

Jenes Lichtbild: The Possibility of a Theory of Tragedy

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I have often said, and oftener think, that this world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel – a solution of why Democritus laughed and Heraclitus wept.

Horace Walpole, letter to Sir Horace Mann, 31 December 1769.

1. Different things may be meant by ‘theory of tragedy’. One species of theory sets itself the task of defining and illuminating tragedy conceived as a specific kind of dramatic, literary or cultural object, marking its distinctions from other literary genres, charting its historical development, determining its cultural significance, and so forth. Such theorising takes tragedy *ab initio* as a phenomenon embedded in a historical, literary, or cultural context, ranged alongside other kinds of literary work, public performance and cultural practice. A different kind of theory of tragedy, which we may call ‘internal’, attempts instead to pursue the experience of tragedy in the manner of a self-reflection, extending the subject’s aesthetic experience of tragic works of art into the realm of discursive, systematic thought.¹ To the extent that tragedy is thought to contain or to give expression, if only in incipient form, to a distinctive view of human existence or characterisation in the most general terms of the fate of human beings, internal theories of tragedy are bound by their very nature to be philosophical or at least of philosophical significance – at some point in the reflective elaboration of the experience of tragedy, it can be expected that contact will be made with themes central to the philosophical tradition.

¹ There is a close but complex relation, which cannot be examined here, between this reflection, which is that of the spectator, and the perspective of the tragic protagonist within the work; an internal theory of tragedy may also be regarded as elaborating reflectively the latter.

The two species of theory of tragedy are not, of course, exclusive, and it is arguable that a theory of the second sort cannot expect to get far, or to convince, if it is not informed by the first, as is the case in Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, where an internal theory of tragedy is developed in parallel with a theory of tragedy's historical origins. But the two aims – of, on the one hand, determining tragedy's place in the human world at large, and on the other, determining the world in its light – are nonetheless distinct in principle, and the history of philosophy provides many examples of attempts to grasp the meaning of tragedy in abstraction from literary history and cultural context, as indeed ought to be possible, if the tragic characterisation of human existence has the strict universality which it claims for itself.

My concern here is with the question of whether a theory of tragedy in the internal sense can hope to succeed. This meta-question may sound unduly abstract, and in any case it may be thought that, if we wish to pursue it, then we cannot do better than to actually offer an internal theory of tragedy, or to examine critically those that have appeared in the history of philosophy. I will focus my discussion on two historical figures, Nietzsche and Sartre, but I do so because they are, I will argue, especially helpful in allowing us to determine the reasons why it may be thought, in general, that an internal theory of tragedy cannot succeed. What lends this issue urgency is the close involvement of the question of the possibility of an internal theory of tragedy with broader issues which are of the highest philosophical and existential importance. If tragedy affords the deepest, or merely one of the deepest, representations of our condition, and if the sense of tragic representation cannot be recuperated in reflection and command assent, then we are faced immediately with a choice of either confessing that discursive thought is incapable of expressing the most existentially fundamental truths about human existence, or, alternatively, of devaluing the experience of tragedy. This latter may involve shrinking our understanding of the import of tragedy to a merely psychological matter, stripped of any claim to truth, reducing the

experience of tragedy to a mere affective state, or, if the tragic image of human life is allowed to possess truth, this may be construed as concerning merely the plain empirical character of human life, the familiar preponderance of pain over pleasure in the balance sheet of human experience. Tragedy would then amount to literary shorthand for a complex of independently verifiable generalisations about the ubiquity of suffering in human life, endowed with the power to affect us emotionally.

Devaluation is the route recommended by the modern naturalistic orientation, and it is implicit in much discussion of tragedy in the analytic philosophical tradition, which focuses on the hedonic paradox in the experience of tragic works – the question of how pleasure can be derived from the representation of pain – in place of a cognitive consideration of tragedy. If, however, we hold fast to the conviction that the depth of tragedy is a matter of, or that it presupposes, its truth-content, and so reject this devaluation, yet fail to find a convincing systematic, discursive conception of the human situation which accords with the sense of human existence derived from tragedy, then the final, problematic result will be that we are divided and conflicted, in a philosophical as well as psychological sense. It is not my claim that this is where we are left ultimately, but it seems to me that a strong case can be made in favour of such a conclusion. The point of this paper is to explore the reasons for pessimism regarding the possibility of an internal theory of tragedy, with a view to gaining a clearer picture of our situation.

2. The dominant motive in the formation of theories of tragedy until an extremely late historical point was undoubtedly the concern to bring tragedy into accord with morality, and this, I suggest, comprises the chief characteristic limitation of historical writing on tragedy, as this appears from our late modern, post-Nietzschean point of view. The neo-classical tradition, from Horace to Mendelssohn and Lessing, is preoccupied consistently with discovering in tragedy the representation of moral truth and/or a medium of moral development. The tenacity of this conviction

is witnessed by Schiller's adaptation of Kant's theory of the sublime, a late and highly sophisticated instance of the attempt to identify a moral meaning in tragedy, which nevertheless lacks, for us, the ring of truth – though we may accept that a connection subsists of tragedy with morality, the suggestion that the value which tragedy allows to be perceived in human life can be identified with or derives from moral commitment, or that it fosters the propensity to moral goodness in any direct fashion, fails in our eyes to agree with the content of much ancient and modern tragedy, and to encapsulate the content of tragic affirmation.²

The view that tragedy and morality constitute two fundamentally independent vectors owes much to Nietzsche, the central thrust of whose *Die Geburt* is to establish an opposition between the life-affirmative Dionysian orientation of tragic culture, and the non-Dionysian, rationalistic optimism of its Socratic successor, from which we have come to understand the experience of tragedy as a primitive and unmediated existential event, and to regard this privileged, pre-moral status as the ground of its value.

