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PHILOSOPHY OF TRAGEDY

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It. *Filosofia della tragedia*; Fr. *Philosophie de la tragédie*; Germ. *Philosophie der Tragödie*; Span. *Filosofía de la tragedia*. The term Philosophy of Tragedy refers to the attempts to determine the fundamental meaning of Greek tragedy from a philosophical perspective. In other words, philosophies of tragedy attempt to identify tragedy as the most philosophical of the art forms (Billings 2014). Even though the relationship between philosophy and tragedy is long-standing, this term is surprisingly recent. It was first used by Lev Šestov in opposition to Plato's condemnation of tragic poetry as damaging philosophical reflection (Šestov 2012). Still, by this locution Julian Young uses this term to mean a field of reflection focused not only on providing a definition of tragedy, but also on isolating its philosophical meaning. Therefore, the philosophies of tragedy are reflections which establish, with regard to tragedy, an evaluative project rather than a descriptive one (Young 2013). They identify the fundamental *telos* of tragedy – often classified as “the tragic” (Gentili, Garelli 2010) –, or they consider one or more tragic plays in their paradigmatic function.

PHILOSOPHY OF TRAGEDY, PHILOSOPHY OF THE TRAGIC

As in the case with the “Philosophy of Literature” (see the related entry in ILAe), the genitive enclosed in the expression “Philosophy of Tragedy” can be understood in an objective or a subjective sense. From this distinction two different kinds of interpretation arise, which nonetheless remain in a mutual tension with one another. This distinction must not be understood in a strict sense, since the strands originating from it are to always be considered as dialectically related. Here I will provide only general criteria to distinguish them theoretically.

An objective interpretation of the genitive “of” characterizes the investigation of Peter Szondi. In line with the tradition traced by Scheler (1954), Benjamin (1998) and some of the German Idealists, Szondi sees tragedy as one of the objects of philosophical reflection. This kind of understanding leads to the notion of

the “tragic”, in which lies the fundamental aim of tragedy. From a philosophical perspective, the tragic is the most relevant element of tragedy. Nevertheless, the tragic also specifies the most difficult content that can be articulated in the language of philosophy (Szondi 2002). Szondi’s view initiated a very fortunate strand of thought. Another expression corroborating this view is the term Philosophy of the Tragic, to which could be ascribed the thoughts of both French (Girard 1972) and Anglo-American philosophers (Cavell 2003). The main aim of the philosophers of the tragic is to reflect on the analogy between the tragic and the dialectic movement. Provided that the majority of these theories hesitates to provide a univocal definition of the tragic – for Szondi had pronounced its non-pronounceability – they also often accentuate a bond between the tragic and negativity. This is the case with De Beistegui, Sparks (2000), where the *telos* of the tragedy is recognized in a tragic conception of truth and, more generally, in the affirmation of dynamism and impermanence. The philosophical content of tragedy, namely the tragic, identifies with the human disposition to change, to their condemnation to death. In Terry Eagleton’s view, the philosophical meaning of the tragic, and hence its non-pronounceability, lies in its trans-historical value. The tragic is steady suffering: it is the sorrow for conflicts which are immanent to history, and human weakness (Eagleton 2013). For this reason, Eagleton’s use of the tragic should not be understood in a post-structuralist view. For Eagleton, its disposition to instability is not the most relevant feature of the tragic. Tragic conflicts do still have permanence. In the tragic, human fragility finds its connection to human freedom.

The Italian section of this debate deserves to be mentioned. Emanuele Severino glimpses in Aeschylus’ plays an early account of the painful contradictions inside human reason. Tragic thought was later absorbed in an instrumental way of knowing (Severino 1988). This view might be seen as opposed to that of Luigi Pareyson’s. Pareyson builds an analogy between tragic and hermeneutic thought, by highlighting their connection with the impulse for freedom (Pareyson 1986). Sergio Givone recognizes the philosophical validity of a tragic thought, since it is able to express the inner laceration between truth and being (Givone 1988). More recently, recalling Pareyson Barnaba Maj rehabilitated an idealist definition of the tragic, taken from a late Hölderlin’s fragment: the tragic is the absence of gods from history and the reflection of this absence in human destiny (Maj 2003).

