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MICHAEL KELLY

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Kristin Gjesdal

TRAGEDY (Modern & Contemporary)

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There is a close relationship between modern tragedy and modern philosophy of art—so close, indeed, that it would be no gross exaggeration to propose that modern philosophy of art first takes shape as a reflection on the status and nature of tragedy as it emerges in ancient Greek culture and resurfaces, in a new and challenging form, in the work of William Shakespeare. For it is against the background of the enlightenment debate over the value and relevance of Shakespearean drama—as it fundamentally breaks with the credo of classicist criticism—that Immanuel Kant starts working on his third Critique and, a bit later, the Kantian turn to pure aesthetic judgment is criticized by the Schlegel brothers, F. W. J. Schelling, G. W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. As it develops in interaction with post-Kantian philosophy of art, modern tragedy finds its shape in the works of Friedrich Hölderlin, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and, later on, Georg Büchner, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov. Finally, twentieth-century tragedy reaches an emblematic form in the work of Samuel Beckett. Upon encountering Beckett's barren, yet hyper-expressive prose, philosophers like Georg Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno faced the challenge of accounting for literature and its capacity, in a Europe ravaged by war and disaster, to express the ultimate limits of the human condition. In this way, modern tragedy is not simply an artistic form that is theorized and classified in a more or less adequate and coherent philosophical language, but a force that came to shape the very nature of aesthetics as a modern, academic discipline.

i. Modern Tragedy and the Birth of Philosophical Aesthetics

It is difficult to think of a work that has influenced modern art to quite the same extent as Aristotle's *Poetics*. From the renaissance and all through the classicist movements of later centuries, the *Poetics* was read as a descriptive account of Greek tragedy *and*, all the same, as providing a set of norms and guidelines for budding tragedians. To write tragedy was to write according to an Aristotelian scheme of imitation of men in action. Whatever work did not meet with these requirements was, by definition, no tragedy proper. This perception was questioned when Shakespearean tragedy, gradually gaining popularity in France and Germany throughout the 1750s, forced critics and philosophers to reconsider the Aristotelian paradigm.

Classicist critics had long rejected the aesthetic relevance of Shakespeare's drama; they found his work lacked structure, his characters were too diverse, and his lengthy soliloquies were undramatic. This only changed when philosophers like Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried Herder called for a reconsideration of the Aristotelian paradigm. *The Poetics*, Herder pointed out, is a book on and of Greek culture, and even though it amounts to a philosophical masterpiece, it would be a misunderstanding to view it as a manual for modern art. If Shakespeare's work does not meet the standards of *The Poetics*, this does not lessen the value of Shakespeare, but, rather, calls for a historicizing of *both* Aristotle *and* modern tragedy. Shakespeare, it is argued, is right in abandoning the imitation of the ancients. His is a new and genuinely modern theatre that, in turn, must give rise to a new and genuinely modern philosophy of drama. Having learned from the reception of Aristotle, Herder insists that modern

reflection on art ought to proceed from the study of actual works to the level of theory, rather than engender a set of categories under which the individual tragedies ought to be subsumed. In the Anglophone world, Edward Young and the Scottish philosophers had found ways to make sense of Shakespearean drama. And in a German context, Herder, the Schlegel brothers, Hölderlin, Schelling, Hegel, and Nietzsche all came to reflect on tragedy in ways that follow along the lines staked out by the initial debate about Shakespeare. Now, it was argued, the question “what is tragedy?” ought to be reformulated as a question of what *modern* tragedy is. How can we speak of a tragedy that is situated within and reflective of a way of life that, in its emphasis on individuality and freedom, is constitutively different from that of the ancient Greeks? Hence the question is not simply what modern tragedy is and ought to be, but also to what extent it is possible for modern readers to understand ancient Greek tragedy and read it as the ancients did.