In consequence Nietzsche has been invoked frequently, especially by writers influenced by post-structuralism, in support of the Platonic idea that a fundamental opposition subsists between the claims of tragic art and those of philosophy, with the crucial supplement that Nietzsche is held to show, *contra* Plato, that our judgement should not come down on the side of philosophy, and that the tragic poets should not be exiled but on the contrary prized for their exhibition of the limits of philosophical reason.

If this line of interpretation were correct, then it would be a mistake to look to Nietzsche for an internal theory of tragedy in the sense described above, since the whole point of his philosophical project would be to show how the perspective of tragedy undermines the aspiration to systematic discursive conceptualisation.

² I offer a more detailed historical view in: *Tragedy, morality and metaphysics*, in: *Art and Morality*, J. L. Bermúdez/S. Gardner (eds.), London 2003, 218-259.

I think, however, that this misunderstands Nietzsche's complex position on the relation of tragic experience to discursive thought. Certainly Nietzsche accords *priority* to the experience of tragedy, which he regards as unanalysable beyond a certain point. Nietzsche insists on the limited discursive explicability of the life-affirmative dimension of tragedy and its Dionysian component,³ that is, the phenomenon that pain can be experienced as an occasion for joy, 'jene Erscheinung, daß Schmerzen Lust erwecken':⁴ the cheerfulness of the Greeks is ultimately inexplicable, an *unerklärliche Heiterkeit*.⁵ It is for this reason that tragic art has priority for Nietzsche over any corresponding theory or structure of thought – the experience of tragedy is a condition on the communicability of tragic philosophy – and that tragedy is strictly impossible without the spirit of music.⁶

Nietzsche does not, however, suppose that the experience of tragedy can *dispense with* reflective, theoretical articulation: the 'aesthetic metaphysics' or 'artist's metaphysics'⁷ contained in *Die Geburt* are not an addendum to the experience of tragedy but integral to it and a condition of its all-important existential meaning.⁸ Tragedy arose, on Nietzsche's ac-

³ Cf. BT §2, 21; WKG III-1:30, BT §3, 22; WKG III-1:31, and BT §17, 81; WKG III-1:105-106. References prefixed 'BT' are to the English translation, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (1872), tr. S. Whiteside, M. Tanner (ed.), Harmondsworth 1993, and then, prefixed WKG (in the form, e.g., 'III-1:3', referring to Abteilung III, Band 1, and Seite 3) to Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, G. Colli/M. Montinari (eds.), Berlin 1967-.

⁴ BT §2, 20; WKG III-1:29.

⁵ BT §3, 22; WKG III-1:31.

⁶ Cf. BT §2, 21; WKG III-1:30 and BT §17, 81; WKG III-1:105-106: 'Of course we must reconstruct the overwhelming power of the musical effect [...] before we perceive anything of the incomparable consolation that must have been inherent in true tragedy [um etwas von jenem unvergleichlichen Troste zu empfangen, der der wahren Tragödie zu eigen sein muß].'

⁷ In 1872 Nietzsche talks of 'ästhetischen Metaphysik', BT §5, 29; WKG III-1:39. The phrase 'Artisten-Metaphysik' is introduced only in the later prefatory 'Versuch einer Selbstkritik', BT, 5; WKG III-1:7.

⁸ What follows is taken in part from 'Nietzsche's philosophical aestheticism', in: *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, K. Gemes/J. Richardson (eds.), Oxford 2011, where the interpretation is presented and defended in more detail.

count, as a solution to an existential quandary: the Homeric Greeks found themselves unable to reject the Dionysian truth with which ‘barbaric’ Asiatic Dionysus-worship confronted them, but equally unable – on account of their habituation to Apollonian reality and acute sensitivity – to tolerate the level of pain which embracing Dionysus demands. Tragedy, according to Nietzsche, resolved this predicament by allowing Dionysian truth to be conjoined with Apollonian illusion. In this process the artist’s metaphysics of *Die Geburt* play a logically essential role. Nietzsche proposes that the Nature or primal Oneness, ‘Ur-Eine’, which lies at the ground of Dionysian experience has its own, supra-personal telos,⁹ which realises itself through human subjects, at two levels: first, in the ‘symbolic expression’ which it receives in Dionysian cult festivals and their musical forms,¹⁰ and then, more profoundly, in tragic representation, through which the Ur-Eine receives ‘its constant redemption’, ‘seiner steten Erlösung’.¹¹ This simple and brilliant move – supplying the Apollonian with a Dionysian ground, which it lacked previously in Homeric culture, and the Dionysian with an Apollonian telos, which it lacked previously in Asiatic culture – Nietzsche validates the Apollonian representation of life, which Dionysian experience seemed to endanger, on grounds independent of truth. Indeed, it is precisely because of the epistemically negative character of the Apollonian, the fact that it is ‘*illusion of illusion*’, ‘*Schein des Scheins*’, that it can play its necessary metaphysical role: by means of tragedy’s Apollonian symbolic representation of

