

Who's Afraid of Seneca? Conflict And Pathos in the Romantic-Idealistic Theory of Tragedy

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconsiders the Idealistic aesthetics of tragedy from an unconventional point of view. It investigates the relationship between theory and dramatic canon by focusing on those works and authors that are excluded from the canon by the theoretical discourse. My aim is to show that Idealist philosophers and Romantic critics concur in constructing a unitary model of the tragic conflict that is partly defined through its contraposition to the 'Senecan' conception of tragedy as a representation of suffering and as a dialectic of passions. Seneca here stands for an entire line of European dramaturgy, culminating in French Classicism, in which the negativity that produces the mournful outcome is rooted in the inner self of the tragic hero and is not redeemed by the affirmation of a superior ethical or metaphysical instance. This contrast does not merely concern a literary model, but also, more generally, the conception of subjectivity underlying the dramaturgy of passions. This paper thus helps to shed light on the controversial relationship between the idealistic philosophy of the tragic with modern tragedy at large.

KEYWORDS

Theory of Tragedy, Idealism, Seneca, Hegel, Pathos

1. *Introduction*

Tragedy or the tragic? Peter Szondi's statement that Aristotle inaugurated a poetics of tragedy, and Schelling a philosophy of the tragic, has become an unavoidable point of reference for those who deal with German Idealism. It certainly hits the mark, but perhaps presents too radical an alternative between the two terms.¹

The discourse on the tragic always entails a double valence and, one could say, a basic contradiction: on the one hand, the search for the essence of the tragic aims at defining a structure of thought or a fundamental experience that transcends tragedies in their concrete formal and historical configuration. On the other

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¹ P. Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische*, in P. Szondi, *Schriften*, ed. by J. Bollack, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1978, p. 151.

hand, the tragic as a concept is not thinkable without reference to the object of 'tragedy'. This contradiction is particularly evident (and I would add productive) in post-Kantian aesthetic thought, which not only conceives of art as a way of understanding the rational content of the world, but in systematic terms integrates art history into aesthetics.

In fact, the idealistic aesthetics of tragedy do not coincide with the speculative theory of the tragic, although in a sense they presuppose it. Neither, however, are they equated with poetics as a more or less normative theory of the form of dramatic representation.²

The metaphysical speculation on the tragic between the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century has, in fact, produced an aesthetics of tragedy based on completely new criteria, and at the same time contributed decisively to reconfiguring the dramatic canon on a philosophical basis. It is evident that speculative readings of Greek tragedies – such as that of the *Oedipus Rex* by the young Schelling in his *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* or that of the *Eumenides* and *Antigone* by Hegel – constitute the essential presupposition of aesthetic reflection on tragedy in the proper sense, which however significantly widens the perspective by including also the modern dramatic production, even if with a different emphasis.³ Thus, Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, while essentially maintaining the model of conflict elaborated in his article on natural law and in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, treats the tragic phenomenon not as an instrument through which to explain the ethical world or as a prefiguration of the dialectical unfolding of the spirit, but rather as a historically determined sensuous expres-

² The question of the specificity of the aesthetics of tragedy with respect to the philosophy of the tragic is discussed in Ch. Menke, 'The aesthetics of Tragedy. Romantic perspectives', in J. Billings, M. Leonard (eds.), *Tragedy and the idea of modernity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 42-58. See also R. Galle, 'Tragik, tragisch', in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, vol. 6, Metzler, Weimar 2005, pp. 157-165 and Th. Martinec, *Von der Tragödientheorie zur Philosophie des Tragischen*, in "Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft", 49, 2005, pp. 105-128.

³ On Schelling's interpretation of the *Oedipus Rex* see, in addition to Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische*, cit., pp. 157-161, L. Hühn, 'Die Philosophie des Tragischen. Schellings „Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus“', in J. Jantzen (ed.), *Die Realität des Wissens und das wirkliche Dasein. Erkenntnisbegründung und Philosophie des Tragischen beim frühen Schelling*, Frommann, Stuttgart 1998, pp. 95-128. On the formation of Hegel's philosophy of tragic see M. Schulte, *Zur Beziehung von Ethik und Tragödientheorie bei Hegel*, in "Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie", 45, 1997, pp. 711-740 and M. de Beistegui, 'Hegel: or the Tragedy of Thinking', in M. de Beistegui, S. Sparks (eds.), *Philosophy and Tragedy*, Routledge, London-New York 2000, pp. 11-37. On Hegel's reading of *Antigone* and its theoretical consequences see D.J. Schmidt, *On Germans and other Greeks. Tragedy and Ethical Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2001, and M. Donougho, *The Woman in White: On the Reception of Hegel's Antigone*, in "The Owl of Minerva" 21, 1, 1989, pp. 65-89.