Philosophies of the tragic distinguish themselves from a Nietzschean and Aristotelian interpretation of the genitive “of” in a subjective sense; the latter could be called “Philosophy in Tragedy.” In this perspective, philosophy does not define the *telos* of the tragedy, since tragedy itself expresses the philosophical truth, using clearer language than that of philosophy. The forerunner of this view is Walter Kaufmann, who restores the Platonic tension between tragedy and philosophy to claim that tragedy is truthful and autonomous, even without philosophy’s intervention. Kaufmann explicitly criticizes the attempt, made for example by Scheler, to isolate the philosophical meaning of tragedy. According to Kaufmann, tragedy is already able to provide its meaning by itself. Philosophy should not assume a dogmatic attitude towards tragedy, nor should it try to essentialize its last aim. Philosophy should recognize tragedy’s value *per se*. The latter lies in the connection between ideality and corporeality, between philosophy and theatrical exhibition. Lacoue-Labarthe (1998) thinks that philosophy must liberate tragedy’s experience from a common “antitheatricality” prejudice. Tragedy shows its philosophical relevance rather in theatrical praxis

than in theory or reflection. Taminiaux (1995) connects tragedy's *praxis* with its political importance. Intellectualistic understandings of tragedy, like those of German idealists such as Schelling and Hegel, or Heidegger's speculations on Hölderlin, do not capture its political and its communal meaning. Philosophers should recognize that tragedy's philosophical value lies in its theatrical language.

Having said that, Christoph Menke's conception of tragedy appears crucial. Menke rehabilitates Kaufmann's theory of a philosophy in tragedy by stating its connection with the idea of a permanence of tragedy in modernity (Menke 2009). This allows him to associate these two ways of understanding of philosophy of tragedy with the claim that tragedy is dead.

IS TRAGEDY DEAD?

Both Kaufmann and Menke affirm tragedy's persistence in modernity by rejecting philosophies of the tragic because of their adherence to the strand of thought initiated by George Steiner (1961). In his famous essay, Steiner asserts that tragedy consumed itself in ancient Greece and could not survive until today. According to Steiner, tragedy is not compatible with the dominant ideologies of modernity, such as Christianity and Marxism. This view is comparable to Benjamin's idea of the propagation of the tragic element in modernity. In other words, Greek tragedy proves to be entirely inaccessible to moderns, even though its mournful foundation remains, and enables the existence of the *Traverspiel* or tragic drama. This kind of perspective was already present in Nietzsche and coincided with the conviction of a wide difference persisting between the Greeks and us. Therefore, even Steiner's claim of the death of the tragedy couples with an evolutionistic, or historicistic thesis. According to Vernant, Vidal-Laquet (1990), tragedy has to be considered in its temporary nature. This historicistic theory of the death of the tragedy points to investigate tragedy's mythic origin. Therefore, it considers tragedy as an aesthetic phenomenon, which is gone. Tragedy must be examined in its historical characters.

An opposite orientation is supported by Bernard Williams (1993), who refuses the evolutionistic thesis and states indeed a strong affinity between the Greeks and us. As in Raymond Williams (1966), by rejecting Steiner's paradigm – or by claiming that tragedy remains alive in modernity, which is the same – one can prove that the ancient Greeks are closer to us than we think. According to R. Williams, philosophy should not conceive tragedy as a philosophical concept or speculate on its mythic origin. Philosophy must conceive tragedy as a particular modality of experience: through tragedy, the audience can experience fallibility as a constitutive character of humanity. A similar perspective can be seen in Butler (2001), according to whom Antigone's claim arises from her own experience of *grievability*, mourning and conflict.

Even more recently, Simon Critchley (2019) recommended a reconciliation of the strands of thought which have been seen. On the one hand, Critchley asserts a radical contrariety towards Steiner's vision and places himself in agreement to R. Williams and Kaufmann. On the other hand, the author tries to rehabilitate Szondi's perspective. According to Critchley, the notion of the tragic has been often misinterpreted. The tragic should not be seen as an essence or an ontological concept. The tragic should instead be defined as a theatrical modality of experience. Therefore, Critchley rephrases the locution

“philosophy of tragedy”: it becomes “tragedy’s philosophy”, making clear that the genitive “of” should be interpreted in a subjective sense. According to Critchley, to construct a tragedy’s philosophy means to conceive philosophy as able to grasp the theatrical nature of tragedy, its aliveness and its vividness. In the end, in a tragedy’s philosophy he recognizes an antidote to “philosophy’s tragedy”, a locution which nominates the danger of philosophy losing itself in the tragic’s non-pronounceability, as Szondi already noted.

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