⁹ Cf. the end of BT §1, 18; WKG III-1:26 (‘the artistic power of the whole of nature [die Kunstgewalt der ganzen Natur]’, ‘of the Dionysian world-artist [des dionysischen Weltkünstlers]’) and the beginning of §2, 18; WKG III-1:26 (the Apollonian and Dionysian are ‘artistic powers which spring from nature itself, without the mediation of the human artist [ohne Vermittelung des menschlichen Künstlers], and in which nature’s artistic urges are immediately and directly satisfied’). The metaphysical character of the assumption is made explicit in §4, 25; WKG III-1:34-35.

¹⁰ Cf. BT §2, 20-21; WKG III-1:29-30.

¹¹ BT §4, 25; WKG III-1:34.

Dionysian reality, the Ur-Eine finds, Nietzsche says, satisfaction of its primal desire for illusion, an even higher satisfaction – ‘eine noch höhere Befriedigung der Urbegierde nach dem Schein’ – than that provided by empirical reality.¹²

From this it is clear that Nietzsche’s story of the Ur-Eine’s redemption-in-illusion cannot belong only to the external, philosophical interpretation of tragedy, but must form a constitutive part of the experience of tragedy itself: Nietzsche must suppose the Greeks themselves to have grasped the metaphysical conception in at least an implicit form, for otherwise tragedy would not have allowed them to regard Apollo and Dionysus as reconciled. In any case, and even more importantly – in view of the fact that the final aim of *Die Geburt* is not to explain a Greek cultural development, but to establish tragedy in place of Schopenhauerian pessimism in modern consciousness¹³ – the artist-metaphysical conception is necessary for tragedy to be re-embraced in the present day: Nietzsche offers the vision of the Ur-Eine to his readers as an account of what is involved in tragic consciousness, and as an invitation to grasp the world in its light.

While it is true that a sizeable portion of modified Schopenhauerian metaphysics is presupposed, in some sense of the term, in *Die Geburt*, and Nietzsche no doubt intends his story of the Ur-Eine to bring to mind the rich history of metaphysical proposals in aesthetically-orientated Romantic post-Kantian philosophy, it does not follow that Nietzsche understands the metaphysical propositions in question in the same terms as his post-Kantian predecessors.¹⁴ The right view of this much-discussed issue is to be gleaned from the passage in §4 of *Die Ge-*

¹² BT §4, 25; WKG III-1:35.

¹³ Which Nietzsche is pursuing by means of an analogy of our cultural situation with that of Greek Apollonian culture in its encounter with Dionysian truth: we too are caught in an acute contradiction of theoretical with practical reason, of truth with the conditions of life.

¹⁴ The reading of *Die Geburt* as advancing metaphysical or ‘ontological’ truth, prominent in Heidegger’s Nietzsche interpretation, is widespread.

burt where Nietzsche sets out the grounds for our acceptance of his artist's metaphysics in carefully chosen words. In what reads like a rehearsal, with appropriate substitution of terms, of Kant's moral argument for the theological postulates, Nietzsche argues in explicitly first-personal terms from the felt longing, 'Sehnsucht', for redemption by illusion, 'Erlöstwerden durch den Schein', not to the *truth* of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, but to *feeling himself compelled* to make the metaphysical assumption, 'metaphysischen Annahme', of a primal Oneness that 'needs' the Apollonian vision.¹⁵ What Nietzsche advances, therefore, is a practically grounded argument, which delivers only a *necessity of representation*, not metaphysical truth.¹⁶ Our difference from the Greeks is that we know that that which must be postulated as a condition of the fulfilment of our axiological-practical needs cannot be taken in an unreservedly realistic spirit: it can have only the status of, in Kantian language, an 'object of practical cognition'.

Nietzsche's non-realist stance towards his artist's metaphysics is connected with his view of the inexplicability of tragedy. Were Nietzsche's understanding of his metaphysics the same as Schopenhauer's, then the discursive representation of the experience of tragedy by means of Nietzsche's artist's metaphysics ought on the face of it to be regarded as making that experience *rationally transparent*, in the manner of Schopenhauer's metaphysical explications of art – just as Schopenhauer's account of tragedy as showing the self-antagonism of the will makes the meaning of tragedy rationally accessible.¹⁷ If that were so, then tragedy would give Nietzsche an *argument* for life-affirmation, in the same sense that Schopenhauer thinks it argues for resignation. The discursive articulations of the Dionysian-tragic experience that Nietzsche offers in

¹⁵ BT §4, 25; WKG III-1:34-35.

¹⁶ A full account would require reference to the Nachlaß material from 1872-1873 regarding Nietzsche's relation to Kant, and to the influence of Alfred Lange.