sion of the idea. In his lectures on philosophy of art (1802-1803), Schelling relates the tragic conflict to the idea of artistic beauty. Here, the figure of the hero who succumbs to fate blamelessly and affirms his freedom by voluntarily accepting punishment, lying at the center of his interpretation of the *Oedipus Rex*, becomes the symbolic representation of the relationship between what is finite and what is infinite in the work of art. "Since freedom and necessity are the highest expressions of that particular antithesis upon which all art is based, the highest manifestation of art is thus the one in which necessity is victorious without freedom succumbing, and in the reverse fashion in which freedom triumphs without necessity being overcome".⁴ The focus lies on the identity of opposites resulting from the mutual negation of the two conflicting terms. In the framework of Schelling's speculative conception of poetic genres, tragedy has a paradigmatic function because it makes the ontological structure of artistic beauty visible symbolically, that is, on the level of content. This gives to tragedy a higher aesthetic value than to lyric poetry and epic, in which the conflict is unilaterally resolved, respectively, in the interiority of the subject or in the objectivity of the events depicted.

It can be said that the Idealistic-Romantic aesthetics of tragedy are triggered by the intersection of the theoretical core of the interest in the negative with the Kantian conception of the sublime, which Schiller had first applied to the tragic phenomenon. The concepts of the pathetic sublime (*Pathetischerhabene*) and the sublime of action (*Erhabene der Handlung*) mark the transition from the reflection on aesthetic subjectivity to the reflection on the structure of the tragic event. Starting from the question of the pleasure provoked by tragic objects, Schiller had in fact integrated the moral component of the Kantian sublime and its antithetical structure into a conception of tragedy serving as a representation of a condition of suffering provoked by the moral nature of the individual itself.⁵

It is from the philosophy of the tragic that the common element of the theories of tragedy set forth in the critical writings of the Schlegel brothers and in the aesthetic lectures of Schelling, Hegel, and Solger derives: the idea that tragic representation is centered on the dialectical collision between opposing principles, not on the grief caused by a misfortune or by incoercible and destructive pas-

⁴ F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, in F.W.J. Schelling, *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Ch. Binckelmann, II, 6, Frommann, Stuttgart 2018, p. 368; Eng. trans. by D.W. Stott, *The Philosophy of Art*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1989, p. 249.

⁵ The relevance of Schiller's conception of the tragic sublime for Schelling and Schlegel is stressed by J. Billings, *The Genealogy of the Tragic*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014, pp. 80-97.

sions. Of course, this collision takes on different configurations. It is understood as an opposition between freedom and necessity by Schelling and the Romantics, between equally legitimate ethical instances whose annihilation leads to a higher conciliation by Hegel, and between the finiteness of individual existence and its absolute foundation by Solger. But in all cases, it entails attributing an entirely secondary role to the analysis of the subject's emotional states, desires, and psychophysical turmoil in the dramatic construction.⁶

In the following pages I will examine the relationship between theory and the dramatic canon in the Idealistic aesthetics of tragedy. My aim is to show that Idealist philosophers and Romantic critics concur in constructing a unitary model of the tragic conflict that is partly defined through its contraposition to the 'Senecan' conception of tragedy as a representation of suffering and as a dialectic of passions. Seneca here stands for an entire line of European dramaturgy, culminating in French Classicism, in which the negativity that produces the mournful outcome is rooted in the inner self of the tragic hero and is not redeemed by the affirmation of a superior ethical or metaphysical instance. For the German Idealists, this conception of the tragic is opposed to the paradigm of 'Attic' tragedy they follow.

2. *Aesthetic Theory and The Tragic Canon*

The close interconnection between aesthetic theory and philosophy of history in post-Kantian thinkers results in a certain ambivalence in the very definition of tragedy as an artistic form. On the one hand, the question about the status of modernity tends to draw a line of demarcation between ancient tragedy and modern drama, essentially connecting the idea of the tragic in the strict sense to Attic tragedy. For Hegel, for instance, the modern world lacks the spiritual conditions originating the dialectical core of the tragic conflict, namely the identification of the individual with an ethical totality, and the idea of destiny. Solger, whose reflections on tragedy originate in his activity as a translator of Sophocles, seeks instead to trace a conceptual model equally applicable to ancient and modern

⁶ The focus on conflict, which places the idealistic theory of tragedy in a line of continuity with the Aristotelian doctrine of the centrality of *mythos*, has often been criticized with the argument that it produces a kind of sterilization of the sense of the tragic event, since it does not capture its authentic character, which is performative, emotional and musical. See for example K.-H. Bohrer, *Das Tragische. Erscheinung, Pathos, Klage*, Hanser, München 2009, pp. 11-16.

tragedy.⁷ On the other hand, the integration of art history into the systematic structure of aesthetics, from Schelling's *Philosophy of Art* to Hegel's Berlin lectures on aesthetics, presupposes the establishment of a canon of dramatic literature based on philosophical criteria, as well as devoting considerable attention to modern dramatists such as Shakespeare and Calderón up to contemporary authors such as Goethe and Schiller. The identification of the tragic with the Sophoclean model does not exclude, as we shall see, the attribution of the label 'tragic' to modern works as well. However, the focus on the inner conflict of the subject makes its application to the interpretation of tragedies such as *Hamlet* or *King Lear* problematic, especially in the case of Hegel.

