

## An Aesthetic Prelude

The great Shakespearean scholar A. C. Bradley once said that “tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery.”<sup>1</sup> Yet through the ages we have studied that mystery with great and serious purpose from a variety of perspectives to significant cultural benefit with little threat of exhausting the subject. So why do I return to it here: to make the bold offer of the final word or to add a modest footnote or two to a body of learned literature? Neither of these, really. Less modest than the latter and differently ambitious than the former, my aim is to bring the subject to bear on how we are to think fundamentally about our cultural, political, moral, and religious horizons in the twenty-first century. We get our bearings best, I will argue, by framing our most central issues in terms of what I will call the problem of tragedy. In Chapter 1, I will characterize that problem as I see it more precisely, but here I want to try to convey what I mean for tragedy to be central to how we frame the issues we face. I will do so by providing my own interpretation of developments in views about tragedy that run in one direction in the world of ancient Greece and in just the opposite direction in nineteenth-century Germany. The point of the exercise is not to settle a scholar’s quarrel about whether my interpretation is the correct one, though I believe that it is. Rather, the point is to illustrate how I want to bring thinking about tragedy and the tragic aspects of life to the

<sup>1</sup> See A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 51.

center of our ethical thought. I defer the scholarly disputes to another occasion. The interpretive exercise will provide a setting in which I can locate my own discussion of tragedy within my interpretation of what several "canonical" philosophers, Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, have said about tragedy. It will also allow me to place my project within the context of recent thought on the subject.

I begin with a question: which is the greater work of Homer, the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*? The answer, I believe, is the *Iliad*, and there are two reasons why. First, the *Iliad* did more to make Greek readers of the time keenly aware of their highest values than did the *Odyssey*. It did so by unrelentingly subjecting them to the tragic costs of human excellence and guiding them almost effortlessly to the thought that Achilles was the greater hero than Odysseus, that despite their different fates it was more noble to be Achilles than Odysseus.<sup>2</sup> The second reason is parasitic on the first: by means of the same tragic device, the *Iliad* is superior to the *Odyssey* in revealing to us the values and the mind of Greece in the late eighth century B.C.

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* characterize the human condition as radically vulnerable to the vicissitudes of fortune and the whims of the gods. The universe is composed in part of forces that are indifferent to human excellence and well-being. In this sense, a good human life must be lived in light of the fact that the world is an unfriendly place. There are no promises that things will turn out well. In fact, they are likely to turn out very badly, the more so the more noble you are. The questions of how to live and what kind of person to be are questions about how to live in this unfriendly world and what kind of person it is best to be in such a world. In the face of this, there are at least two honorable ways of proceeding. On the one hand, we can follow Achilles and confront the vagaries of fortune with uncompromising resolve and

<sup>2</sup> After commenting on what he sees as the best tragedies (like the *Iliad*) that end in the death of the hero, Aristotle comments on those critics who favor the happy outcome of the *Odyssey* and consequently rank it as the first kind of poetry. He says, "It is ranked first only through the weakness of the audiences; the poets merely follow their public, writing as its wishes dictate. But the pleasure here is not that of tragedy." Of lesser exemplifications of this form, he says that they "belong rather to comedy, where the bitterest enemies in the piece (e.g. Orestes and Aegisthus) walk off good friends at the end, with no slaying of any one by any one." See Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. II, *The Poetics*, translated by Ingram Bywater (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2325–6.

accept the consequences. We may even instigate the confrontation. If we do, we express to the unfriendly world just what we are made of and who we are, but we virtually ensure our own demise. On the other hand, we can follow Odysseus and try to manipulate the unfriendly forces of the universe through cunning, resourcefulness, and perseverance. If we do, we express less clearly to the unfriendly world just what we are made of and who we are, but we increase our chances of avoiding the worst outcomes. Life will test us and be filled with many hardships. It will require a noble character to survive, but it will not demand the best and most noble in us. Either way, the choice of how to live is predicated on a view of the human condition as one in which the human good is a project pursued in a hostile or indifferent universe. That its prospects cannot be guaranteed by the best in human effort and by a modicum of good luck is central to the tragic view that Homer and the later Greek tragedians of the fifth-century B.C. were concerned to convey.