¹⁷ A., *The World as Will and Representation*, tr. E. F. J. Payne, New York 1969, vol. 1, §51, 252-254; *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Bd. 1, in *Sämtliche Werke*, W. Frhr. von Löhneysen (Hg.), Stuttgart 1960, Bd. 2, 353-356.

Die Geburt are, however, certainly not intended to *account for* the life-affirmative upshot of tragedy: the claim that Dionysian subjects cognise their noumenal identity with fecund self-delighting nature is not meant to *explain* the phenomenon that pain is experienced with joy.

Nietzsche elaborates his non-realist understanding of his artist's metaphysics in §9 of *Die Geburt*, where he discusses the moral metaphysics of Aeschylus and Sophocles, that is, the views implied by their works of the relation of human action to cosmic justice. Sophocles is said to conceive Oedipus as the 'noble man' whose actions destroy the whole moral world yet which exert 'a magical and beneficial power' which founds 'a new world on the ruins of the old'. Nietzsche then explains that '[t]his is what the poet, *in so far as he is also a religious thinker*, wishes to say to us',¹⁸ and, crucially, that the whole vision of the poet, 'die ganze Auffassung des Dichters', is nothing but 'that light-image that healing nature holds up to us after we have glimpsed the abyss', 'jenes Lichtbild, welches uns, nach einem Blick in den Abgrund, die heilende Natur vorhält': 'light-patches, we might say, to heal the gaze seared by the terrible night', 'leuchtende Flecken zur Heilung des von grausiger Nacht verkehrten Blickes'.¹⁹ The particularised vision of the poet Sophocles does not, however, Nietzsche says, exhaust the content of the tragic myth of Oedipus: its full content, he claims, concerns the Schopenhauerian 'dissolution of nature' into a trans-phenomenal will.²⁰

In similar fashion, Aeschylus' *Prometheus* – which, Nietzsche acknowledges, reflects Aeschylus' 'longing for *justice*', rests on an 'unshakable substratum of [Greek] metaphysical thought', and provides an 'ethical background to pessimistic tragedy and the justification of human evil'²¹ – is interpreted in terms of the complex meaning carried by individuation according to Nietzsche's artist's metaphysics.

¹⁸ BT §9, 46; WKG III-1:61-62. Italics added.

¹⁹ BT §9, 47; WKG III-1:63 and BT §9, 46; WKG III-1:61.

²⁰ BT §9, 47; WKG III-1:63.

²¹ BT §9, 48-50; WKG II-1:63-66.

The moral metaphysics of Sophocles and Aeschylus are thus regarded by Nietzsche as derived logically, through the interpolation of extraneous religious and ethical elements and the mediation of the artist's individual personality, from Nietzsche's artist's metaphysics. What Nietzsche intends his artist's metaphysics to amount to, therefore, is not an *extraction of metaphysical truth* from tragic myth, but a *restatement of tragic myth* in its highest, most comprehensive, maximally universal (and in that sense 'philosophical') form, one that allows all particular tragic myths (of Oedipus, Prometheus, etc.) to be seen as instances of a single schema, variations on a theme, or partial realisations of an archetype; and since the latter are ultimately just *Lichtbilder*, so too must be Nietzsche's revised Schopenhauerian metaphysics. Nietzsche is, therefore, regarding Schopenhauer's metaphysics as *myth suitable for modernity* – as a mythic content which we moderns will find it intelligible to postulate, and which may serve for us as a discursive reflection of the experiential meaning of tragedy, related to that experience in a quasi-metaphorical but non-arbitrary way. In summary, then, the artist's metaphysics are conceptual after-images of the experience of tragedy, capable of playing a logical role as postulates answering to the subject's concern to articulate reflectively the experience of tragedy.

Nietzsche's position on the possibility of an internal theory of tragedy is therefore intricate, and the conditions for an adequate theory of tragedy, it is implied in *Die Geburt*, are difficult to meet. To summarise these: On Nietzsche's account an adequate theory of tragedy must give central place to the affirmative moment in tragic experience, for it is this that gives tragedy its true, anti-Schopenhauerian value. This affirmative moment cannot, Nietzsche thinks, be explained by direct reference to metaphysical reality, but it involves nonetheless a conceptualisation, which it is the task of a theory of tragedy to articulate. Though metaphysical truth cannot be claimed for this conceptualisation, it does have a different kind of validity, deriving from its reciprocal relation to the experience of tragedy, which gives it authority and which it supplies with

a warrant in the eyes of the subject of tragic experience. In *Die Geburt* Nietzsche employs Schopenhauer's metaphysics as materials for constructing his version of this conception, and Kant's notion of practical cognition as a model for its validation.