As is well known, a major role in the creation of such a dramatic canon is played by the Schlegel brothers, whose critical analysis has strongly influenced the aesthetic approach to the tragic phenomenon.⁸ This is one of the most significant cases of interaction and mutual influence between Early Romanticism and Idealism, notwithstanding the basic differences regarding the conception of the relationship between art and philosophical knowledge. A cursory comparison of Friedrich's Jena writings and August Wilhelm's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* with the main systematic aesthetic writings of German idealism, those of Schelling, Hegel, and Solger, is enough to see that these authors refer to the same corpus of dramatic texts and take very similar positions on tragedy. Now, by definition, literary canons establish scales of values and are characterized equally by presences and exclusions. Since 'omnis de-

⁷ Solger's translation of Sophocles' works appeared in 1808 (*Des Sophokles Tragödien*, Leipzig). He deals with tragedy in his *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik* and especially in the long review of August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, appeared in 1818 in the "Wiener Jahrbücher für Literatur" and reprinted in Solger's *Nachgelassene Schriften* (1826). Hegel pays particular attention to this work, to which he already refers in the *Philosophy of Right*, in his review of the *Nachgelassene Schriften* (1828). See G. Pinna, 'Constelaciones berlinesas. Controversias estéticas entre el idealismo y el romanticismo', in F. Oncina Coves (ed.), *Historia conceptual y método de las constelaciones*, Pre-Textos, Valencia 2017, pp. 73-90.

⁸ As is well known, Friedrich Schlegel's aesthetic reflection is entrusted to a large number of fragmentary texts and materials published posthumously, while August Wilhelm is responsible for a series of lecture courses, published and immediately translated into the major European languages, which extensively expound the aesthetic principles and theory of literature elaborated in collaboration with his brother. Here I stick to the current practice of considering the positions of the two regarding the conception of tragedy as a unitary model although, as I will say later, a more articulated position emerges from Friedrich's notes, also regarding Euripides. On the topic E. Behler, 'Die Theorie der Tragödie in der deutschen Frühromantik', in R. Brinkmann (ed.), *Romantik in Deutschland*, Metzler, Stuttgart 1978, pp. 572-583. On Friedrich Schlegel's position D. Messlin, *Antike und Moderne. Friedrich Schlegels Poetik, Philosophie und Lebenskunst*, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2011, pp. 332-341.

terminatio est negatio', exclusions and devaluations provide significant indications regarding the boundaries of the idealistic aesthetics of tragedy and also the internal differences within this area itself.

A first distinction emerges already in the definition of the triad of the great Athenian tragedians: the tragedies of Euripides are attributed a lesser aesthetic quality than those of Sophocles and Aeschylus. In the architecture of the tragic canon, designed by Schlegel on the model of the development of Greek sculpture established by Winckelmann, Aeschylus in his archaic severity represents the origin, Sophocles the harmonic perfection and Euripides the phase of decadence.⁹

Although with some fluctuations, Friedrich's fragmentary writings and August Wilhelm's lectures agree in motivating their negative judgment on Euripides through his depowering of the idea of fate, his tendency to introduce sophisticated arguments that relativize the moral meaning of actions and, above all, his representation of passions not related to ethical values, such as love.¹⁰ Amorous passion "can only be stretched out to a tragic passion", Friedrich Schlegel asserts, "through the use of ugly, immoral, and fantastic adjuncts".¹¹ Love, Friedrich adds, is absent even from the best modern tragedies. The implicit reference is to tragedies centered on female characters like Phaedra or Medea. In Phaedra's case fate plays a secondary role and incest is not unconscious as in the case of Oedipus, and Medea uses magic and infanticide to avenge betrayed love. The main argument against Euripides' dramaturgy is that it displays elements such as physical and psychological suffering, lamentation, and the weakness of individual characters, which create a state of emotional turmoil in the viewer but are not redeemed by cogent moral reasons.¹²

⁹ See A.W. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, ed. by G.V. Amoretti, Schröder, Leipzig 1923, vol. 1, pp. 64-65; Eng. trans. by J. Black, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, John Bell and Sons, London 1894, pp. 113-116. On the romantic construction of the tragic triad and its reference to Winckelmann see G. Most, *Schlegel, Schlegel und die Geburt eines Tragödienparadigmas*, in "Poetica", 25, 1993, pp. 155-175.

