



TRAGEDY AND COUNTER-POLITICS

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ABSTRACT This article discusses aesthetic counter-politics in the early 20th century through an examination of the idea of tragedy in culture and metaphysics.

KEYWORDS aesthetics • counter-politics • culture • ethics tragedy

When it comes to the ability of human life to reflect upon itself through form, to give material expression to its inner substance, to create itself anew or to explore its farthest limits, modern philosophy has often contemplated it in terms of the possibility of tragedy. The question takes many referents but is often afflicted by catastrophic premonitions: Is tragedy possible in a world without kings? citizens? gods? Greeks? rituals? unities? The eclipse of tragedy, or at least of some kind of tragedy, is thus assumed and lamented by theories which at the same time assert that what the world needs is a new or a counter- or an anti-tragic expression. Thus tragedy is not just an object of cognition (as a genre, style, or even category) but a notion invested with a variety of values – cultural, political, moral, or ontological.

The discontinuous history of tragedy exerts an irresistible fascination on historical imagination. Other artistic genres and modes appear and disappear but their return or recovery has not acquired intellectual or philosophical importance. Moderns are content with the end of the epic or the picaresque narrative, feeling that they completed their life and cycle or that they belong to the period and culture that generated them. But they are intrigued by the thought that tragedy may not have died, that it may come back at a moment and place in history more appropriate or more blessed than theirs. They are convinced that, even if tragedy has disappeared, it has not depleted itself. The reason for this ambivalent attitude is a strong intuition that tragedy is something richer, larger than a literary or theatrical

phenomenon, that it emanates from the bottom of the heart and articulates some profound mysteries of existence. Hence the frustrated or defiant demand of modern thought for tragic form and insight.

This demand figured prominently in the revolt against industrial society that erupted among European intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century.

A central theme of this revolt was its counterposition of *Kultur* and *Gemeinschaft* with *Zivilization* and *Gesellschaft*, the former concepts suggesting the sought-after natural, face to face community that would truly meet man's spiritual and creative needs, the latter concepts defining the existing 'society' – mechanized, alienated and destructive of the essential vitality and fullness of human life. (Breines, 1970: 9–10)

While the French and English concept of civilization may refer to a wide array of social, religious or technical facts, the German concept of *Kultur* is limited to intellectual, artistic, and religious facts, which it divides sharply from political, economic, and social ones. The opposition between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* has been traced to late 19th-century romantic anti-capitalism and its interest in tragic contradiction:

While *Kultur* defined a sphere of traditional ethical, religious, aesthetic, and political values, an 'organic' spiritual universe, considered to be typically German, *Zivilisation* referred to material, technical/economical, 'mechanical,' and 'artificial' progress of Anglo-French origin. This contradiction appeared to them as *tragic*, insofar as they understood the inevitability of capitalist development and the impossibility of returning to the 'organic' past. Certain aspects of such a tragic worldview appeared at the turn of the century, in various guises in the work of several German social scientists and philosophers. Examples include Tönnies's nostalgia for the *Gemeinschaft*, Weber's social pessimism, the problem of tragedy of culture in Simmel, and the theme of cultural decadence in such diverse authors as Max Scheler, Alfred Weber, Werner Sombart, and Oswald Spengler. A similar orientation can be found also among certain writers and poets during the same period: Theodor Storm, Stefan George, Thomas Mann, and Paul Ernst (most of them are mentioned in [Lukács's] *Soul and Forms*). (Löwy, 1991–2: 129)

In his essay 'On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture' (1911), Georg Simmel (1968) posits the Hegelian dualism of subjective and objective spirit as an opposition between soul and structure within the realm of spirit where the former represents the individual and the latter his material expression. There is tremendous tension between the flowing, restless subjective life of a person and the independent, fixed existence of his creations that form their own universe. The source of the problem is the dialectical necessity of form that both drives organic evolution toward greater growth and arrests the integration of its history in a timeless structure. Subjective life may reach inner perfection only through extrinsic means since free individual cultivation involves the binding materials of objective expression. The challenge for culture is to overcome the separation of soul from its works.