Here we have a body of literature that reflects a culture in which the problem of how to live, act, feel, and think about life is centered in framing life's issues in terms of a tragic view of the human condition. Here we have a culture guided in thought, action, and feeling by its tragic sense. That is what it is for the issue of tragedy to be brought to the center of how a culture frames its values and the major issues it faces. What brings tragedy to center stage are two variables: a sense of high value and a belief that high value is pervasively and perpetually vulnerable to destructive forces. It is the sense of what high value is and what has high value that determines the substance of a tragic sense, and it is the degree of vulnerability to destructive forces that brings a tragic sense to the center of ethical thought. The more vulnerable high value is to destructive forces, the more central a tragic sense is to the ethical thought of a culture. Most importantly, we have in Homeric culture a culture with a tragic ethics, one that recognizes that life is pervasively and perpetually tragic, that this will always be so, and that the ethical task is to construct a life that is on balance good, despite the tragedy involved.

We find a contrast in Aristotle and the Greeks of the Late Classical period. The Late Classical Greeks of the fourth century B.C. were not guided by a tragic sense in the way that the Archaic or even the Early and High Classical Greeks were. That the later Greeks had a tragic sense and that it was important to them it would be foolish to deny. But

it was not the same tragic sense as that of Homer and the tragedians, nor did it play the same central role in ethical thought that it had in the previous culture. By the time we get to Aristotle, the Greeks have come to think of the universe as being morally friendly. There was on Aristotle's view a harmony between nature and human goodness and excellence.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the universe is a whole in which all the parts are harmoniously related. The goodness of any natural kind, including human kind, is in the realization of its nature, and the environment is such that with a modicum of good luck we can realize that nature. Thus the Late Classical Greek view of the human condition was an extremely optimistic one. Though these Greeks interpreted the world as having its unfriendly dimensions, on the whole they saw it as favorable toward human excellence and well-being. Tragedy is found in the various ways in which we can fail to have the modicum of good luck that protects us against the vicissitudes of the unfriendly, destructive elements.

All this is important to understanding how Aristotle viewed tragic literature and his account of its aesthetic dimensions in his work *The Poetics*. There is a difference, however, between his aesthetic account of tragedy and the role that tragic concepts played in his ethical thought. The aesthetic account attempts to explicate the general form of tragic genre in the Greek tradition from Homer through the tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

For our purposes, the essential features of the account are these. Tragic literature aims at a certain tragic effect through the employment of a regular set of literary devices. The effect is the evocation of tragic emotions in such a way as to achieve catharsis, a kind of purging or purification of the emotions. The tragic emotions attach to a person of high worth: fear and pity for his plight and, as Aristotle should have said, awe for his noble character. Included in the devices employed to achieve the tragic effect are a hero and a plot. The plot includes an action on the part of the hero that plays a significant role, along with forces over which the hero has no control, in a reversal of his fortune from happiness to misery. It is the awareness of the interplay between the hero's actions, his character, and the external forces of chance that produce the tragic effect. What emerges from this account is the fact

<sup>3</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962).

that Aristotle saw tragic literature, in Martha Nussbaum's memorable phrase, as a study in the fragility of human goodness.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the relevance of that study for ethics was different for Homer and the tragedians than it was for Aristotle. Within the period ranging from the Archaic through the High Classical, there were changes in the tragic sense due to changes in perceptions of what is noble. Odysseus is held in high regard by Homer but subject to ridicule by Euripides, and women are more the subject of tragic treatment later in the period than earlier. These are cases of a change in the tragic sense because of a change in what is seen to be of high and noble value. Yet, these differences aside, what remains from the beginning of the period to the end is that what is most noble about the noble is that they are people of action. The tragic sense finds its response in an encounter with the fragility of *actors*. Hence, the warrior ethic.

Aristotle's ethic is not a warrior ethic (although it includes an ethic for warriors). What is most noble about us, according to Aristotle, is that we are *thinkers*. To be sure, we are actors as well, but the best part of us is found in our thinking capacities. The life that is predominantly contemplative is better than the life that is predominantly active. It is the realization of the higher part of our nature. Yet if tragedy flows from action rather than thought, then tragic concepts are less central to ethical thinking than other concepts, which is why conditions of flourishing are for Aristotle more central to his ethical thought than conditions of conflict and calamity. Moreover, even as actors we are primarily social animals whose most noble actions are expressed in cooperation and harmony with others rather than in conflict with them. In either case, whether it be our contemplative nature or our nature as actors in the social arena, our most noble side is expressed and realized under the most favorable conditions rather than under conditions of conflict.

The sum of these observations goes a long way in demonstrating that Aristotle has retained tragic concepts but has moved them off center stage in his ethical thought. His tragic sense is different than that of his Greek ancestors, and it plays a different role in his ethical thought. When we add to this that Aristotle thought that human goodness is

<sup>4</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

considerably less vulnerable to unfriendly or indifferent forces than the pre-Late Classical dramatists believed, we can see that though he was interested in the study of the fragility of human goodness, it was not central to his ethical conceptual scheme in the way that it was for Homer or Sophocles or even Euripides. That bad things sometimes happen and that it takes noble character to deal with them is a far different set of thoughts than the thought that destructive forces lurk all around us and are highly likely to thwart our actions with calamity unforeseen.