The contraposition of Aeschylus and Euripides was already a topic in ancient literary criticism. Cf. for instance R. Hunter, *Critical Moments in Classical Literature. Studies in the Ancient View of Literature and its Uses*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, p. 47.

¹⁰ E. Behler, A.W. Schlegel and the Nineteenth-Century Damnatio of Euripides, in "Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies", 27, 4, 1986, pp. 335-367.

¹¹ F. Schlegel, *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie*, in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. by E. Behler et al., vol. 1, p. 319 f.; Eng. trans. by S. Barnett, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, SUNY Press, New York 2001, p. 72 f.

¹² Elsewhere Friedrich Schlegel notes that the attention to the inner complexity of the subject as well as his inclination to reason is what brings Euripides closer to the reflexivity of modern art. See *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. by E. Behler et

In his *Lectures on Dramatic Art*, August Wilhelm Schlegel puts forward a version of the fundamental conflict on which tragic representation is based that summarizes Schiller's idea of the sublime resistance to an external violence and Schelling's Oedipus' paradox: "Inward liberty and external necessity are the two poles of the tragic world. It is only by contrast with its opposite that each of these ideas is brought into full manifestation".¹³ The self-determination of the tragic subject is affirmed through its dominion over his or her animal component, or through the struggle against a superior power that cannot be "mere natural necessity but one lying beyond the world of self in the abyss of infinitude".¹⁴ Beyond Schlegel's interest in the compositional structure of tragic works, the premise of his historical-critical reconstruction of tragic literature is therefore philosophical: a work is called tragic if in it the moral foundation of the subject is manifested through an inescapable struggle with external necessity. Schelling, whose innovative reading of the *Oedipus Rex* was formulated within the framework of a theoretical-metaphysical argumentation in the properly aesthetic context of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, elaborated in close contact with the Schlegels in Jena, visibly depends on their critical judgment on dramatic works, including the negative evaluation of Euripides' tragedies. According to Schelling, Euripides had put aside "the high ethical atmosphere" that characterized the work of Aeschylus and Sophocles, aiming to produce on the spectator a "material emotion or feeling wedded more with suffering": not a catharsis of the passions but their exaltation.¹⁵ What Ernst Behler calls the "*damnatio* of Euripides" is motivated by the presence in his plays of a sensual pathos produced by the detailed depiction of emotions and their bodily manifestations. In particular, the motif of bodily suffering is considered as an entirely subordinate component of tragic event, even in cases where "is the basis of the collision", as Hegel says about Euripides' *Alcestis* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.¹⁶ On the same line is Schelling's interpretation of the Aeschylean *Prometheus*, which in the *Philosophie der Kunst* is defined as "the archetype of the highest human character and thus the true archetype of tragedy".¹⁷ Emphasizing that the suffering of Prometheus is not a suffering

al., vol. 16, p. 314.

¹³ Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, cit., p. 51; Eng. trans., p. 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, cit., p. 383; Eng. trans., p. 262.

¹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vol. 13 (Ästhetik I), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1978, p. 269; Eng. trans. by T.M. Knox, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1975, p. 206.

¹⁷ Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, cit., p. 383; Eng. trans., p. 262.

of the body, but an inner suffering caused by the sense of injustice due to the submission to which the tyrannical power of Zeus forces him, Schelling wants to reiterate that the essence of tragedy concerns the moral constitution of the individual, the resistance of the spirit that overcomes natural necessity while succumbing to it. This is a vision of the tragic hero that incorporates the Stoic component of Schiller's early writings on tragedy and the sublime, but at the same time places it within a metaphysical questioning of the concept of freedom.

However, the centrality of dark feelings and of the irrational in the tragic plot, which correlates with the representation of the intrinsic fragility of the subject, is at the origin of a much more radical *damnatio*, that of Seneca, an author who had had an enormous influence on the development of European dramatic theater since the Renaissance, and without whom Shakespeare, Calderón and the *tragédie classique* are unthinkable. This influence is indeed recognized, but in purely negative terms. Seneca is charged with being responsible for the transformation of the natural individuality of the Greek tragic heroes into abstract characters "that may count more or less as mere personifications of specific passions – love, honour, fame, ambition, tyranny, etc"..¹⁸

