THE TRAGIC AS A PARADIGM IN THE WEST

BEREAVEMENT AND RIFT. THE EXPERIENCE OF TRAGEDY AND THE DEMISE OF CULTURE

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Introduction

'Culture', generally speaking, is a man-made set of values, attitudes and ends, means and actions, invented and implemented to realise the 'good life' that, as defined by the cultural set in question, makes sense of man and his being in the world. Tragic action (henceforth 'tragedy' in the non-artistic sense) is a consequence of the fact that this endeavour to realise the good life, is in principle fallible. No set of values is coherent under all mental conditions and under all factual circumstances. 'Happiness' that can be taken down to one's grave in peace, is not for all. Far from it. At least, such happiness cannot be guaranteed. Cultural endeavours however, so it seems, are intentionally set against this fatality, no matter how futile they may turn out to be. Hence tragic constellations, which lead to tragedy, are characterised by cultural ànd material circumstances in which the 'good', as culturally defined, is no longer possible. In history pragmatic dilemmas, pragmatic contradictions cannot be excluded: the nature of existence is such that at the same time it holds for the cultural and moral imperative of the 'good' and for its eventual impossibility. Whatever we try to obtain, we can also fail to obtain, precisely because we have to *try* to do so; no action is without risks. 'Agamemnon in Aulis' cannot behave as he should. He must be 'tragic', whatever he intends to do. And he cannot but act, because he is culturally representative and paradigmatic. He cannot sneak away, as most of us would try to do in the circumstances. It is clear that these dilemmas, if they are acted out effectively -if they do not degenerate pathologically, in non-action or stark denial- have the following characteristics. First fatal ignorance, or, as Aristotle said, *hamartia*, i.e. the heuristically well-motivated, but nevertheless false belief that there is after all a culturally acceptable, that is conformable solution, which, second, if acted upon, *ex hypothesi* turns out to be counterproductive at large -hence the action is heterotelic, it fatally fails to realise its goals- and, third, boils down to the inevitable recognition of the unsolvability, within the cultural set, of the conflict

at hand. Tragedy therefore is a destructive necessity or fatality that reveals itself as the consequence of chance, i.e. bad luck, on the basis of cultural pretense at general problem-solving. It is the demise of a cultural set: tragic action reveals the finiteness of our problem-solving capabilities. It makes their limits explicit and, by doing so, transgresses them. The tragic 'hero' is a culturally paradigmatic person, who believes in the problem-solving capability of his set of values (hence his culturally determined 'initial religiosity') who, inevitably, by ignorance and error (due to his finiteness, especially his epistemic finiteness) and the heterotely of the actions that ensue, realises that these convictions have their limits, and hence, given the circumstances -which are exceptional but real nevertheless- fatally fail to realise the culturally obligatory goals. Hence the rift in the cultural set and the bereavement of the hero: he inevitably fails and, at one and the same time, he is a drop-out, a scapegoat and a saint. In so far as the set of values cannot be changed at all (e.g. because the nature of culture as such requires them) or because it is, for whatever reasons, rigid (e.g. when the cultural set is foundationally seen as god-given), the 'hero' is by definition an ambivalent person: he is culturally paradigmatic but at the same time he has to be eliminated because of his so-called *hubris*, as he reveals the chaos beyond the cultural order he has shown to be deficient. In this sense, the tragic person has destroyed the most holy of things: the problem-solving power of his culture, the very source of its existence and of its right to exist. He has not so much murdered people, even if he has. Such things could be forgiven or otherwise disposed of within the boundaries of the cultural set, its attitudes and values. He has done something much more ominous and irreparable: he has murdered, as far as the culture is concerned, the essence of humanity so conceived. Hence his liminal position, at the same time in and out of the cultural domain: tragic action is destructive yet, nevertheless, productive as well. It destroys the old dispensation and it makes room for new ones. As such however, it is not, nor can it be a dispensation in its own right. Neither can it anticipate the set of values, the *religio* to come. It cannot but register the failure of the cultural set, its failure in action, and consequently, the demise of politics and, more generally, of the powers that be. The home country of its heroes is, after all is said and done, always a no-man's land. Tragedy is culturally and, consequently, philosophically dangerous, and accordingly the consciousness of it has to be repressed. Hence the question arises: 'Under which conditions is "tragedy" culturally accessible and thematically acceptable, and a fortiori, possible as a literary-theatrical category?'