As it was initiated in the mid 1700s, this discussion fundamentally shapes the beginning of modern aesthetics. At this point philosophers, taking into account the historical development of art, start to reflect systematically on the nature of aesthetic value. Triggered by the experience of a gulf between ancient and modern tragedy, these philosophers were driven by a sense that our existence as modern is and must be disclosed through the expressions of modern art, tragedy being a case in point.

ii. Tragedy and the Tragic

How, then, can tragedy provide a lens through which modern life is expressed and reflected? The answer to this question must be sought in the relationship between tragedy

(as a particular kind of drama) and the tragic (as related to the conditions of finite, human life). The relationship between tragedy and the tragic had not been part of Aristotelian *Poetics*. Nor was it on the agenda of Shakespeare's first proponents in Germany (i.e., late Enlightenment philosophy of art). It is only with Hegel, the philosopher of modernity *per se*, that the link between modern tragedy and the tragic aspect of modern life is brought to full, reflective consciousness.

Hegel views modernity as reflected in a larger spectrum of human practice: epistemology (Descartes and the turn to the *ego cogito*), religion (Luther and the *sola scriptura*), education (the shift from authority-driven teaching to individual *Bildung* to citizenship and freedom), and political life (the French revolution and its promise of political self-determination). In the realm of literature, modernity finds expression in the work of Shakespeare. Although Shakespeare draws on pre-modern, mythical material, figures such as Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, express the price to pay for the new-won freedom of the individual: the endless doubts, the melancholy, the hopeless search for trans-subjective meaning. Through Shakespeare's tragedies, the drama of the modern individual is brought to the stage and, concomitantly, given outer form and expression. Likewise *Faust* (1808), Goethe's masterly modern tragedy, pitches the predicament of the modern individual as related to his ceaseless quest for godlike, universal knowledge.

Even anti-idealistic philosophers like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche would, in different ways, take over the notion of an intrinsic relationship between modern tragedy and modern life. For Schopenhauer, modern tragedy is in a particular position amongst the arts because it demonstrates that suffering and misfortune is not the fate of a few, wretched individuals, but built into the nature of human individualization. Likewise for

Nietzsche. Though he came to skip his planned discussion of Shakespeare in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the reference to Hamlet, as expressing the Dionysian spirit within the conditions of modern life, proves crucial to his youthful call for a rebirth of tragedy in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of his friend, Richard Wagner. In Wagner's musical drama, Nietzsche finds an ability to rejoice and affirm life as it is given: oftentimes difficult and painful, yet with the possibility of ephemeral transcendence through the creation of great art. It is as such that Nietzsche's philosophy of tragedy sheds light on modern dance, be it in Isadora Duncan's ecstatic-romantic adaptations, or, in a more mediated form, pieces by Martha Graham, Pina Bausch, and Merce Cunningham.

iii. Tragedy and Historical Consciousness

If philosophers, from Hegel to Nietzsche and beyond, have focused on how modern tragedy reflects modern life, there is also another, related but nonetheless different, aspect of this issue that emerges in the late Enlightenment period: that of historicity and the relationship between ancient and modern drama.

The recognition of modern drama *as* modern, i.e., as constitutively different from ancient tragedy, is only possible when the classicist paradigm has lost its power and influence. In its French-speaking guises as well as its German off-springs (Johann Christoph Gottsched and others), classicist criticism had focused on the possibility of recreating Greek art, that is, of Greek art establishing a timeless model for art as such. The key to such recreation is the idea of law-bound harmonies radiating through beauty. The historicity of art plays no significant role in this paradigm. Nor, for that sake, does the expressiveness of the individual artist. With the breakdown of the classicist paradigm

we see the emerging identity of the modern artist and also a new-won awareness of the historicity of art. The values, beliefs, and practices that reverberate in Greek drama are no longer ours and hence our art needs to be one in which modernity can find expression.