Seneca's works deal with Greek mythological materials, of which, however, they no longer share the religious-institutional foundation. They are centered on the verbal articulation of the emotional states of the characters. The intent of the tragic representation is, in a sort of inverted mirror of the Stoic doctrine of the control of passions, the exploration of the nature of emotions, especially negative ones such as anger, jealousy, revenge. In this 'plot of the human soul' there is not a simple dynamic of cause and effect between passion and action, but rather a process with different steps, in which there is not only moral reason that opposes passion, but a complex interaction between conflicting passions, judgment and reason. The reasoning moved by anger contributes, for example, to determine the cruelty of the outcome, as in the case of Medea.¹⁹ For the Stoics, tragedy is the result of the failure of judgment and the prevalence of negative affections over positive ones. The underlying interest in the psychology of action results in a rhetorical development of the conflicting motivations, both irrational and rational, of action and the psychopathic traits of the characters.²⁰ The condemnation

¹⁸ Hegel, *Ästhetik III*, cit., p. 560; Eng. trans., p. 1227.

¹⁹ See G.A. Staley, *Seneca and the Idea of Tragedy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 80 f.

²⁰ See J. Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2013, p. 52 f.

of this type of tragedy by the Romantics and Idealists is unanimous and results in the expulsion of Seneca from the canon of dramatic authors. August Wilhelm's judgement on the Roman author is unquestionable: Seneca is rhetorical, brutal in the representation of suffering, abstract in the definition of characters, poorly effective in the construction of dramatic action. Rhetoric, in the negative sense of pompous and redundant speech, is for Schlegel the defining feature of Seneca's dramaturgy: his plays, he says, relate to the Attic tragedies as "empty hyperbole against the deepest truth".²¹

Similarly, in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* Hegel states that "the tragic figures in Italian and French drama [...] relate the motives of their actions as well as the degree and kind of their feelings with great declamatory splendor and much rhetorical skill, but this way of explaining themselves reminds us more of Seneca's failures than of the Greek dramatic masterpieces".²² By opposing the "ethically justified pathos" of the heroes of Aeschylus and Sophocles to "the sentimental and personal rhetoric" and "the sophistry of passion" which constitutes the legacy of the Senecan model in modern tragedy, namely in Corneille and Racine, Hegel not only expresses an aesthetic judgement but also a critique of the underlying formalistic Stoic conception of the moral subject.²³

Precisely Racine, in Michael Silk's words "the elephant in the room" of the idealistic theory of tragedy, is taken by August Wilhelm Schlegel as an example of the distance between tragedy centered on the analysis of the passions and tragedy based on a moral conflict.²⁴ In the *Comparaison entre la Phèdre de Racine et celle d'Euripide*, published in 1807, he gives a comparative analysis of the *Phèdre*, which two years earlier had been brought to the German stage in a new translation by Schiller, and of Euripides' *Hippolytus*.²⁵ Curiously, the previously criticized Euripides here represents the positive pole of the comparison: the worst of the Greeks is still better than the French.

But apart from these considerations, dating back to Lessing and based on the construction of the German cultural identity in an anti-French key, Schlegel's criticism here also moves from a philosophical standpoint. The conflict between freedom and necessity, according to Schlegel, means that the outcome of the action proceeds from

²¹ Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, cit., p. 193; Eng. trans., p. 165.

²² Hegel, *Ästhetik III*, cit., p. 560 f.; Eng. trans., p. 1227.

²³ Hegel, *Ästhetik III*, cit., p. 546; Eng. trans., p. 1215.

²⁴ M. Silk, 'Epilogue', in J. Billings, M. Leonard (eds.), *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 306-313, here p. 311.

²⁵ A.W. Schlegel, *Comparaison entre la Phèdre de Racine et celle d'Euripide (et d'autres textes)*, ed. by J.-M. Valentin, Artois Presses Université, Arras 2013, pp. 105-183.

the impossibility of reconciling an absolute moral instance, in the case of Phaedra's story the prohibition of incest, with an irrepressible impulse, the love passion which in the Greek Phaedra has a character of necessity because it is imposed by Aphrodite. In Euripides' *Hippolytus* it is the struggle between two goddesses, Aphrodite and Artemis, that provides the framework for the conflict, as well as its character of necessity: Phaedra is the instrument Aphrodite uses to punish the chaste Hippolytus, whose rejection of sensual love manifests his exclusive devotion to Artemis. Racine eliminates this frame of reference, thus shifting the focus to Phaedra's psychological condition as the motor of the action. A similar operation had already been carried out by Seneca, whom Racine mentions in his preface, with the deletion of Aphrodite's speech in the proem and Artemis' reconciliatory intervention at the end. In Schlegel's view, this undermines the element of fate, or necessity, which is essential to the tragic dialectic. But the main defect of Racine's tragedy consists in having put in the background the seriousness of the immorality of the protagonist's love for her stepson by minimizing the reference to incest in such a way as to shift the focus to the inner torment of a morally unworthy figure. In his re-elaboration of the plot, Racine brings into play another 'low' passion, jealousy, by introducing the figure of Aricia. This substantially contributes to marginalizing the role of Hippolytus, for Schlegel the only authentically tragic figure, who in Euripides succumbs because he tries to defend his chastity. In a moralising tone, he deplors the loss of centrality of the heroic (one might say masculine) ethos, which adds to the ambiguous characterisation of Theseus, "héros presque divin", described as potentially unfaithful and certainly as incapable of judging correctly.