Others before him saw culture as potential synthesis of subjective and objective spirit. For example, Nietzsche thought that 'a people to whom one attributes a culture has to be in all reality a single living unity and not fall wretchedly apart into inner and outer, content and form' (Nietzsche, 1983: 80). Simmel finds that the heteronomous development of the autonomous subject constitutes a painful paradox since the autonomy of the soul is violated by the heteronomous drive toward autonomous structures. He is scandalized by the ignominy of representation, and attacks graven images with iconomachic zeal (Lambropoulos, 2001). The true relation between the restless drive of soul toward the infinite and the finite existence of its creations in perpetuity is one of animosity, he insists. Forms are a menace to life, stifling its polyphony. Frequently, creativity dies from its products, process from its forms, movement from its achievements. The dualism of soul and form is insurmountable, the discharge of creative energy fatal. Alienation does not inhere in modern labor but in culture itself. The tragedy of self-perfecting spirit is its necessary embodiment. Spirit is condemned to this cyclical, eternally unfulfilled motion of attraction and revulsion between subject and object. Culture is no synthesis, there is no overcoming. The price it pays for acquiring this forbidden knowledge is loss of authenticity, separation from identity, fall into history, exile into world of appearances. For Simmel, the cardinal notion is cultural sinfulness and its punishment, spiritual homelessness. The anti-mythical task of criticism in an idolatrous civilization consists in the pursuit of allegorical interpretation and interpretive emancipation. In light of this radical impressionism that denounces solid, self-contained structure, is there a form that can still do justice to the multiplicity of life?

In his essay 'The Metaphysics of Tragedy' (1911), Georg Lukács, who studied in Berlin with Simmel in 1909–10, renews the demand for tragic reconciliation in uncompromisingly metaphysical terms:

The question of the possibility of tragedy is the question of meaning and essence. It is the question whether everything that is there, *is* – just because, simply because, it is there. . . . Is 'being' a property of all things, or is it a value-judgment upon things, a distinction and differentiation between them? (Lukács, 1974: 156)

And if indeed, as the author clearly hopes, 'being' is a value judgment upon things conferred through distinction between them, what makes such a judgment valid? A certain kind of theater provides the answer. The paradox of tragedy is that, by giving essence sensual form, it creates real human beings. This miraculous creation of reality takes place before the face of God. For Lukács, 'every true tragedy is a mystery play. Its real, central meaning is a revelation of God before the face of God' (1974: 154). The 'tragic miracle' is the coming into being of a unique experience, an experience of new birth (and already given tragic death), of autonomous, integrated selfhood.

'Tragedy is the becoming-real of the concrete, essential nature of man' (1974: 162). It constitutes an exemplary case of being's differentiation.

Simmel seeks consolation for the tragedy of the spirit and at the same time an ethical alternative to Nietzsche's tragic philosophy. In response, Lukács argues that tragedy is a matter of essence and not punishment, of coming to being and not dying, and proposes as its model the consolable *Trauerspiel*, the religious play which partakes of mysticism and history without settling in either. Both writers affirm 'the intellect's potential for freedom. In both cases, there is an attempt to alter the import of Nietzschean tragedy, to assimilate it – and having done this, to move toward a new criticism, a new aesthetics, a new *Kultur*' (Cacciari, 1993: 86, emphasis in original). In tragedy, 'the deepest longing of human existence' (Lukács, 1974: 162), the longing for selfhood, can find its greatest satisfaction. The ecstasy of mysticism cannot provide such satisfaction since at its peak, 'the Unity of the All' (1974: 159), the mystic has to surrender his selfhood and merge with all things into a melting flux of oblivion. Neither can the necessity of history provide such satisfaction with its sense of arbitrary tyranny, just yet inexplicable fate, which presents life as a regular accidentality. Mysticism deprives being its uniqueness, its differentiation, while history denies it its value, its distinction. Only tragedy can respond to the question of deep meaning, the question of justification, of the ethical value of being.

But if neither ecstasy nor history can provide an appropriate set of criteria, where does tragedy find the principles to establish a 'hierarchy of life-possibilities' (1974: 173)? Within its own nature, answers Lukács, as a form-giving literary expression. 'Form is the highest judge of life. Form giving is a judging force, an ethic; there is a value-judgment in everything that has been given form' (1974: 173). The artistic form, which constitutes the cultural objectification of the absolute spirit, mediates between soul and life, organizes multiplicity into meaningful structures, and represents a 'judgment on life' because it bestows meaning upon it.

In his contemporary essay 'The Sociology of Modern Drama' (1911), Lukács argues that modern drama cannot solve its problems until a new ethical center, like the one shared by the classical dramatist and his audience, is discovered. In this essay, he discovers such a center not among social norms but in the drama itself, where 'form has become the goal of life, a categorical imperative of greatness and self-perfection' (1974: 174). Lukács transforms Simmel's menace into a redeeming force. If Simmel warned that there is a contradiction at the heart of *Kultur*, Lukács defines tragedy as the reconciliation of form and life, and the attainment of the life of essence. The new ethic is not located in society or religion, in communal beliefs or political practices. It is not even explored within a performative framework where creator and his audience can interact. It is simply identified with aesthetic entelechy, in this case, with tragic form. Because the tension between soul and structure is overcome in it, tragedy finds its criteria within its own

confirmation, which is the ultimate judging force. A self-referential form 'which has been purified until it has become ethical' (1974: 174) has the authority to pass judgment upon meaning and the value of being. The metaphysics of tragedy pertains to existence itself as art provides a glimpse of utopian reconciliation.