Philosophical inhibitions

Let's recapitulate. The culturally unsolvable conflict, the clash of values, the dilemma, the action itself, presupposes ignorance and error (*hamartia*), counterproductiveness and, finally, the revelation of the 'truth', the unsolvability of the conflict. Initial religiosity (to take one's culture seriously, the paradigmatic stance) and final religiosity (recognising the inevitability of the dilemma without reliquishing one's cultural set). In short, the acceptance of the finiteness of existence on the one hand and the finiteness of culture on the other, as two sides of the same coin. To conclude and to summarise: 'high tragedy'. If this definition is true, some culturally specific, philosophical, even ontological conditions have to exist in order for tragedy, as a cultural and artistic category, to obtain. Let's sum up some of them.

First, the concept of tragedy cannot be universalised without triviality. One might be inclined to think that existence itself, because of its finiteness, is tragic. Indeed, in order to stay alive, we live, and by doing so we inexorably die; and the more we live, so to speak, the more we die. The problem is insolvable, and its only possible solution -to go on living- is patently counterproductive. Hence, the argument goes, transcendence, eternity and immortality aside, human existence, or perhaps even the world itself, is pantragic by nature. Tragedy is the direct and inevitable consequence of our mortal condition. I think this is wrong, because the idea robs tragedy of its special character, indeed of all character whatsoever. Moreover, if this pantragic stance were true, the consciousness of tragedy ought to be universal. Its contrary would be incomprehensible. The idea therefore seems to be wrong, even stupid, which is worse. Nevertheless, it has its 'raison d'être': it is the night that falls on earth when heavenly suns, religious or philosophical ones, darken. Tragedy becomes universal when transcendence, which guaranteed, at least metaphysically, the 'good life', for whatever reasons -in fact because the device is trivial- starts to lose its credibility. If we believe that death can be vanquished, -death being the unsolvable conflict *par excellence*-, there would be no unsolvable conflicts at all, and in the heavenly realm of our cultural beliefs no tragedy. The immanent evidence of death and finiteness as such and in the cultural order possible tragedy, is denied on the then 'really' real transcendent level, which then works as an impeccable general problem-solving device. Pantragicism then is the earthly counterpart of its absolute denial. Man is 'une passion inutile' (Sartre), not because that is so in fact, immanently, or because man ought to be useful in an absolute sense (whatever that means), but because he cannot be or become 'God', as he -being 'une passion inutile'- has to in order to make sense at all. Or so it is thought. Hence too Plato's notorious fear of

tragedy and its ontological impossibility in traditional religions, such as Christianity and, presumably, Islam, and, moreover, in orthodox communism as well. Or rather, generally speaking, its repression, its neutralisation, even its exorcism in any culture whatever which denies the existence of unsolvable conflicts, or - what boils down to the same thing- the metaphysical denial, one way or another, of our finiteness.

Let's expatiate on this theme, because this 'meta-belief', if we can call it that, is more insidious and more widespread than is generally assumed. As indicated, the reason why in Christianity, strictly speaking, tragedy in the full sense is unthinkable, is simple. Ontologically it cannot be construed on its premises, because Christianity -as with traditional religions in general- is inter alia conceived and invented precisely to ward off the allegedly unbearable consciousness of our cosmic futility. In other words: to safeguard man, because he is assumed to have an infinite will, against existential and cultural 'nihilism' that -counterproductively, tragically enough- has its very origin exactly in the heavenly ambitions of religion. In short, the fear of finiteness and death is dealt with by the denial of their reality; this makes for yearning for eternity and makes it reasonable to do so; hence the necessity to neutralise, even to exorcise death. And, in its wake, follows the futility of our finite existence, grounded in the inacceptability of death. Nihilism therefore -just like pantragicism for that matter- is not a given of existence but culturally 'learned', a consequence of the *hubris* of our will, in so far as it is thought to be insatiable. Which, pace Schopenhauer, it is not. Our finiteness makes for a finite will, a finite 'life-force', and finite energy, it does not make eternal longings. We don't have them naturally with us. If that seems so, it is the virtual effect, the after image of our capacity for boundless and consequently trivial generalisation. Christianity knows of no tragedy in the world, because in God's hand, what has been done, can be undone (like death), and what has gone wrong, can be rectified. For all grief there is redress. However, if this could be believed in all cases, then only *quia absurdum est*. Now, after science, the idea is not only absurd, it has become unthinkable, intellectually and even emotionally. Such beliefs indeed strip the world as it is of its undeniable reality. But even philosophies that deny reality as it is, must at least have reality as it is thought. Christianity therefore *does* have tragedy after all, and a unique one at that: the denial namely of its all-round problem-solving capability, i.e. the denial of God, the rebellion of Lucifer. Paradoxically, his victory -if thinkable at all- would, metaphorically speaking, again pave the way for the possibility of 'tragedy', if Lucifer would not be so misguided -as he naturally is- to want to replace God on his Throne. Which doesn't change the matter that much. In other words, tragedy knows no devils, no angels and no Gods: its kingdom is of this

world, on the right side of death, so to speak.

