

AN ESSAY  
ON THE TRAGIC

---

*Peter Szondi*

# AN ESSAY ON THE TRAGIC

---

*Peter Szondi*

*An Essay on the Tragic* was originally published in German in 1961 under the title *Versuch über das Tragische* by Insel Verlag; it was republished in 1978 in Peter Szondi, *Schriften I*, © 1978, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.

Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

English translation © 2002 by the Board of Trustees of the  
Leland Stanford Junior University. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Szondi, Peter.

[Versuch über das Tragische. English]

An essay on the tragic / Peter Szondi; translated by Paul Fleming.  
p. cm.

ISBN 0-8047-4237-5 (alk. paper)—ISBN 0-8047-4395-9  
(pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Tragic, The. 2. Tragedy—History and criticism. I. Title.  
BH301.T7 S9513 2002  
809'.9162—dc21

2002002459

Original printing 2002

Last figure below indicates year of this printing:

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02

Typeset by Alan Noyes  
in 10.9/13 Adobe Garamond and Lithos Display

AN ESSAY  
ON THE TRAGIC

---

M E R I D I A N

*Crossing Aesthetics*

Werner Hamacher  
& David E. Wellbery  
*Editors*

If you do evil to us, it comes to us from ourselves.

—Agrippa D'Aubigné

When I think that I am satisfied and at ease,  
I harm myself.

—Jean de Sponde

# Contents

Introduction	I
PART I. THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE TRAGIC	
§ 1 Schelling	7
§ 2 Hölderlin	11
§ 3 Hegel	15
§ 4 Solger	23
§ 5 Goethe	25
§ 6 Schopenhauer	28
§ 7 Friedrich Theodor Vischer	31
§ 8 Kierkegaard	34
§ 9 Hebbel	37
§ 10 Nietzsche	41
§ 11 Simmel	44
§ 12 Scheler	47
Transition	49

## PART II. ANALYSES OF THE TRAGIC

§ 13	<i>Oedipus Rex</i>	59
§ 14	<i>Life Is a Dream</i>	64
§ 15	<i>Othello</i>	70
§ 16	<i>Leo Armenius</i>	74
§ 17	<i>Phaedra</i>	78
§ 18	<i>Demetrius</i>	82
§ 19	<i>The Schroffenstein Family</i>	90
§ 20	<i>Danton's Death</i>	95
	Notes	101



## Introduction

Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic.<sup>1</sup> Composed as an instruction in writing drama, Aristotle's text strives to determine the elements of tragic art; its object is tragedy, not the idea of tragedy. Even when it goes beyond the concrete work of art and inquires into the origin and effect of tragedy, the *Poetics* remains empirical in its theory of the soul. The realizations it thereby achieves (the imitative instinct as art's origin and catharsis as tragedy's effect) are meaningful not in themselves, but rather in their significance for tragic poetry, whose laws are to be derived from them. Modern poetics is essentially based upon the work of Aristotle; the history of modern poetics is the history of his reception and influence. This history can be understood as adoption, expansion, and systemization, as well as misunderstanding and critique. Aristotle's prescriptions regarding closure and the plot's scope played a particularly important role in classicism's theory of the unity of time, space, and action and its correction by Lessing. The same applies for his theory of fear and pity, whose numerous and contradictory interpretations yield a historical poetics of tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

The philosophy of the tragic rises like an island above Aristotle's powerful and monumental sphere of influence, one that knows neither national nor epochal borders. Begun by Schelling in a thoroughly non-programmatic fashion, the philosophy of the tragic runs through the Idealist and post-Idealist periods, always assuming a new form. If one counts Kierkegaard among the German philosophers and leaves aside

his students such as Unamuno,<sup>3</sup> the philosophy of the tragic is proper to German philosophy. Until this day, the concept of the tragic<sup>4</sup> has remained fundamentally a German one. Nothing is more characteristic of this fact than a parenthetical remark with which Marcel Proust begins a letter: "You will see the entire tragedy, as the German critic Curtius would say, of my situation."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the first part of the following study, dealing with definitions of the tragic, contains only the names of German philosophers and poets, while the second part considers the works of Greek antiquity, the Spanish, English, and German Baroque, as well as French and German classicism and its dissolution.