Many elements in *Die Geburt* are carried over into Nietzsche's later thinking, but in one crucial respect, the position he advances in 1872 is left behind for good: Nietzsche re-assesses the capacity of contemporary modernity for regeneration through direct artistic means and ceases to hold out any hope that the experience of (Wagner's) tragic art will arrest the slide into nihilism. The next port of call in Nietzsche's development, evidenced in *Morgenröthe* and *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, is instead science, more exactly, the virtues and sensibility of modern scientific consciousness, which aesthetic consciousness, Nietzsche observes, fails to incorporate and is at odds with. This signals Nietzsche's clear-sighted recognition that the *Lichtbilder*-postulates of tragedy cannot hold their own against the demands of modern reflection, with its passionate commitment to the autonomy of theoretical reason – what Nietzsche later calls the will to truth – and largely naturalistic conception of its deliverances. Nietzsche's subsequent strategy, in his so-called positivist period, is accordingly to attempt to exploit precisely this modern commitment as an instrument for critique and transformation. When at a later point Nietzsche returns to art and the aesthetic as a basis for existential progress – most explicitly in Book II of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* and the late *Nachlaß* – the idea of tragic experience is resumed under the heading of what he calls *der ästhetische Zustand*, the aesthetic state of the subject.²² Nietzsche emphasises the light conceptual freight of the aesthetic state, but continues to attach to it an ideational component, which is now supplied by Nietzsche's vision of the world as Will to Power and

²² Cf., e.g., the passage headed '*Aesthetica*' in the *Nachlaß* for autumn 1887, VIII-2:57; *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, R. Bittner (ed.), Cambridge 2003, no. 9[102], 159-160.

subject to eternal recurrence.²³ The exact relation of these doctrines to the experience of tragedy is hard to determine, not least because of the uncertain epistemological and metaphysical status of Will to Power and eternal recurrence, but all that needs to be noted for present purposes is that, unless Will to Power and eternal recurrence have independent authority in the eyes of theoretical reason, it is hard to see how the situation has changed structurally since *Die Geburt*: on the face of it, Nietzsche has merely substituted a different *Lichtbild* for the fictive metaphysics of the Ur-Eine. The problem remains unsolved: if reflective articulation of the experience of tragedy issues in a conception that we cannot accept as true, then Nietzsche has not given an account of the grounds on which, from outside the aesthetic state, we can regard it as rightful. And if this is so, then it must be concluded that, for all of Nietzsche's acknowledgement of the demands of reflection and intense, life-long preoccupation with the relation of art and truth, no stable position on the relation of tragic experience to the demands of reflection can be found in either *Die Geburt* or Nietzsche's later writings.²⁴

3. If Nietzsche's surrogate for metaphysical truth does not satisfy demands of reflection which, Nietzsche himself acknowledges, cannot be escaped, while the earlier tradition of theorising about tragedy fails Nietzsche's litmus test of rationalising the affirmative dimension of tragedy in an appropriately immediate, non-moral way, then we must look elsewhere. I will turn now to another historical figure. Sartre is not referred to often in the context of the theory of tragedy, but his claim to provide an adequate internal theory of tragedy is, I will suggest, very

²³ Cf. in particular the 1885 Nachlaß, VII-3:338-339; *The Will to Power*, tr. W. Kaufmann/R. J. Hollingdale, W. Kaufmann (ed.), (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), no. 1067, 549-550.

²⁴ For a fuller defence of this admittedly large claim, cf. 'Nietzsche's philosophical aestheticism', where I argue that it is doubtful that the aesthetic state can play its internal role in Nietzsche's project, namely as breaking the deadlock of theoretical and practical reason.

strong. Again for reasons of space my comments will need to be very compressed.

The term tragedy figures little in Sartre's texts, and nowhere, to the best of my knowledge, does Sartre discuss tragic works of art under that description. It is nevertheless a commonplace to describe the view of the human condition presented in Sartre's philosophy and literary works as tragic, and with good reason, for Sartre presents man as bound in the strongest sense to strive for an end which is in principle incapable of fulfilment. More exactly and more strongly, according to Sartre's ontology, man *is* that striving – a 'passion inutile'.²⁵

Abstracting from all questions regarding the coherence of Sartre's metaphysics, the point which is important for present purposes is the strength *prima facie* of Sartre's candidacy for an adequate internal theory of tragedy: Sartre identifies the structure of human subjectivity with tragic form, and grounds this identification in a comprehensive metaphysical system. The point can be brought out by a contrast with the post-Kantian, pre-Hegelian German idealist metaphysics which Sartre's system in many ways resembles. The notion that the human subject is bound to aim at a metaphysically-defined end which it cannot realise – because its realisation would be inconsistent with the finitude which defines human, as opposed to divine, subjectivity – appears in Fichte, early Schelling, and much writing of the Frühromantik.²⁶ Sartre's difference from these early post-Kantian authors is that, on his account, not even an infinite approximation, *unendliche Annäherung*, is possible – on the contrary, on Sartre's account the end constitutive of human subjectivity, viz., attaining the status of *en-soi-pour-soi*, recedes with every step that we might

²⁵ Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, tr. Hazel E. Barnes, London 1995, 615; L'Être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique, Paris 1943, 708.