Strange as it may seem, something very similar occurs in orthodox communism or 'vulgar materialism', as it is called. 'In socialism there is no tragedy', as Lunatcharsky, the First Commissar for Culture, once said. Indeed! If socialism obtains, by definition at least the weighty societal problems of humanity are solved: there are no unsolvable problems, as Hegelian dialectics has already proclaimed. The consequence is that socialism does not and cannot exist, at least not on earth, that is, not in history but after it, in a so-called posthistorical time as mythical as heaven always has been. Paradise on earth, hence, is only conceivable as a sophisticated, modern version of millenarianism. The reason for the parallel with fully fledged religion is that the idea of 'paradise on earth' in historical time can easily function in the same way as the idea of 'heaven' in eternity: it suffices to replace the eternal virtual 'now' of God by the historical virtual 'future' of History. But just as eternal bliss or vertical eschatology has its theodicy -Why not yet and why not all? What about the useless fuss of finiteness?- so eschatology turned immanent and horizontal, has its own demise: 'Encore un effort, citoyen'! Why not yet? Why tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow? Why, after all, history?'. With one big difference though: whereas God's dispensation can be accepted a priori, because what is done can be undone, the 'fait accompli' of History, especially its manifest evils, cannot so easily be overlooked. In consequence, because of the fact that the intellectual fallacy of final progress progressively is revealed, belief in the future of universal problem-solving devices progressively loses its appeal, until, once again, it becomes the lie it always has been. After the demise of the history of salvation, the heroic individual who was prepared to sacrifice, as a revolutionary, his life and well-being, in fact his individuality, for the community of the future, is no longer prepared to do so: his really heroic stance -however stupid it finally turned out to be- melts away and is transmuted to unbelief, cynicism and possibly to a belief in profit-making at all costs. And just as in traditional religion, there *is* tragedy in revolutionary endeavours, and it is of the same kind. In the history of salvation by historical man there is indeed only one unique kind of tragedy: the denial of the sense of history at large. And this idea is as devilish a stance as the denial of God: the end of history with a capital H is no less of a black hole than God and His Revelations. With, perhaps, after all, one essential difference: the idiocy of history is much more in evidence and by far easier to detect that God's stupidity ever could be.

The invisibility of tragedy, or at least its denial -with tragic or, if one prefers, comic, even ridiculous results- is not limited to religions, but is, it appears, as

widespread in philosophy. For instance, as said, in Plato. If I remember rightly, the reason why tragic poets are gently pushed out of the ideal *polis*, is that their theatrical pieces are very impressive, but, alas, false: they tell lies. Platonically speaking, this must be so: what classical tragedy makes crystal clear, is that people may be confronted, from time to time, with unsolvable dilemmas, that are not made-up but are, as chance has it, simply given. An ideal state, modelled on a universe of Platonic Ideas, that in principle cannot contain or imply or produce contradictions, cannot accomodate tragedy, precisely because it shows that this presupposition of intellectual 'harmonie préétablie', and harmony otherwise, does not obtain in the world. The mere possibility of tragedy therefore definitely undermines the very possibility of political utopia; and consequently, if Plato has to be right -which he manifestly thinks he must- Sophocles has to be deadly wrong. For if he and his colleagues indeed were right, the whole onto-epistemic construction of platonism would founder and collapse. It would become futile. And this *ought* not to be. Hence... Otherwise said, the notion of tragedy is a stranger to all philosophies that pretend to the kind of worldview that implies that adequacy and completeness can be attained, if only in principle. This idea of 'completeness' however is provably impossible: it is an onto-epistemic falsehood. To pretend to the contrary is onto-epistemic *hubris,* as Sophocles unmistakably showed in *Oedipus Rex*: it is indeed possible in fact, always and everywhere, not to be in a position *in* the world to know what one ought to in order to be able to avoid catastrophy. It is manifestly false -as Hegel's dialectics presume and as Marx said in his 'Political Economy'- that if a problem arises the conditions for its solution are, for that reason alone, accessible as well. It is clear this means that unsolvable conflicts cannot occur, neither in history nor anywhere else. Plato would have approved. But that, tragically, would be a stupid thing to do. As it would, once again, make finiteness fake. The same is true moreover, for instance, for philosophical stances such as strict determinism, so that 'chance', an essential element in the non-triviality of tragic action, does not obtain or, at least, is not really what it seems. Just as predestination excludes tragedy, so does determinism, and so does, apparently, the fatalism associated with Islam.