This, no doubt, is a gain for modern art. Only at this point is modern art—and with it, modern tragedy—understood on its own premises. Only at this point can modern art endorse its modernity, its capacity to express the world of which it is a part. Yet this gain comes at a price. For as it was seen by philosophers at the time, Greek art not only represented a certain aesthetic paradigm, but also a model, a wishful projection though it might be, for a harmonious, ethical life: a seamless, organic unity between individual and society. In Hegel's view, Sophocles's *Antigone* stages the breakdown of this unity; it is a play whose tragic nature rests with the fact that *both* Creon *and* Antigone represent essential social values and are in a given sense right in pushing their agenda in a most unyielding manner. Yet Hegel, like Hölderlin, his friend at Tübinger Stift, cannot help noting a certain melancholy in the face of this loss. As Hölderlin notes, what was nature to the Greeks, their pre-reflective worldview and set of practices, is culture to us moderns: an object of reflection and intellectual scrutiny, something towards which we take *a stance*. The loss of such immediacy is, Hegel and Hölderlin maintain, in some way the tragedy of modern life. While Hegel philosophizes this predicament, Hölderlin dramatizes the modern condition both in his poetry and in his artful translation of Sophocles. With Hölderlin, tragedy transcends the format of drama proper, be it classical or modern, and extends into poetry. Hölderlin's literary contribution will be a point of fascination for philosophers like Adorno and Martin Heidegger. Even though Adorno and Heidegger situate themselves in the opposing camps of, respectively, critical theory and

phenomenology, they both appreciate Hölderlin's insight into modernity as constituted through the loss of a deeper unity between nature and culture, individual and society. In Adorno's case, this would drive him to explore contemporary forms of tragedy. Before we get that far, however, we need to address the way in which these aspects of modernity—the loss of immediacy and the turn towards individuality—are brought to stage in the realist tragedy of Ibsen and Strindberg.

iv. Modern Life; Modern Tragedy

Philosophers from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to Adorno and Stanley Cavell have seen Ibsen's plays—in particular *A Doll House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890)—as staging the price to pay for bourgeois culture. Focusing on the tragic heroine of *Hedda Gabler*, an Antigone who is deprived of the larger framework of ethical-religious principles, Adorno summarizes this reading when suggesting that Ibsen's play expresses a tension between beauty and morality. This, no doubt, is an important aspect of Ibsen's drama. Further, Adorno's reading marks a shift in the reception of Ibsen, moving from a framework of narrow naturalist drama to that of modernist theatre. However, if Ibsen stages the flipside of bourgeois society, this hardly covers the complexity of his *oeuvre*. For at the center of his work rests a set of questions that are reflective of, yet cannot be reduced to, societal critique: the challenge of living together as modern individuals, of recognition, misrecognition, and the limits of individuality in and over against others, even those others with whom the self is supposed to be particularly close (spouses, lovers, parents, sons, and daughters). His is, as Cavell has pointed out, a universe of

moral perfectionism, one where conversations about selfhood, justice, and human relationships are such that they cannot be discursively redeemed, but only acted out.

Strindberg's characters, Miss Julie and the haphazard ensemble from *A Dream Play* (1901), are equally out of touch with their lives. In the case of Agnes, the semi-mythical protagonist of *A Dream Play*, the very notion of an individualized human existence is challenged or even dissolved. Resounding the sensitivities of Ibsen, the Zola'ian call for a naturalist theatre, and the agenda of André Antoine's *Théâtre Libre*, Strindberg's work nonetheless extends the realist commitments into a phantasmagorical landscape that goes far beyond the focus on class and conduct (*Miss Julie* (1888)) and blurs the distinction between reality and dream. As part of this Nordic modernism—visually expressed in the melancholy paintings of Edvard Munch or Vilhelm Hammershøi, musically resounding in Edvard Grieg—tragedy yet again comes to the fore as the artform *per se*, as an expression that shows how art still has the capacity to reveal the most fundamental conditions of human life, not as grand and fuelled by high ideals and heroic ambitions, but as finite, lived, and sometimes painful beyond the bearable.