²⁶ The theme is highlighted and explored by M. Frank in: Unendliche Annäherung. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik, Frankfurt 1997, partially translated as The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism, tr. E. Millan-Zaibert, Albany 2004.

seem to take towards it. Our distance from it cannot be diminished, since in reality nothing could count as *Annäherung* to the condition of a *causa sui*. This is what makes Sartre's metaphysics tragic in a sense which is not true of, for example, to take the least tragedy-orientated of the post-Kantians, Fichte. On Fichte's account, the end of man, man's *Bestimmung*, is, properly speaking, not to realise the unachievable end of an *Aufhebung* of the distinction of *Ich* from *Nicht-Ich*, but to *approximate* to that condition, and this approximation is something which *is* achievable, through internalisation of the *Aufhebung* as a regulative ideal and the moral commitment which follows from it.²⁷ On Sartre's account, by contrast, the teleology which defines human subjectivity is abortive in its entirety and without qualification, from start to finish.

In light of the absolute centrality of man's metaphysical failure for Sartre, and the absence from Sartre of any tendency to subordinate his view of the human condition to the perspective of morality, Sartre's claim to have articulated an internal theory of tragedy would appear, so far, exceptionally strong. The difficulty comes, however, when we turn to consider what Sartre has to say about the affirmative component of the experience of tragedy.

There can be no doubt that Sartre regards the picture of human existence in *Being and Nothingness* as a spur to action, and that the intended effect of his philosophical work is to induce not despair but an intensification of our engagement with the world, based on a new insight into our metaphysical plight. But how, it may be asked, can Sartre hope to achieve the opposite of Schopenhauerian resignation, given that, on his account, it is impossible for us to realise our constitutive *telos*?

There is, of course, another part to Sartre's story: insight into man's 'original project of being', *projet originel d'être*,²⁸ gives rise to the pos-

²⁷ The different relation of Schelling and Frühromantik to tragedy I will come back to in my conclusion.

²⁸ *Being and Nothingness*, 564-665, *L'Être et le néant*, 651-652.

sibility of what Sartre calls ‘pure reflection’ and ‘radical conversion’,²⁹ which in turn makes possible an affirmation of freedom, freedom which takes itself as a value or end, which wills and affirms and is conscious of itself, and carries ethical potential.³⁰ So, it may be suggested, the affirmative moment in tragedy maps onto this part of Sartre’s account: the primary, negative, purgative moment of the tragic development, constituted by the failure of man’s *projet d’être*, engenders a *prise de conscience* which opens up horizons of affirmation.

Further reflection shows, however, that this cannot be right, or at the very least, that the identification of tragic affirmation with the self-affirmation of Sartrean freedom requires careful handling of the latter notion. If the affirmation of freedom involves a genuine metamorphosis in the subject’s orientation, then it allows itself to be characterised, it would seem, as man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity: the subject takes possession of itself, and in finally assuming self-responsibility, makes a fresh beginning. Sartre’s outlook would then lose its tragic character: the metaphysics of abortive teleology would describe only the immature condition of man ignorant of his true potential for autonomy, and the unrealisable telos of becoming *en-soi-pour-soi* would be discarded once and for all, replaced outright by the new, realisable telos of freedom’s self-affirmation. Sartre’s outlook would thus converge with Fichte’s view of man’s *Bestimmung*, and we would back to a familiar, optimistic, Enlightenment outlook, advancing towards the kingdom of ends.

Though Sartre’s position does allow itself to be recast in this orthodox Enlightenment form,³¹ and Sartre talks on occasion – in, for example, the famous *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* lecture – as if he wishes his existentialism to be classified alongside classical humanist po-

²⁹ Being and Nothingness, 464, 475-476, L’Être et le néant, 542, 554-555.

³⁰ Being and Nothingness, 627-628, L’Être et le néant, 722.

³¹ This is the tendency of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, Paris 1947; *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, tr. B. Frechtman, New York 1996.

sitions, competing with Kant and Marx in the market-place of humanist ideologies, I do not think that it represents Sartre's true outlook. The key issue is whether the new aim of affirming freedom supplants and obliterates the original abortive teleology of the subject – meaning that the subject's telos has undergone an objective transformation – or whether the aim of freedom remains dependent and merely overlaid on the abortive teleology. If the latter is the case, and if it is held that the aim of affirming freedom continues to get its *sense* from its negative relation to our abortive teleology, the purposiveness and value of the aim of freedom consisting in a double negation – repudiation of the futility of the *projet originel d'être* – rather than comprising a self-standing, unconditioned good, then we have a tragic rather than Enlightenment structure. Aiming at freedom would, in that case, be merely the most that we can do to compensate for our *abiding* tragic fate, consciousness of which would never be shaken off, since it would supply the motivational ground for our affirmation of freedom.

That Sartre sides with tragedy rather than Enlightenment self-assurance becomes clear in the following passage from 'Qu'est-ce que la littérature?'. Sartre is describing, and commending, an outlook that he discovers in modern poetry:

'One does not ordinarily consider the two faces of Janus; the man of action sees one and the poet sees the other. When the instruments are broken and unusable, when plans are blasted and effort is useless, the world appears with a childlike and terrible freshness, without supports, without paths. It has the maximum reality because it is crushing for man, and as action, in any case, generalizes, defeat restores to things their individual reality. But, by an expected reversal, the defeat, considered as a final end, is at once a contesting and an appropriation [à la fois contestation et appropriation] of this universe. A contesting, because man is *worth more* [*vaut mieux*] than that which crushes him; he no longer contests things in their 'little bit of reality' [leur 'peu de réalité'], like the engineer or the

captain, but, on the contrary, in their ‘too full of reality’ [leur ‘trop plein de réalité’], by his very existence as a vanquished person; he is the remorse of the world. An appropriation, because the world, by ceasing to be the tool of success, becomes the instrument of failure. So there it is, traversed by an obscure finality; it is its coefficient of adversity which serves, the more human in so far as it is more hostile to man. The defeat turns itself into salvation [L’*échec* lui-même se retourne en salut]. Not that it makes us yield to some beyond [quelque au-delà], but by itself it shifts and is metamorphosed. For example, poetic language arises out of the ruins of prose [...]