Thus tragedy is not expected to work as a mere play or even an exemplary artwork. It is expected to do more, and this accounts for philosophy's passionate interest in it. Tragedy is charged with the task of transcending text, performance, communication, art itself, and expressing an insight into the depths of human existence – with solving the problem of essence. Consequently, the interpretive question of its meaning leads to the philosophical question of its possibility. There are other literary or art genres in general whose survival or continuity have been examined sociologically, culturally or aesthetically. Still, the survival of the ode, the opera, or ornamentation has not been invested with so much significance as that of tragedy. As can be gleaned from Lukács' essay, only tragedy among all the kinds of art is expected to be more than a genre, more than an aesthetic category, more than an artistic accomplishment. Only tragedy is asked, in addition to becoming great art, to transcend its artisticity and become truly tragic. This mission, which Lukács calls the 'metaphysics of tragedy', is ultimately an ethical one. 'Aesthetics are here – as in many other works of literary criticism by Lukács – intimately linked to an ethical standpoint, a moral position toward the life and the society of his time' (Löwy, 1991–2: 126). The possibility of tragedy is the possibility of an ethical art, an art that is more than mere art and assumes an ethical function. Tragedy cannot simply exist as any other genre. First, it has to appear in the world as an exemplary one. That is why mediocre novels or poems may be tolerated but not average tragedies. Tragedy has to be either great or not at all. If it is not great, if it does not overwhelm its audience, it is reduced to drama. It may be excellent but still remains (bourgeois, naturalistic, symbolist or historical) drama. Second, tragedy is not just great drama but must also make a qualitative leap outside drama and elevate itself to something higher than high art, more true than history, more mysterious than religion, more complex than politics. Tragedy is greater than the genre of tragedy – it is tragic.

Since at least the time of his first major work, the *History of the Development of Modern Drama* (which received first prize in a literary society competition in 1908 and was published in two volumes in 1911), Lukács was trying to restore to the theater the moral authority that Schiller attributed to it and Nietzsche rejected with derision. He identifies the new ethical center with the form of tragedy, which finds its ethical criteria immanently, within its own form, the categorical imperative of greatness. This is also where he seeks the tragic itself: 'Dramatic tragedy is the form of the high points of existence, its ultimate goals and ultimate limits' (Lukács, 1974: 159). Such high points occur suddenly – when the flow of empirical life is interrupted

by 'the accident, the great moment, the miracle; an enrichment and a confusion' (1974: 153). These great moments of accidental insight are like epiphanies that give life dramatic form and impart illuminating knowledge.

There, at the point to which the miracle of accident has raised a man and his life, tragedy begins. . . . It begins at the moment when enigmatic forces have distilled the essence from a man, have forced him to become essential; and the progress of tragedy consists in his essential, true nature becoming more and more manifest. (1974: 155)

The miraculous moment of the precipitate encounter with the accident brings into life a unique experience.

This tragic experience, which occurs completely outside temporal existence, has an absolute unity of time in that it lasts only a fleeting moment; an absolute unity of force in that it happens suddenly and all at once; an absolute unity of meaning in that it makes everything essential; and an absolute unity of purpose in that its happening and its goal coincide, cancelling any expectation of development. What follows it is only manifestation. That is why Lukács concludes that

the miracle is fulfillment. It snatches from life all its deceptive veils, woven of gleaming moments and infinitely varied moods. Drawn in hard and ruthless outline, the soul stands naked before the face of life. (1974: 153)

In addition to being a fulfillment, the tragic miracle leads to the experiencing of the frontier between life and death, which alerts the soul to its limits and brings it to self-consciousness. 'This is why tragedy is the awakening of the soul. The recognition of the frontier extracts the soul's essential nature' (1974: 161–2) and enables man to fulfill his longing for selfhood. In the miracle of tragic fate, the essential human nature emerges concrete as freedom and necessity are finally united.

The ethical form of the mystery play (tragedy) is contrasted to the undifferentiated flux of oblivion (mysticism) and the arbitrary pattern of fate (history) – a comparison that around 1915 would inspire Walter Benjamin's preoccupation with the *Trauerspiel* until the mid-1920s. At a time of godlessness like modernity, when fate is decadent, not tragic, when form-destroying mysticism is no longer available and history constitutes a 'value-denying necessity' (1974: 167), tragedy emerges as the only metaphysics that can endow life with meaning by giving solitary souls lost in soulless nature and blind fate a form in a reality of its own creation. 'God must leave the stage, but must yet remain a spectator; that is the historical possibility of tragic epochs' (1974: 154). With God as a mere spectator, and chance as an arbitrary tyrant, modern form assumes the authority of a judging force. Thinking that the unity of subject and object can only be realized in art, Lukács defends the counter-ethical autonomy of the aesthetic sphere. Form purged of all teleology until it has reached the purity of self-contained ethics becomes 'the goal of life' (1974: 174), transposing the deontology of the First Critique ('a