Against this background, it is possible to see how modernist tragedy, in the well-known forms of Beckett's work from *Endgame* to *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and television plays such as *Quad* (1981), does not abandon a call to "realism" in the widest meaning of the word (this had been Lukács's misunderstanding). Beckett's drama is indeed reflecting on and digging into reality—his and ours—and his work does not depict the life of distant protagonists, but the most emphatic conditions under which modern life is played out.

v. *Modernism and Beyond: Tragedy Without Grandeur*

Ibsen and Strindberg drew attention to the personal sacrifices of bourgeois life, thus moving the stage into the closed chambers of the domestic, bourgeois sphere. Yet, their protagonists, many of them female, are not without majesty. Even though they are not, like Lear and Hamlet, of regal stature, Hedda and Miss Julie both possess a tragic grandeur, and the pain of their fates is one of downfall, loss, and doom. When modernist tragedy finds its form in the work of Beckett, the last trace of such grandeur is brutally stripped off. Tattered, worn, and with little to lose, Beckett's characters signal that the downfall aspect of modern tragedy is gone. Beckett's anti-heroic protagonists maneuver plays with no dramatic development and unfold an empty, eventless temporality. Yet his plays (more so, one could say, than the prose trilogy of *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953)) is not without human warmth. Nor is his writing deprived of humor, often of the life-affirming, Joycean kind. This is a tragedy that so to speak dissolves the very genre from which it springs. In *Quad*, we follow four dancers as they exhaust the positions of a neatly measured square, divided by two diagonal lines, yet avoiding the center of the quadrangle. There is no room for spontaneity, no room for action, acting, or tragic fall. This is a universe ruled by nothing but cold, indifferent laws. Here the suffering of a single human being cannot be meaningfully mourned or contemplated. Short of resignation, the only adequate response is that of calculation and dry registration (as in Molloy's shifting of sixteen stones from pocket to pocket, or the aging Krapp's expressionless reflection on his mother's passing). With Beckett, we confront an existence with no consolation, a world whose aporetic dilemmas are captured in the famous lines from *The Unnamable*: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

One could certainly ask if there is room for tragedy after Beckett; his work, no doubt, presents us with the tragedy of tragedy itself. Following the lead of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), it would be possible to respond that after the Second World War, which put us face to face with a tragedy more overwhelming, more disastrous, more unconsoling than any artwork can ever be, the only way tragedy can survive in art—and for Adorno this amounts to the only way in which art, as such, can hope for survival—would be through the almost inexpressive lyrical lines of hermetic poetry like that of Paul Celan. Yet, it would be an exaggeration to propose that there is no room for tragedy after Beckett. If it is true that tragedy reached a milestone with Beckett, it would still be possible to propose that this artform survives in works by such twentieth-century Austrian writers as Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek. Further, one could suggest that tragedy, in the twenty-first century, expands its territory from the theatre to the related media of film. Is it possible to watch the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose background includes both acting and a stint as director of the Frankfurt Theater am Turm, without the shudders of tragedy and in some cases even an element of catharsis? With his staging of Theodor Fontane's 1894 novel *Effi Briest* (1974), we are transported to a world that mirrors that of Hedda Gabler or Miss Julie. But also films such as *Why does Herr R. Run Amok* (1970), *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) reflect a loneliness of cosmic proportions. The same could be said about Michael Haneke's more recent movies like *The Piano Teacher* (2001), *The White Ribbon* (2009), and *Amour* (2012).

v. Conclusion

From its early modern forms in Shakespeare, to its less media-specific realizations in theatre, dance, and film, tragedy keeps reinventing itself. At the heart of this reinvention—and this is what makes it possible to speak of modern tragedy in the first place—is a willingness and commitment to stage the ultimate conditions of finite, human existence, the interplay, if one likes, between the tragic (as an existential category or condition) and tragedy (as a form of art). As actualized within the conditions of non-negotiable finitude and suffering, human life is not portrayed as joyless or without its moments of bliss and affirmation. The impermanence of all things human, the passing of our ideas and expressions, ultimately also our own lives, retains an aesthetic spell. In its modern manifestations, from Shakespeare to Beckett and beyond, tragedy has moved a long way from the neat dramatic structure laid out in Aristotle's *Poetics*. It has, however, retained the intensity, the passion, and the scrupulous will to investigate the human condition that characterize Greek tragedy both in its early and in its mature, Sophoclean form. Existing throughout the history of modern literature, tragedy has been, still is, and, hopefully, will continue to be a constant source of challenge and impulse for modern aesthetics and philosophy of art.

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