Poetry is a case of the loser winning [La poésie, c’est qui perd gagne]. And the authentic poet chooses to lose, even if he has to go so far as to die, in order to win [...] he is the man who commits himself to lose [...] it is his deepest choice, the source and not the consequence of his poetry. He is certain of the total defeat of the human enterprise and arranges to fail in his own life in order to bear witness, by his individual defeat, to human defeat in general.³²

The challenge of modern poetry, Sartre says, is pursued in the name of ‘the hidden defeat which every victory conceals’, but the perspective which it expresses is ‘the absolute valorisation of the defeat [la valorisation absolue de l’*échec*]’.³³ The passage thus evokes strikingly the affirmative pathos of tragedy so important for Nietzsche – the sense in which tragedy is felt to display human life, in the instant of its failure, as achieving a unique value and dignity, as unconditionally to-be-embraced, in its curious interdependence with a recognition that the ‘human enterprise’ ends in ‘total defeat’.

³² What is Literature?, tr. Bernard Frechtman, London 1967, 23-24 n4; Qu’est-ce que la littérature?, in: Situations II, Paris 1948, 86-87 n4. (Translation slightly modified.)

³³ What is Literature?, 24-25 n4; Qu’est-ce que la littérature?, 87 n4.

Though Sartre does not avow the outlook described in the passage as his own, his sympathy is clear – contemporary poetry which valorises defeat is in possession of existential truth. Indeed, the *qui perd gagne* formula can be regarded as setting the pattern of Sartre’s metaphysics: ontologically, the human subject *is* absolute defeat – sheer lack of being, *manque d’être* – but is able to turn its condition of deprivation against being and convert its existence as *néant* into a kind of victory. The tragic perspective Sartre discerns in modern poetry thus transfers itself to his own outlook.

We know why the human enterprise, on Sartre’s account, must end in defeat; but it remains to be considered how the philosophical base of Sartre’s account of tragic affirmation should be construed, given that, as we have seen, it cannot consist in grasping that we should aim at freedom (even if it may presuppose or imply that reorientation). What distinguishes ‘absolute valorisation’ of defeat from mere consciousness of defeat? Sartre’s answer is that the valorisation comprises ‘a contesting and an appropriation of this universe’. This may be understood in two ways, subjectively or objectively. On the one hand, we might read the contesting and appropriation described by Sartre as referring only to an *attitude* which the defeated human subject may (should) take up towards the world – a stance or way of thinking about the world which Sartre is recommending, or which, he is claiming, the unobscured apprehension of our total defeat entitles us to adopt. Alternatively, the contesting and appropriation might be read as having the same reality-status and objective truth as the original upsurge of the *pour-soi* and failure of its *projet d’être* – that is, as an event which belongs to the fabric of reality, not merely our attitude towards it.

Sartre’s text is, characteristically, poised between the two interpretations; the statement that man ‘*is worth more*’ than the world that crushes him appears categorical and unconditional, yet may also be taken, in context, as referring only to how the poet chooses to represent humanity. The problem, in any case, is that neither construal seems satisfactory, in

so far as Sartre's position is considered in the light of what is required for an adequate internal theory of tragedy. If the valorisation of defeat is a purely subjective matter, then it is not true that man's defeat *has positive value* in the same sense as it is true that it has *negative value*: the two moments of tragedy, the negative and the affirmative, weigh unequally, the former being grounded in reality, the latter being a matter of mere, ungrounded, subjective decision. However successful Sartre, or modern poets, may be in inducing us to feel tragic defeat *as if* it were an instance of victory, tragic affirmation would then not survive reflective scrutiny, and Sartre's position would confront the same difficulties as Nietzsche's metaphysical postulates.

The objective reading, while circumventing this problem, encounters its opposite: the affirmative moment weighs too heavily. If the subjective attitude of valorisation of defeat is grounded on the *fact* of its absolute value – if it is objectively true that, through man's defeat, the world accedes to man's reproach and alters its teleological shape – then defeat does indeed 'turn itself into salvation', but in so strong a sense that the negative moment of tragedy is cancelled: if our defeat enables our absolute victory, then loss becomes a strategy, and exists only in appearance. The pattern of Kant's sublime and Schiller's interpretation of tragedy is thus reproduced, albeit in a de-moralised form: *Zweckwidrigkeit* reveals itself as *Zweckmäßigkeit*.