Just as one cannot reproach Aristotle's *Poetics* for lacking insight into the phenomenon of the tragic, one cannot deny from the outset the validity of the theory of the tragic produced by German philosophy after 1800 for earlier tragic poetry. To understand the historical relation prevailing between nineteenth-century theory and seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century practice, one must assume that the flight of Minerva's owl over this landscape also begins only with the onset of dusk.<sup>6</sup> And yet, only the commentaries constituting the book's first section can determine to what extent the definitions of the tragic in Schelling and Hegel, in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, take the place of tragic poetry (whose time seems to have come when these authors were writing) and to what extent these definitions describe tragedies or even their models.

The first section simply contains commentaries, not exhaustive presentations, let alone criticism. The commentaries refer to texts assembled, apparently for the first time here, from the philosophical and aesthetic writings of twelve thinkers and poets between 1795 and 1915. These commentaries can neither critically penetrate the systems from which the definitions of the tragic are extracted nor do justice to their singularity. Rather, the commentaries must, with few exceptions, make do with inquiring into the status of the tragic in the relevant thought structure and, thereby, partially compensate for the injustice done to it by tearing out quotes. Furthermore, the task of the commentaries is to make the various definitions of the tragic comprehensible by revealing a more or less concealed structural element that is common to all. This structural moment obtains its significance when one reads the various thinkers' definitions not in view of their specific philosophies, but

rather in view of the possibility of analyzing tragedies with their help, that is, in the hope of securing a general concept of the tragic. The exceptions, though, are those commentaries that have to wrest the meaning from a difficult text (such as Hölderlin's fragment) or that dig beneath a definition of the tragic and look for its origin at a point where the tragic is apparently not yet addressed, but where the explanation for its later definition is found. This is the case in the Hegel commentary, which constitutes the basis for the other interpretations, just as Hegel must be named before all others at the beginning of this book, for its insights are indebted to Hegel and his school, without which it never could have been written.



PART I

*The Philosophy of the Tragic*



## § I Schelling

It has often been asked how Greek reason could bear the contradictions of Greek tragedy. A mortal, destined by fate to become a criminal, fights *against* this fate, and yet he is horribly punished for the crime, which was the work of fate! The *reason* for this contradiction, what made it bearable, lay deeper than the level at which it has been sought: It lay in the conflict of human freedom with the power of the objective world. In this conflict, the mortal necessarily had to succumb if the power was a superior power—a *fatum*. And yet, since he did not succumb *without a fight*, he had to be *punished* for this very defeat. The fact that the criminal, who only succumbed to the superior power of fate, was *punished* all the same—this was the recognition of human freedom, an *honor* owed to freedom. It was by *allowing* its hero to *fight* against the superior power of fate that Greek tragedy honored human freedom. In order not to exceed the limits of art, Greek tragedy was obliged to have the hero *succumb*; but in order to compensate for this humiliation of human freedom imposed by art, it also had to allow him to *atone* and *make amends*—even for a crime committed through *fate*. . . . It was a *great* thought: To willingly endure punishment even for an *unavoidable* crime, so as to prove one's freedom precisely through the loss of this freedom and perish with a declaration of free will.<sup>1</sup>

By no longer focusing on the effect that the tragic has on the audience but on the phenomenon of the tragic itself, this interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* and of Greek tragedy in general commences the history of the theory of the tragic. The text comes from the last of the *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, which Schelling wrote in 1795 at the age of twenty. In these letters, Schelling contrasts the teachings of Spinoza and