categorical imperative') to the realm of the Third ('self-perfection'). Hence the demand for tragic form. Lukács feels that he is witnessing the end of historical theater, 'the path along which great German drama has traveled since the days of Schiller and Kleist: the path whose goal was to marry Sophocles with Shakespeare' (1974: 163). Despite the fact that he burned his early plays, Lukács is speaking for his artistic generation but also for the philosophical age between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, when he writes that 'we may again hope for the coming of tragedy' (1974: 154), and soon the evolution of theater satisfied this expectation, even though by that time his *Theory of the Novel* (1916) had reaffirmed the possibility of hope, and *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) had superseded the metaphysics of tragedy.

The possibility of tragedy is a central concern regarding human essence and expression because this is the only kind of artistic creation with an immanent ethical substance, which is usually called 'the tragic'. While moral issues and positions may find expression in all other genres, it is only in tragedy that ethical choices must necessarily be made and carried to their ultimate consequences. This gives it its unique moral urgency and intellectual potency. It has been argued that Lukács' 'understanding of tragedy as the pure form of essence, as the life of essence, constitutes a direct response to the historicist-Simmelian problem of the synthesis between form and life as the goal of duty' (Cacciari, 1993: 77), but instead of turning against ontological stratification it radicalizes the form of the *Trauerspiel*, retaining a reductive conception of the tragic. Tragedy is the domain of the free ethical will. The possibility of tragedy pertains to the prospect of the ethical will, of integrated selfhood – its freedom and responsibilities. But the autonomy of this will, the integrity of selfhood that would satisfy the longing for being, can become problematic if their immanence is not defined in terms that make a forceful struggle possible. For example, from the very beginning of his essay, Lukács specifies that the domain of the ethical will is a stage where the drama of human fate is enacted with God as the single spectator. Not only has God vanished from the tragic stage, where classical tragedy had placed him, but he has also displaced the traditional audience. This struggle is no longer a heroic drama of gods and mortals presented before the citizen body but an epiphanic encounter with enigmatic forces occurring before (and confirming the presence of) God, where 'there is no difference between seeming and substance, appearance and the idea, event and destiny' (Lukács, 1974: 153). In such a case, the ethical immanence of tragedy is paradoxically supervised by the distant presence of a God who is watching without interfering.

What makes the accident a great moment, redeeming it from the flux of history and the arbitrariness of fate, is the overseeing eye of God. Although he is no longer part of the tragic proceedings, it is because God is watching that the miracle acquires its momentous power, making man essential and fulfilling his longing for selfhood. 'The god of nature and destiny, who is

always speechless and always unredeemed, brings forth the voice of the god who slumbers inside man, the voice which, in life, has fallen silent; the immanent god awakens the transcendental god into life' (1974: 154). In this view, the ethical immanence of tragedy is compromised by a defining heteronomy, the watchful presence of God. This approach rejects an earlier metaphysics, the understanding of tragedy as 'the highest art in saying Yes to life' (Nietzsche, 1967a: 274). Nietzsche had scorned the '*religio-moral pessimism* that suffers from the "corruption" of man and the riddle of existence' (1967b: 450), opposing to its decadent moral instinct an unreserved and exuberant affirmation of life. For his successors, tragic man lives in deep separation from the world. Because God's eye is always upon him, the gap between being and essence stands yawning. The hero's tribulations take place not before a Dionysian chorus but a silent divinity. Without him, there is no miracle, no fulfillment, no ethical action. But how much integrity can a heteronomous ethical action have? God may not be interfering but, if in his eye there is no difference between event and destiny, how much freedom does the hero have to become essential? Or is the event of the miracle only going to confirm his destiny?

Much as he fell under its spell, Lukács sought to overcome tragedy. He looked first at small spiritual communities, later at the proletariat (when, in light of the revolutionary moment, for him the accident of the miracle lost its tragic importance), and finally to classicism. In all three instances he pursued the authentic life through a program of cultural education. His case is paradigmatic of a significant trend in political thought of the last three centuries which invests in cultural politics, a particular kind of counter-politics. Many of its representatives wrote in German but the trend is also evident in American pragmatism (Rorty), French deconstruction (Derrida), Italian phenomenology (Vattimo), Central European psychoanalysis (Žižek), British post-colonialism (Bhabha) and elsewhere. It is distinguished for its greater interest in genres than institutions, art than action, education than constitution, rhetoric than governance, the public than the electorate. Since the 1980s, Heidegger's intellectual biography has come to exemplify the ethico-political dilemmas of philosophy. It may be time to examine such dilemmas in their more harrowing evolution through Lukács' long career in aesthetic education.

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