Societal Conditions.

Besides these onto-epistemic conditions, some less arcane and more urbane ones are required for an individual to become a 'tragic hero'. These requirements are essentially societal in nature: the individual must be paradigmatic of his culture at large; he has to be its uncontested representative, at least initially; he must be empowered to act with full authority and might on his own initiative, i.e. he has

to be able to act on behalf of society at large, he must be in power or he must be powerful; and lastly, he must act autonomously, i.e. he must take upon himself the problem-solving capacities of the culture he has been educated in and is an outstanding member of. In consequence, he has to have a strong, a full and, as E. G. Forster would say, a 'round' character. For tragedy to fully occur, the tearing apart of the cultural set, the bereavement and the no man's land the tragic person finds himself in, have to occur in full consciousness of their importance and their consequences: the hero must understand, at least finally, what is at stake. Otherwise paradigmacity is impossible. Secondly, tragic action has to be highly energetic: the person, given his initial religiosity, must do his utmost to find a solution for the conflict at hand and he must be empowered to take all measures necessary to do so. In other words -initial circumstances evidently apart- the tragic action must be fully of his own making. Thirdly, he has to take responsibity for what happens, for as *he* has to try to find a solution for the cultural impasse he is in, *he* himself is responsible for his cultural stance, its wishes for survival and its ultimate death: he has to take this holy burden upon himself.

It is clear that such conditions rarely obtain: they are exceptional indeed. It even seems that they are only effectively possible in small groups, among people with an aristocratic turn of mind, who know one another rather well, who can survey their cultural set in its entirety, who can assess the conflicts that occur and can envisage the solutions, if there are any. In short, tragedy in the full sense is only possible in a small society of free, equal and aristocratically-minded people, in the world of an uncontested elite: high society and high culture are required. As in classical Greece. It appears indeed that classical Greek tragedy was a very 'theatre of the mind', of Greek culture, of its problems and conflicts. It is no mere coincidence then that in ancient Greek democracy (aristocratical after all), mathematics and philosophy, in our sense of the word, were developed more or less at the same time. For all three are, so it seems, intrinsically bound up with a heightened sense of what it means for man to be an animal that is fully cultural because he made himself so, and to be fully conscious of the fact: culture, history, etcetera is indeed *ta gignomena ex anthropoon,* as Herodotus said. In this perspective democracy is a meta-societal idea: it implies that social life and its organisation are no givens, but have to be negotiated by free, autonomous and self-conscious individuals who have a thorough grasp both of their interests as individuals and of their responsibility as member of the community. Human culture and its organisation are no heavenly gift but the result of a continuously negotiated consensus, again and again. Consequently, it presupposes fully conscious convictions of the individuals concerned and relevant, conclusive and,

if possible, compelling argumentation in the realm of thinking and negotiating: hence rhetoric and logic, philosophical argumentation, and mathematics, because its deductive method is close to irrefutable proof or could be thought to be so. Moreover, culture interpreted as an essentially contested concept, as indeed it is, is only conceivable in such an aristocratically minded, argumentative and democratic environment. Hence, further, the problem of the foundation of culture and consequently the idea of the 'good life': 'Les philosophes au pouvoir!', so to speak. In this perspective one can fruitfully compare, we surmise, Socratic dialogue with the traditional relation between master and pupil in e.g. classical Taoist texts. However, human existence and its self-cultivation is perhaps too large, too complex and too opaque to be fully, completely and adequately knowable. Perhaps, pace Plato, the good itself is ambivalent. And, perhaps, as said, no cultural set is effectively consistent: perhaps consciousness and thinking -and for that matter culture at large- in principle and in practice occasionally have their unsolvable problems and conflicts, hence their tragedies. Who is right? Plato or Sophocles? Plato, the Republic and the utopian drive for the perfect cultural set? Or Euripides and his *Bacchae*, the dionysian destruction of the 'soi-disant' universal problem-solving power of Platonic idealism, rationalism and control? It seems that up till now the oscillation between those two classical positions continues unabated. A satisfying solution yet to be found: the tragedians don't want to leave the 'polis', presumably because they cannot. At least, not yet.

