – are unaware of the fate that is befalling them, and coming about because of them. But most tragedies also have a reversal of circumstances (*peripéteia*), a moment at which hopeful expectation crumbles and the hero suddenly becomes aware of his tragic position. Postmodernity is another way of saying that modern culture recognizes itself as tragic.