

Tragedy and Metaphysics

Neo-classical views of tragedy: tragedy as morally significant. Romantic post-Kantian reflection on tragedy: Schiller, Hegel, Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, Schelling.

Reading – primary texts

- F. Schiller, 'On the art of tragedy' (1792) and 'On the pathetic' (1793), in *Essays*, ed. W. Hinderer and D. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993).
- F. Hölderlin, 'The ground for Empedocles' (1799), and 'Remarks on *Antigone*' (1803), in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).
- F. W. J. von Schelling, *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795), in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796)*, trans. F. Marti (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1980), pp. 192-4.
- F. W. J. von Schelling, F. W. J. von, *The Philosophy of Art* (1804-5), ed. and trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), pp. 247-80.
- A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1819, 1844), 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. I, bk. 3, §51, pp. 252-5.
- G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (1835), 2 vols., trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), vol. 2, pp. 1192-1237. (Or see extracts in S. Houlgate ed., *The Hegel Reader*, ch. 30.) Some of the same ideas are presented, more briefly but less perspicuously, in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§464-76 and §§731-43.
- F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), trans. Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993). Read at least the prefatory 'Attempt at a self-criticism' and §§1-5 of the main text.

Reading - commentary

- M. Budd, *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music*, pp. 110-23. On the hedonic problem of tragedy.
- D. Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). Short, wide-ranging discussion.
- M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 9. Survey of German theories of tragedy before Nietzsche.
- H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 129-34.
- J. W. Krutch, 'The tragic fallacy', in *The Modern Temper* (New York: Harcourt, 1929).
- G. Steiner, 'Tragedy, pure and simple', in P. Stern ed., *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*.
- A. C. Bradley, 'Hegel's theory of tragedy', in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1909).
- R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other*, ch. 10. On Hegel's theory of tragedy.
- S. Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics*, ch. 8. Comparing Hegel's theory of tragedy with that of Nietzsche, and defending the former.

Essay question

'The true significance of tragedy is not moral but metaphysical.' Discuss.

A. C. Bradley: 'it is extremely hard to make out exactly what this experience [of tragedy] is, because, in the very effort to make it out, our reflecting mind, full of everyday ideas, is always tending to transform it by the application of these ideas, and so elicit a result which, instead of representing the fact, conventionalises it'. Tragedy presents us with a 'mystery', an 'inexplicable fact'.

Neo-classical views of tragedy. **Sidney:** 'Therefore poetry is an art of imitation ... with this end, to teach and delight ... the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls ... can be capable of'. Tragedy is 'so excellent a representation of whatsoever is most worthy to be learned'. **Rymer:** tragedy represents '*poetical Justice*'. **Milton:** 'the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems'. **Dryden:** drama is '*A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind*'. **D'Aubignac:** 'Drama does not show things as they are, but as they ought to have been ... if the dramatic action is clear and well-constructed, it will show the power of virtue shining out ... [even when overcome, it] always remains admirable', while vice 'even when it triumphs by violence, never ceases to be abominable. Hence the spectators draw their own conclusion, quite naturally, that it is better to embrace virtue at the risk of suffering injustice.' **Corneille:** tragedy enforces the sovereignty of reason and hence of morality over the passions. **Racine:** tragic pity and terror temper and refine our passions in order to set them in conformity with morality and reason. **Lessing:** tragedy induces pity and fear in such a way as to transform these passions into virtues.

Neo-classicism's argument for the moral view of tragedy: 1. Tragedy represents for our edification the morally proper consequences of virtue and vice (poetical Justice). 2. Tragedy's arousal of emotion is morally beneficent.

Rymer: 'besides the *purging* of the *passions*; something must stick by observing that constant order, that harmony and beauty of Providence, that necessary relation and chain, whereby the causes and the effects, the virtues and rewards, the vices and their punishments are proportion'd and link'd together; how deep and dark soever are laid the Springs, and however intricate and involv'd are their operations'. **Dryden:** in tragedy 'the laws of justice are more strictly to be observed; and examples of punishment to be made to deter mankind from the pursuit of vice ... Thus tragedy fulfils one great part of its institution: which is, by example, to instruct.' **Johnson:** 'the design of tragedy is to instruct by moving the passions'. **Addison:** tragedy is 'one of the most delightful and most improving Entertainments': tragic dramas 'cherish and cultivate that Humanity which is the Ornament of our Nature. They soften Insolence, sooth Affliction, and subdue the Mind to the Dispensations of Providence.' **Johnson:** 'He [Shakespeare] sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose ... he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care.'

Shelley. '[A] poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as a temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty'. Epic and dramatic poetry shows 'beauty of the internal nature', 'naked truth and splendour'; moral attributes are reduced to outward shape and 'costume'. Athenian tragedy represents 'that ideal perfection and energy which everyone feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become'; 'even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion' in tragedy; 'error is thus divested of its willfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice'. 'Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God.'