For Schlegel, according to whom what determines the tragic effect is not the representation of a suffering resulting from an inner fragility of the subject but the emergence of the moral component of the human being through the suppression of its naturalness, this type of dramaturgy does not really succeed in producing a genuinely aesthetic effect. He describes it with a terminology that once again recalls Schiller's concept of the pathetic sublime:

"Non, ce n'est pas le spectacle de la souffrance qui fait l'attrait d'une tragédie [...]. Je crois que ce qui, dans une belle tragédie, fait ressortir une certaine satisfaction du fond de notre sympathie avec les situations violentes et les peines représentées, c'est, ou le sentiment de la dignité de la nature humaine, éveillé dans nous par de grands modèles, ou la trace d'un ordre de choses surnature".²⁶

Schlegel's critique of Racine is based on an essentially anti-psy-

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

chological conception of subjectivity, common to Idealistic aesthetics. Tragic action questions the subject as a moral entity seeking to assert its freedom against the limitations of objectivity. The tragic character is therefore required to be a substantial unity, which in the ancient world is expressed through the identification of the individual with a social or religious norm, in the modern world through the consistency of character. And on a (true or alleged) moral connotation of character as an expression of the autonomy of the subject with respect to naturalness, that is, to the passions, is based the inclusion of modern authors such as Shakespeare, Calderón and Schiller into the tragic canon of the Idealists.

3. *Pathos and Character*

“Pathos forms the proper center, the true domain of art”, we read in Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*.²⁷ But what does Hegel mean by pathos? In its broadest sense, it refers to the fact that the knowledge of the absolute in art takes shape through the feeling of the subject. It assumes, however, a peculiar meaning in relation to tragedy. To the concept of pathos Hegel devotes particular attention in the section “Action” (*Handlung*) of the general part of the *Aesthetics* and takes it up again in the section on dramatic literature. In general, action is the determinacy of the ideal considered in its process of differentiation in itself and of resolution of this difference. Since for Hegel, art as a form of the absolute spirit is nothing but the sensuous manifestation of the ideal, the action as an expression of the dynamic essence of the human subject, of his spiritual interests, of his volitions and passions is the essential content (*Gehalt*) of artistic representation. In a dramatic work, the action becomes the theme of representation and determines the very form of discourse. Hence the position of pre-eminence accorded to drama with respect to other forms of artistic expression. If we look at the concrete configuration of content, the action takes its starting point from the opposition of the individual to a given situation, or from a collision with other subjects. In Greek tragedy, the motivation to act is given by a moral conviction accompanied by an emotional adhesion that transforms pure principle into concrete choice. This is what Hegel calls tragic pathos: the self-identification of an individual with an ethical principle that informs his or her character.²⁸

²⁷ Hegel, *Ästhetik I*, cit., p. 302; Eng. trans., p. 232

²⁸ Hegel’s concept of pathos certainly expresses a close relationship between aesthetics and ethics, which has its origin in the analysis of the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology*. But

What we want to underline here is that this peculiar use of the term *pathos* (which in Aristotle designates the action that produces the mournful event and therefore the tragic effect) implies first of all a distancing from the pathetic-emotional interpretation of the tragic phenomenon. In fact, Hegel makes it clear that he considers the translation of the term as ‘passion’ to be inadequate because of the connotations of passivity and irrationality that are normally associated with it: “Pathos in this sense is inherently justified power over the heart, an essential content of rationality and freedom of will”.²⁹ Tragic *pathos* should therefore be distinguished from passion (‘*Leidenschaft*’) understood as submission to the natural order, a condition that humans have in common with animals. On the contrary, *pathos* concerns “the great themes of art, the eternal religious and ethical relationships; family, country, state, church, fame, friendship, class, dignity, and, in the romantic world, especially honour and love”.³⁰ Insofar as it springs from the values that regulate intersubjective relations, it is ethically and rationally founded. Contrasting, but equally legitimate *pathe* are Antigone’s love for her brother and Creon’s loyalty to the laws of the city.