Sartre, it may be noted, is acutely aware of the possibility and danger that tragic fate will be transmuted into Providence and tragic affirmation into Divine Grace, and repudiates explicitly the attempt to extract transcendent metaphysical meaning ('some beyond', as he puts it in the passage) from the formula of *qui perd gagne*.³⁴ In *Search for a Method* Sartre castigates Jaspers for manifesting 'a surreptitious wish to resuscitate the transcendent'. Jaspers, according to Sartre, takes from Kierkegaard the

³⁴ C. Howells, Sartre and negative theology, in: *Modern Languages Review* 76, 1981, 549-555, puts in focus the problematic relation between Sartre's idea of 'salvation' and his opposition to the theologisation of defeat.

idea of a subjectivity which ‘discovers the transcendent through its defeats’, allowing us to ‘catch a presentiment of the transcendent in our failures’ as their ‘profound meaning’, and from this ‘subjective pessimism’ derives a ‘theological optimism’ which ‘dare not speak its name’: the transcendent proves its reality through its absence. This feeble and treacherous conception, ‘cette pensée molle et sournoise’, Sartre concludes, is ‘perfectly suited to a bourgeoisie which is partially de-Christianized but which regrets its past faith’: it is ‘only a survival’ and holds no philosophical interest.³⁵

Sartre cannot be suspected of the covert Christian motivation he attributes to Jaspers, but the problem remains for Sartre’s account: the form of *qui perd gagne* is teleological, and even if Sartre’s philosophical system prevents the ground of tragic affirmation from being given determinate theistic form, it remains the case that, when tragic affirmation is allowed an objective ground, the world assumes a positive teleological character, which remains stubbornly providential, and thus non-tragic. Thus, while all credit is due to Sartre for grasping the nettle and asserting the paradoxical absolute-value-in-absolute-defeat which is the essence of tragic experience, it cannot be claimed that Sartre allows us to comprehend this axiological paradox in systematic, discursive, philosophical terms. Sartre’s tragic insight is here one step ahead of his metaphysics.

4. We have, therefore, moved in a circle. At the final hurdle, Sartre either reproduces Nietzsche’s aporia, the failure to provide a reflective expression of the experience of tragedy which satisfies the demands of our theoretical reason, or displays the characteristic limitation of traditional, pre-Nietzschean theories of tragedy, the conversion of tragedy into a species of oblique providence. Nietzsche appears vindicated, with re-

³⁵ Search for a Method, tr. H. E. Barnes, New York 1968, 15-16; Critique de la raison dialectique (précédé de Question de méthode), tome 1, Théorie des ensembles pratiques, Paris 1960, 21-22.

spect to his thesis of the incompatibility of tragic consciousness with Socratic rationalism.

We can now state in a general form the reason for thinking that no internal theory of tragedy can succeed. Tragedy requires a teleological consideration of human existence, and that this teleology have an ultimately negative character. This is something that philosophy can provide, as the metaphysics of Sartre (and of course Schopenhauer) make clear. But a theory of tragedy must also, as Nietzsche rightly insists, rationalise the affirmative moment in tragedy, and do so in the right way. And it is at this point that the movement of thought leading from the aesthetic experience of tragic works to a philosophical conception of the meaning of tragedy miscarries: philosophical theory either leaves the affirmative moment ungrounded, a mere subjective attitude lacking reflective endorsement, or it supplies it with a ground, which satisfies the demands of reflection, but at the same time cannot avoid cancelling the fact of tragedy, even when theism is rejected explicitly and the nature of the ground is left indeterminate. Nietzsche's *Lichtbilder*-postulates and *ästhetischer Zustand* illustrate the first disjunct, as does Sartre on the subjectivist reading; Jaspers, and Sartre on the objectivist reading, illustrate the second.

The challenge is to decide where we should go from here. If we do not call a halt with Walpole's dichotomy of the-world-as-thought and the-world-as felt – leaving the worlds of the happy man and the unhappy man distinct and unreconciled – then, as far as I can see, only one possibility remains. The underlying reason for the difficulty we have encountered is the unqualified *absoluteness* of tragic experience, which makes the articulation of an internal theory of tragedy an all-or-nothing matter. If this assumption could be relaxed, then some *accommodation* between the demands of reflection and the experience of tragedy could be sought. If this route is worth pursuing, then the appropriate place to look is to Schelling, Hölderlin and the early German Romantics, whose thought incorporates tragic elements in a way that Fichte's does not, but for whom

tragic experience is not final, or unconditionally authoritative, in the way that it is for Nietzsche: tragedy is interpreted, instead, as expressing an insight to be assimilated and a challenge to be overcome.³⁶ We might consider furthermore that the systematic difficulty we have discovered in the construction of an internal theory of tragedy supports such an approach: if the negative and affirmative moments in tragedy cannot be coordinated in reflection, then, it may be argued, this reflects not a limitation of reflection but the fact that the experience of tragedy is not fully coherent, and if that is so, then its claim to absoluteness should not be taken at face value. Whether this accommodation can be carried off, without either revoking the negative moment in tragedy or undermining its Dionysian affirmative moment, is another question.

³⁶ Emphasised by K. Ameriks in 'Tragedy, romanticism, and idealism' (forthcoming), from which I have profited in writing this paper.