Kant (which Fichte already had called the only two “completely consistent systems”)<sup>2</sup> and at the same time attempts to guard critical philosophy against lapsing into its own dogmatism. In a letter to Hegel from this period, Schelling writes: “The real difference between critical and dogmatic philosophy appears to be that the former proceeds from the absolute I (which has yet to be conditioned by an object), while the latter proceeds from the absolute object or non-I.”<sup>3</sup> This sentence corresponds to the conflicting meanings that the two theories attribute to freedom, which for Schelling constitutes “the essence of the I,” the “alpha and the omega of all philosophy.”<sup>4</sup> In dogmatism, the subject chooses the absolute as the object of its knowledge and therefore pays the price of “absolute passivity.” Criticism, on the contrary, which posits everything in the subject and thus negates everything in the object, “is a striving for immutable selfhood, unconditional freedom, and unbounded activity.”<sup>5</sup> Schelling himself, it seems, understood that both of these possibilities disregard the power of the objective, for even when the objective is victorious thanks to the absolute passivity of the subject, it owes its victory to the subject itself. Schelling therefore has the fictive addressee of his letters indicate a third possibility, one that is no longer derived from the presuppositions of philosophical systems, but from life and its presentation in art. “You are right,” the tenth letter begins, “one thing still remains—to *know* that there is an objective power which threatens to destroy our freedom and, with this firm and certain conviction in our hearts, to fight *against* it, to summon up all our freedom and to thus perish.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, as though shrinking from the recognition of the objective, the young Schelling permits this struggle only in tragic art, not in life. This struggle, Schelling writes, “could not become a system of action for the simple reason that such a system presupposes a race of Titans, in the absence of which, however, it would undoubtedly have the most ruinous consequences for humanity.”<sup>7</sup> Schelling thus subscribes to the idealistic faith that believes it has the tragic under its power and that acknowledges it only because it has discovered a meaning in it: the assertion of freedom. Accordingly, he sees the tragic process in *Oedipus Rex* as significant not in itself, but only in view of its telos. Nonetheless, the structure of the tragic particular to this process is evident. In Schelling’s interpretation, the tragic hero does not merely succumb to the superior power of the objective, but is also additionally



punished for succumbing, for taking up the struggle at all. Hence, the positive value of his attitude—the will to freedom, which is “the essence of his I”—turns against him. Following Hegel, this process can be called dialectical.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, Schelling had in mind the assertion of freedom that is paid for with the hero’s demise, for the possibility of a purely tragic process was alien to him. Yet one sentence grounds all of Schelling’s philosophical endeavors concerning the problem of the tragic: It was a great thought “to willingly endure punishment even for an *unavoidable* crime, so as to prove one’s freedom precisely through the loss of this freedom.” Within this sentence one can already hear the somber theme that later can no longer be drowned out by any consciousness of the triumph of the sublime: the knowledge that something great and lofty was destroyed precisely by what should have saved it.

The essence of *tragedy* is . . . a real conflict between freedom in the subject and objective necessity. This conflict does not end with the defeat of one or the other, but rather with both of them simultaneously appearing as conquerors and conquered in perfect indifference.<sup>9</sup>

The conflict of freedom and necessity truly [exists] only where the latter undermines the will itself, and where freedom is fought on its own ground.<sup>10</sup>

Schelling’s interpretation of tragedy in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, first delivered in 1802–3, explicitly refers to his earlier book on dogmatism and criticism. The starting point, however, is no longer a third possible relation between subject and object that is reserved especially for art and exists alongside the other two fundamentally possible relations. Rather, the starting point is developed from Schelling’s philosophy of identity and assumes a central position in his aesthetics founded upon this philosophy. While Schelling posits God as the “infinite ideality grasping all reality within itself,”<sup>11</sup> he defines the beautiful as the “forming-into-one [*Ineinsbildung*] of the real and the ideal,” as “the indifference of freedom and necessity, viewed in a real entity.”<sup>12</sup> The three poetic genres appear as different manifestations of this identity. In the epic, Schelling sees

a state of innocence, so to speak, where everything that will later only exist in dispersion or that will only return to a state of unity after a period of dispersion is still together and one. In the progress of culture [*Bildung*], this identity flared up into conflict in the lyrical poem. It was only with the