This direction away from tragic concepts continued through the Hellenistic thinkers to the very end of the ancient Greek period. The more human goodness and nobility were attached to our being thinking things, the less human goodness was vulnerable to unfriendly or indifferent forces of chance. The more the Epicureans and the Stoics emphasized these themes, the more they removed a tragic sense from the center of ethical thought. Christianity, of course, was to take this even further. If this is correct, then the direction of movement within the ancient Greek world was from a tragic to a nontragic ethics, from an ethical conceptual scheme in which a tragic sense was central to framing the ethical life to one in which it was moved more and more to the margins.

When we come to nineteenth-century Germany, we find a movement in just the opposite direction. A brief examination of Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche and their thoughts on tragedy will illustrate the point.

Nineteenth-century Germany, especially early to mid-century, was alive with thoughts of progress. This is why the philosophy of history played such a prominent role in the intellectual climate of the period. But prior to Immanuel Kant, Germany was largely an ahistorical culture, a culture without a sense of historical direction. I say this in part because of the dominance of the intellectualized Christianity of Leibniz.<sup>5</sup> In the seventeenth century, Leibniz had argued that a series of necessary truths should lead us to the conclusion that this is the best of all possible worlds.<sup>6</sup> Whatever evil it contains is necessary to the

<sup>5</sup> No doubt the Thirty Years' War played a significant role as well.

<sup>6</sup> See G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (New York: Open Court, 1985).

overall goodness of the created universe, and we can know this because we can know a priori that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly good God who could and would create only the best possible universe. Such a view dulls the historical sense because it renders a sense of direction both impossible and unnecessary. Whatever the direction of history and whatever the events of history, it is all for the best. Moreover, we needn't worry about its course. God, who is the only one who knows or who can know the ultimate historical destination, is fully in charge. We are not. The upshot is that we can be consoled by the thought that no matter how tragic events might appear, the appearances are deceiving.

Here the tragic sense is as distant from ethical thought as it can get. During the period from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, Leibnizian thought rendered Germany virtually immune to the enthusiasm for the idea of progress found in England and France. John Locke's Christianity, a version contemporary with Leibniz's, was immersed in the humanism sweeping the rest of Europe and brought with it a sense of historical direction, a movement toward social improvement through hard work, market mechanisms, and religious tolerance. Though Locke's Christianity differed from Leibniz's in its enthusiasm for progress, it also made little use of tragic concepts. Indeed, the British Enlightenment was infused with the thought that tragedy was virtually eliminable through human effort. That is what distinguished French and English thought from German thought through most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The intellectual event that changed the German climate was the Kantian Copernican revolution, and with this revolution came a sense of direction, a sense that history can and should be put on a course intelligible to human reason and put in effect by the human will. Immanuel Kant interpreted the forces of history as guided by the logic of the categorical imperative. He saw historical currents converging on social arrangements within nations that removed obstacles to individual freedom and autonomy, and he saw the same currents converging on arrangements among nations that would lead to international peace.<sup>7</sup> Such optimism had little patience with talk about tragedy.

<sup>7</sup> See Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace," in *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals* (New York: Hackett, 1983).

In fact, it is one of the most revealing observations on Kant's thought that he never wrote a significant essay on the concept of tragedy. To my knowledge, he never wrote anything at all on the subject. He seemed interested in it neither morally nor aesthetically. His understanding of Greek ethics makes no connection with the topic, which suggests just how superficial his understanding of Greek ethics was. Indeed, the brilliance of Kant is found in the purity of his ethical theory, and one central feature of that theory is that it is purely nontragic. The most fundamental good is that we have wills that stand above the laws of nature, and the highest good, a combination of good will and happiness, is secured in the hereafter. Taken literally, nothing ultimately tragic can happen on this view. Of course, if evil were ultimately to triumph over goodness, that would be a great tragedy, but, according to Kant, it is an a priori postulate of practical reason that such a tragedy will not occur. Moreover, *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant's major work on aesthetics, makes no reference to tragic literature and its worth.<sup>8</sup> Given the dominance of Aristotle in the history of aesthetics, this omission is startling until reflection on the structure and content of Kant's view of the human condition and the human good reveals that there is nothing essentially tragic in Kant's understanding of these matters. We know that he had a dim view of the Romantic literature of his times. He thought it was sentimentalist fluff, with little moral value. About much of this, he was surely right. Whether he thought the same of all tragic literature, including that of Homer and the Greek tragedians, is something about which we can only speculate. If he did, he was just as surely wrong.