Hegel speaks of “objective *pathos*” in connection with the heroes of the Attic tragedy, since the sentiment of the individual is totally penetrated by the moral option in the name of which they act. In this type of *pathos*, there is no manifestation of a contrast between the condition of suffering of the individual and the character that acts in order to assert its autonomy: feeling and will of the subject coincide. For this reason, in the heroic universe of Classical tragedy there is no discrepancy between intention and action. The heroes do not succumb because of a voluntary breaking of the divine order, but because of the fatal one-sidedness of the principle that the single individual represents. There is instead a subjective *pathos*, prevalent in modern literature, that “belongs rather to a casual particular passion” and is used by “poets who intend to move our personal feelings by touching scenes”.³¹ Forcing the argument somewhat, Hegel applies the dialectical scheme derived from the *Antigone* (the collision of two opposing principles whose mutual annihilation produces a feeling of reconciliation) also

there is for Hegel no “*pathos* of the artist” that “experiences himself to be the essence of the fear of death”, as Paul Cobben argues. In Hegelian aesthetics it is not, as is well known, a matter of the subjectivity of the artist, but of the infinite subjectivity that takes shape in artistic representation. See P. Cobben, ‘Hegel’s Concept of *Pathos* as the Keeper of the marriage between Aesthetics and Ethics’, in S. Simons (ed.), *The Marriage of Aesthetics and Ethics*, Brill, Leiden 2015, pp. 95-109.

²⁹ Hegel, *Ästhetik I*, cit., p. 301; Eng. trans., p. 232.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 286; Eng. trans., p. 220.

³¹ Hegel, *Ästhetik III*, cit., p. 493-94; Eng. trans., p. 1173.

to the interpretation of Euripides' *Hippolytus*: Hippolytus, animated by the pathos of purity, succumbs guiltlessly to the violence of love that he rejects.³² The one-sidedness of Hippolytus' pathos, inspired by Diana, is destined to succumb to the negative power of eros unleashed against him by Aphrodite. Significantly, Hegel contrasts Euripides' play with Racine's modern version of the story with the same arguments as Schlegel, noting that in the latter, the introduction of the character of Aricia, for whose sake Hippolytus rejects Phaedra, lowers the pathos to simple amorous passion. For Schlegel, the analysis of Phaedra's subjectivity, on which Racine's work hinges, is essentially anti-tragic because it lacks an authentically moral foundation (in the Kantian sense); for Hegel, it is at once psychological and metaphysical, in a word, anti-political.

In addition to drawing a clear line between tragedy as a representation of conflict and tragedy as an analysis of the passions, these considerations call into question two other junctures in the aesthetics of the tragic: the effect produced on the spectator and the applicability of the scheme drawn from Attic tragedy to the modern world. Put in a different way, firstly, what role does reception play in an aesthetics of content, and secondly, is a modern tragedy possible?

Regarding the first point, one can observe that in the paragraphs specifically dedicated to tragedy in the lectures on aesthetics Hegel makes an explicit reference to the Aristotelian tradition, in regard both to the definition of drama as a representation of actions, and to the concepts of fear and pity (*Furcht, Mitleid*). The ability to provoke an emotional participation in the spectator is an indication that the representation adequately expresses the tragic principle. This happens if the suffering touches, so to speak, a universal chord, that is, according to Hegel, if it brings into play recognized ethical values: "true pity [...] is sympathy at the same time with the sufferer's moral justification, with the affirmative aspect, the substantive thing that must be present in him."³³ Since subjective pathos is connected to the modern conception of the moral self, characterized by the disjunction between the individual and the abstract structure of the state, the tragic principle would seem to be precluded from modern artistic representation. In fact, Hegel's position, which in principle draws a clear distinction between an-

³² G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, in G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vol. 17, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1978, p.133. See on this point U. Port, *Pathosformeln. Die Tragödie und die Geschichte exaltierter Affekte (1755-1886)*, Fink, München 2005, pp. 197-199.

³³ Hegel, *Ästhetik III*, cit., p. 526; Eng. trans., p. 1198. On the distinction between objective and subjective pathos see *Ästhetik III*, cit., p. 494; Eng. trans., p. 1173.

cient tragedy and modern drama, appears much more nuanced in the concrete analysis of the works. An example of this is his consideration of Schiller's plays. While in his early writing on the *Wallenstein* he had criticized the lack of a reconciliatory solution to the conflict (Wallenstein's end had not seemed tragic to him but only repugnant), in his lectures on aesthetics he states that the figures in Schiller's works express "the pathos of a great mind". The reason for this 'revaluation' of Schiller's dramas, including the *Wallenstein*, lies in the fact that they focus on "great universal aims", making the heroic dimension of the character prevail over the inner contrasts and individual passions. The tragic nature of the action in Wallenstein's case consists in the impossibility for the individual to emerge victorious from the clash with the complexity of power relations. This, according to Hegel, although in the changed spiritual conditions of modernity, recalls the scheme of the collision of Greek tragedy, placing at the heart of the play the contrasts within a political order.