Schiller. Tragedy is 'the particular art that establishes the pleasure of sympathy as its purpose', and we take pleasure in tragedy 'by virtue of the relation to morality', the pleasure being 'greater in minds that are moral'. The opposition of morality to sensuous life 'is the condition for igniting that power of mind, whose activity produces the pleasure that we take in sympathetic suffering'. Tragedy provides a vision in which 'dissatisfaction with fate falls to the wayside, losing itself in the presentiment or rather in a distinct consciousness of a teleological connection among things, a sublime order, a benevolent will. Then, allied with our pleasure in moral harmony there is the invigorating image of the most perfect moral purposiveness in the entire expanse of nature. Its apparent violation, which in a single case caused pain,

becomes simply a goad to our reason to search out general laws for a justification of this particular case and to resolve the isolated dissonance within the grand harmony.' '[T]he most splendid pieces of the Greek stage leave something to be desired'. In inferior forms of tragedy, 'the misfortune springs, not from immoral sources, but rather from external things that have neither a will nor are subject to one'. The effect of tragedy presupposes the thought of 'what *should* and *can* happen', the thought that 'one should disregard the [tragic] loss and that a duty exists to allow it no influence' on oneself.

Hegel. The true content of the tragic action is provided, so far as concerns the *aims* adopted by the tragic characters, by the range of the substantive and independently justified powers that influence the human will: family love between husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters; political life also, the patriotism of the citizens, the will of the ruler ... [Genuinely tragic characters], even if they are living and individual themselves, they are simply the *one* power dominating their own specific character; for, in accordance with their own individuality, they have inseparably identified themselves with some single particular aspect of those solid interests we have enumerated above, and are prepared to answer for that identification ... the ethical powers, just like the agents, are differentiated in their domain and their individual appearance. Now if, as dramatic poetry requires, these thus differentiated powers are summoned into appearance as active and are actualized as the specific aim of a human 'pathos' which passes over into action, then their harmony is cancelled and they come on the scene in *opposition* to one another in reciprocal independence ... The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification* ... In this way ... an unresolved contradiction is set up ... However justified the tragic character and his aim, however necessary the tragic collision, the third thing required is the tragic resolution of this conflict. By this means eternal justice is exercised on individuals and their aims in the sense that it restores the substance and unity of ethical life with the downfall of the character who has disturbed the peace ... although the characters have a purpose which is valid in itself, they can carry it out in tragedy only by pursuing it one-sidedly and so contradicting and infringing someone else's purpose.'

Hölderlin. The tragic is 'the metaphor of an intellectual intuition', viz. the intuition of a primordial living unity prior to the separation of subject and object. Suffering results because the feeling of the whole requires itself to be felt in each of its parts, thereby 'transcend[ing] the boundary' of the parts. Tragic affirmation consists in a return to this original unity, or to a new form of it: '*at this birth of the highest hostility the highest reconciliation appears to be the case*'; 'the separation proceeds until the parts are in their most extreme tension, where they resist one another most strongly. From this conflict, it returns into itself ... a new unity originates'. The tragic rests on 'boundless union purifying itself through boundless separation'; tragic protagonists 'are all more or less attempts to solve the problem of destiny', 'cancelled to the extent that they are not universally valid'.

Schopenhauer. 1. Tragedy exhibits the human world-as-representation as a self-manifestation of will. 2. The proper response to tragedy is a state of resignation.

Schopenhauer's doctrine that human existence is itself sin: tragedy leads ultimately to a judgement of 'eternal justice' (fault is involved in the very individuated existence of the self, consequently there is a rightness to its tragic destruction).

Schelling. Tragedy portrays 'necessity genuinely caught in a struggle with freedom, yet such that a balance obtains between the two [...] *both*, necessity and freedom, emerge from this struggle simultaneously as victorious *and* vanquished, and accordingly *equal* in every respect. But precisely this is doubtlessly the highest manifestation of art, namely, that freedom elevate itself to a position of equity with necessity, and that necessity appear as the equal of freedom without the latter losing in significance in the process [...] The essence of tragedy is thus an actual and objective conflict between freedom in the subject on the one hand, and necessity on the other, a conflict that does not end such that one or the other succumbs, but rather such that both are manifested in perfect indifference as simultaneously victorious and vanquished.' The tragic protagonist 'is *necessarily* guilty of transgression'; 'This is the highest possible misfortune: by fate to become guilty without genuine guilt'; 'fate itself makes the guilty person into a

transgressor'; the protagonist chooses to 'atone voluntarily' for the 'guilt imposed by fate itself'.

For next time, after Reading Week, if you wish to read ahead:

- M. Heidegger, 'The origin of the work of art' (1950) [abridged], in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. Farrell Krell.
- M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's doubt', in *Sense and Non-Sense*, ch. 1.
- H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd & revised edn., Part I, 'The question of truth as it emerges in the experience of art': esp. pp. xxi-xxxviii, 81-121.