With Hegel, however, we do not have to speculate. He was explicitly enamored both with the Greeks and with Greek tragedy. Moreover, his entire philosophical "system" was focused on the essential role of conflict and resolution in aesthetics, in ethics, and in history. In many ways, his aesthetics can be used as a guide to understanding the rest of his thought.

Most revealing in this regard is Hegel's aesthetic theory of tragedy. As on the Aristotelian theory, the tragic artist aims at producing a tragic effect on the audience by employing a variety of literary devices: a plot

<sup>8</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, edited by J. H. Bernard (New York: Prometheus, 2000).



that involves a hero who suffers a calamity that results in a reversal of fortune from happiness to misery through a combination of his own actions and unforeseen events over which he has no control. The major difference between Hegel's theory and Aristotle's lies in their accounts of tragic effect.<sup>9</sup>

Like Aristotle, Hegel thought of fear and pity and awe for the plight of the hero as essential tragic emotions and central to achieving tragic effect. But where Aristotle believed that the evocation of these emotions must culminate in catharsis, Hegel believed that they must culminate in reconciliation. It is this latter requirement that is at the heart of Hegel's theory. The tragic hero experiences a divided spirit, and it is witnessing the struggle with this division within the hero that evokes fear and pity and awe in the audience. In part, what makes the hero a hero is that he is capable of such a divided spirit and such a struggle. But the greatest of the heroes are those who can reconcile themselves to their struggle and its devastating effects. They do so by coming to understand the conflict within them in a way that moves them beyond where they were before the reversal of fortune. Their spirits are changed in regard to the polarized values that caused the conflict in the first place. They see the validity of the conflicting claims, yet are reconciled to their choice between them and the loss that is involved in it. The aesthetic tragic effect is experiencing this resolution with aesthetic distance.

Hegel's theory is also enriched by a broader understanding of the kinds of "spiritual" conflicts we can experience and identify with. This paves the way for understanding modern as well as ancient tragedy. But what must be understood is that on Hegel's view spiritual conflict is a conflict among the hero's highest values. The conflict between family and state was his major conflict of emphasis. The tragic sense is a kind of response to witnessing the struggle to find reconciliation between the things we value most when the realization of some of those values precludes the realization of others. That is what tragedy is about for him. In this sense, then, the Hegelian study of tragedy is not as much the study of human fragility (as it was for Aristotle) as it is the study of the conflicting structure of human values.

<sup>9</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

The ethical significance of tragedy finds a related expression in Hegel's philosophy of history.<sup>10</sup> History is the story of our struggle to reconcile the conflicts between the things we value most highly. History moves by the dialectic of ethical conflict in which the resolution of conflicting particulars resolves in an ever-ascending movement toward ethical universalism. The most humanistic interpretation of this is that we can learn from the conflicts among our values as history proceeds in such a way that we can hope that ultimately we will have a set of values that are harmoniously reconciled. We do not have such an understanding now, but we are headed in that direction. In this sense, we still live in a tragic age. The end of politics and the end of tragic art will converge. What is envisioned is an ethic that no longer depends on tragic conflict.

The direction of movement from Kant to Hegel is thus a development away from a nontragic ethic toward an ethic that makes tragic concepts more central. Hegel's ethics, however, falls short of a truly tragic ethics because it becomes decreasingly tragic in its framework as historical progress is made. By contrast, a truly tragic ethics does not have the Hegelian hope of transcending tragic conflict. It accepts tragic conflict as a permanent feature of the ethical life.

We get something closer to an ethic of this sort in Schopenhauer, which his aesthetic theory of tragedy helps us to see.<sup>11</sup> He begins by rejecting the idea that all the Aristotelian elements of tragedy are necessary. For example, the tragic artist does not need a hero in the narrative in order to achieve the tragic effect, though the incorporation of a hero often heightens that effect. Still, on Schopenhauer's view tragedy can even happen to a villain who inspires no awe. Here I am thinking of someone who is unlike even Macbeth, who has flaws but inspires awe nonetheless. For Schopenhauer, we can experience the tragic emotions of fear and pity even for those who suffer justly. What this reveals is that Schopenhauer sees tragedy as essentially caught up with suffering itself, and it is this fact that loosens artists from the chains of Aristotelian principles in pursuing tragic art. Not only

<sup>10</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956).

<sup>11</sup> See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. G. Payne (Indian Hills, Colorado: Falcon's Wing Press, 1958).