But although Schiller in his late works seems to approach a Classical pathos, in his tragedies, as in those of Shakespeare, the individual character remains the key motive. Indeed, Hegel reconfigures the tragic collision based on the concept of character, which correlates with the idea of the absolute freedom of the modern subject.³⁴ In modern dramatic works, which Hegel does not hesitate to call tragedies, the conflict is often internal to the character of the individual. Confronted with different options, the figures of modern tragedy act according to inclination, and circumstances end up bringing to light what lies at the core of their inner character.

In a paradigmatic work of modernity such as the *Hamlet*, Hegel argues, there is a collision similar to that in *Choephoroi* (*Libation Bearers*) or *Electra*. However, while in the ancient examples the killing of Agamemnon and the revenge of Orestes are both acts attributable to an ethical motivation, Hamlet is faced with a crime provoked by simple ambition: "Therefore the collision turns strictly here not on a son's pursuing an ethically justified revenge and being forced in the process to violate the ethical order, but in Hamlet's character".³⁵ The conflict does not concern the legitimacy of the action, but the ability to carry out a decision.

For the Idealists, Hamlet generally represents a key figure for the definition of the essence of modern tragedy. In a way not very

³⁴ On Hegel's attitude to modern tragedy see T. Pinkard, 'Tragedy with and without Religion', in J. Billings, M. Leonard (eds.), *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 137-158.

³⁵ Hegel, *Ästhetik* III, cit., p. 559; Eng. trans., pp. 1225-1226.

different from Hegel, Solger identifies the fundamental motive of the play in the impossibility of reconciling the obsessive desire to perform a heroic action with the doubt that the action can still correspond to the ideal meaning from which it moves, and with the fact that ultimately the order can only be disrupted. The hero's inaction stems from the terror of staining the purity, "the moral value, so to speak, still virgin", of his intention with the relativism and one-sidedness that the completed action necessarily entails.³⁶ The elevation of Hamlet's character, which is what would drive him to the heroic act, and the moral cowardice that partly weighs on his actions, have the same root.

For both Hegel and Solger, the question is: what is the genuinely tragic element of this inner struggle? The moment of reconciliation, which for Hegel is the necessary outcome of the tragic dialectic, lies in the recognition of a necessity of the catastrophe which is, so to speak, subjective. According to Hegel, the sadness that seizes us in front of the succumbing of "fine minds, noble in themselves" as Hamlet or Juliet to the accidentality of circumstances produces a feeling of reconciliation because we perceive a "necessary correspondence between the external circumstances and what the inner nature of those fine characters really is".³⁷ It is, however, a painful reconciliation, certainly more problematic for Hegel than the one involving "firm characters" such as Macbeth, whose passions are aimed at self-affirmation in the sphere of ethical-political life. As Solger observes, the displacement of tragic conflict into interiority, of which Hamlet represents the exemplary image, makes the passions play a decisive role in modern tragedy. However, he does not intend to dismiss the dialectical paradigm of the idealistic metaphysics of the tragic. In fact, he points out that "these motives (i.e., passions) are not to be transformed into the interesting since they are conceived as the universal".³⁸

In this way, he completely overshadows "Hamlet's archetypally Stoic struggle with *πάθος*" through which he articulates the dilemma of his own position and action.³⁹ The same is done by the Schlegels, Shakespeare's champions in German culture. The exclusion of the interesting ('das Interessante'), i.e. the psychological articulation of indi-

³⁶ K.W.F. Solger, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Briefwechsel*, ed. by L. Tieck and F. von Raumer, Leipzig 1826, vol. 2, p. 587.

³⁷ Hegel, *Ästhetik III*, cit., p. 566; Eng. trans., p.1231.

³⁸ K.W.F. Solger, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, ed. by G. Pinna, Meiner, Hamburg 2017, p. 138. The term interesting (which recalls by antithesis the Kantian conception of disinterested pleasure) indicates a type of attractiveness that addresses the inclinations of the individual person. See *Ibid.*, p. 130

³⁹ On the influence of Seneca's dramaturgy and the confrontation with Stoic ethics in *Hamlet* see R.S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy. The Influence of Seneca*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992, pp. 53-67.

vidual motivations for action, is what marks the distance here from an aesthetics of the passions. For the Idealists, what determines the value and consequently the aesthetic effect of a tragic work is its ability to make manifest its intellectual content, that is, the dialectic between the universal and the particular lying at the basis of the dramatic mechanism. The terms of this dialectic are understood differently by the authors mentioned, but what unites the positions is the idea of tragedy as a sublime paradox, not as a stage for the darkness of the soul.

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