However, this does not mean that tragedy, historically speaking, apart from cultural sets that inhibit tragic consciousness, is universally present. Mass-societies, for instance, as we know them, cannot sustain it either. This does not mean that our societies, as all others, do not from time to time act tragically, counterproductively, etcetera. On the contrary. But it appears that these eventual tragedies can no longer be concentrated in the individuals required. Tragedy, if it occurs nowadays, has become systemic: it takes place behind our backs. It seems that the world of man has become too big for tragedy proper. Nobody can take such a burden upon himself, because first, there is no such monolithic culture anymore, second, it cannot be fully known, as it is too diverse and too complex - we have to know too much with the result that we always know too little-, and third, we are not able to adequately survey our options and their consequences, because the former are fluid and the latter are too big, too complex, too dense. And, finally, there are too many of them. Which means that in a sense we always act irresponsibly, however well-informed we may be: collectively we have become responsible for all and everything, so that individually we end up being responsible for nothing at all. In other words, our responsability escapes us, just as everything else: we are systemically driven, we don't act in the full sense: we

all have become Woyzecks more or less, not tragic heroes, not actors on the stage, but casualties, victims, or even 'collateral damage' in the cellars of history, no more, no less.

Final Reflections.

But, perhaps, the time for culture and its tragedies is a time irrevocably past. Just as 'after Gödel' there is no question anymore of completing mathematics, so 'after tragedy' there is no unique, final, stable, complete and adequate cultural set on the human agenda any longer: the idea is dead. From a foundational point of view, plurality in mathematics, in worldviews and in culture, is the wisdom of the day. As with the Absolute in religion, the 'cultural absolutes' tragedy requires are completely outdated. It is no longer possible to believe in such 'Absolutes'. Consequently, tragedy has become impossible, not only because the material and societal conditions required don't obtain any longer, but first and foremost because cultural conditions have fundamentally changed. In two respects. First, perhaps, because culturally driven scientific, technological and economic progress enables us, at least in principle, to satisfy our common material needs and our mental ones, the common, the individual and even the idiosyncratic. If that is true, it seems that in our times, the market is the place to be. If our material needs are biologically driven and hence collective by nature, our cultural ones, contrary to what was the case in the past, turn out to be specific, individual and finally idiosyncratic. Consequently, as long as the market is in place and there's enough for everyone, cultural preferences, however important individually, are collectively indifferent. Consequently, tragedy is no longer at the core of things cultural: today, in so far as it occurs at all, it is only of private interest: collectively speaking, it is but a 'fait divers'. Given the superabundance, materially and mentally, of the market, culture, as traditionally conceived, will dwindle to a kind of amusement and tragedy will become an accident of minor or no importance. No insurance company will worry about it anymore, if ever they did or could. However, it is not a certainty that our cultural nature is a thing as weightless as that. Nevertheless, there is, perhaps, a more substantial reason why tragedy might turn out to be a fossil of the past. Indeed: scientifically and technologically we are probably so far advanced, i.e. we have made such cultural progress after all, that our very biology is in jeopardy. Perhaps our knowledge of the world and consequently the cultural superiority of science, can overcome these old dilemmas of our cultural plight. Perhaps Plato's project can be endorsed eugenetically. We are cultural beings, uncertain, dubious, ambivalent and contradictory. And if we could get rid of all this? If, in fact, we could get rid of

culture and tragedy at the same time? By effectively transmuting our nature into a new, a post-cultural state of nature: the genetically determined, unique and unavoidable set of values required for the harmony of ourselves, our kin and our world? Possible? The question therefore seems to be this: 'Can culture and its problems be overcome by nature so redefined? In casu, redefined by ourselves... and our culturally, in this case, scientifically informed expertise? Yes or no? The answer is 'no'. Why? Because, if ever the problem was real in the first place, it of necessity has to remain so. In other words, tragedy cannot be overcome. And the reason is simple to the point of simplicity. If our nature is finite -as it manifestly is- it has to remain so: if our knowledge would be sufficient to transcend our condition, it would not be available in this our very condition in the first place; consequently, we could never reach the state of affairs required from the starting point we *de facto* occupy. And *de facto* we have to start. Hence -to use traditional jargon- the help of God is required to change our nature successfully. We, on our own, cannot do this except, by chance. And then, naturally, mostly for the worst. And perhaps, this kind of 'transsubstantiation' is excluded in principle. For what kind of being would it be that could transcend our humanity? What would the world be like beyond the possibility of tragedy? What is beyond contradiction in thinking? What beyond contradiction in consciousness, beyond suicide biologically? What, in the word, beyond an entity in the world that is capable of deciding not to be? The answer seems to be: nothing. And 'nothing' indeed it is. Frankenstein's monsters must be intolerably stupid: they cannot doubt their own intelligence. And consequently, the happiness they pretend to must be fake.