

The Novel as Tragic Form*

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Abstract

This essay puts forward a theoretical definition of the tragic and argues, against orthodox criticism, that some novels should be considered tragic forms. The tragic is defined as any form that articulates dialectically the uncertainty of action and the fact of suffering. The formalist and idealist conceptions of tragedy have both tended to exclude the modern novel from the tragic. Against this exclusion, it is argued that the essence of the tragic is to remind us that we cannot control the consequences of our actions and that we are not always able to avoid the suffering that they cause. Novels, at least some of them, have retained this fundamental message of the ancient tragedy and exercise a salutary political and ethical effect in the modern world.

Keywords: Tragedy / Tragic / Novel / Literary genres / Criticism

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอานิยามเชิงทฤษฎีเกี่ยวกับโศกนาฏกรรม ข้อโต้แย้งถกเถียงและการวิพากษ์เกี่ยวกับนิยายอรรถด็อกซ์แต่ดั้งเดิมที่ได้ถูกระบุไว้ในนวนิยายบางเล่มในรูปแบบที่น่าเศร้าสลด โดยโศกนาฏกรรมถูกนิยามให้หมายถึง การกระทำใดๆ ที่ก่อให้เกิดความไม่แน่นอนของกรกระทำและผลที่ได้รับคือความทุกข์ทรมาน ปัจจัยภายนอกและแนวคิดด้านอุดมคติของโศกนาฏกรรม ซึ่งทั้งสองอย่างนี้มีแนวโน้มที่จะไม่ได้รวมอยู่ในนวนิยายโศกนาฏกรรมสมัยใหม่ แต่ก็ยังเป็นข้อถกเถียงกันถึงข้อยกเว้นนี้ โดยได้ถกเถียงกันถึงแก่นแท้ของโศกนาฏกรรมคือสิ่งที่เตือนพวกเราว่า เราไม่สามารถที่จะควบคุมผลที่จะตามมาจากการกระทำได้และเราไม่สามารถที่จะหลีกเลี่ยงความทุกข์ทรมานที่จะเกิดขึ้นได้ อย่างน้อยนวนิยายก็มีส่วนช่วยเก็บบันทึกข้อมูลพื้นฐานและแนวคิดของโศกนาฏกรรมสมัยโบราณไว้ และได้นำมาประยุกต์ใช้ให้เกิดประโยชน์ทางด้านจริยธรรมและการเมืองในโลกสมัยใหม่

คำสำคัญ: โศกนาฏกรรม / นวนิยาย / ประเภทวรรณคดี / วรรณกรรม

Introduction

I am stepping on treacherous ground here. Too much has been written already on the tragedy. Even more – incredible as it may sound – than what has been written on the novel. Yet, I will speak of the novel as a form of tragedy. Or to be more precise: of the novel as tragic form.

Tragedy is a particular literary genre, a type of drama that appeared in Athens and might have vanished over there a long time ago. Certainly, the novel is not tragedy in that sense. We might even wonder whether *King Lear* or *Death of a Salesman* are tragedies in the sense that *Prometheus Bound* or *Oedipus the King* are. But at least, one might argue, all of those are dramatic plays, which is something that the novel is clearly not. This is the main reason

why I shall speak of the tragic and not so much of tragedy. But I do not intend to limit 'the tragic' to some intrinsically human characteristic, a transcendental or transhistorical outlook on existence. Rather, I want to speak of the tragic as a form. And a form, for that matter, which is in many ways akin to the modern genre that we all call – without really knowing what it is – the novel.

This looks very much like a lost case. Leaving aside a few valiant exceptions (cf. Eagleton, 2003), literary critics have usually pitted the novel against the tragic. Some have even suggested that one of the causes for the regretful demise of tragedy is precisely the emergence of the novel. According to George Steiner, for instance, 'the history of the decline of serious drama is, in part, that of the rise of the novel' (Steiner, 1960, p. 118). Others have claimed the same thing, but with a smile. For many modern critics, the victory of the democratic novel over the aristocratic tragedy is a matter of celebration, not of grieve. This dichotomy, whether defended by nostalgic conservatives or radical activists, is neither trivial nor easy to dismiss. In fact, 'the novel versus the tragic' seems to be one of those conflicts in which you either take sides or you move aside. But what are the arguments that sustain such a hopeless divorce?

Formalist and Idealist Definitions of the Tragic

Allow me to compress and simplify the key questions into two lines of thought. First, I will present the Formalist case, which goes as far back as Aristotle. Then, I will summarize what may be called the Idealist case, which has its most serious advocate in the young György Lukács.

'One must remember,' says Aristotle in *The Poetics* (c. 335 BC), 'not to confuse the tragedy with an epic structure' (Aristotle, 1902, p. 67, *Poet.* 1456a,

my translation). This is an advice that resounds far into the Western critical tradition. The difference between the epic and the tragic, according to Aristotle, is fundamentally a matter of composition (*synthesis*). 'By epic,' he adds, 'I mean made up of many stories' (p. 67, *Poet.* 1456a). Both the *Iliad* and *Hecuba* are *mimesis praxeon*, the representation of actions of the Trojan War. But while the former represents several episodes, the latter represents only one. So it is not so much the fact that one is narrated and the other dramatized that separates the epic from the tragic according to Aristotle. It is fundamentally a question of length and density (cf. Kaufmann, 1968). Translating Aristotle's concise analysis in other terms, we could say that the novel is a form of time (*chronos*) while the tragic is a form of crisis (*kairos*) (Kermode, 2000). The novel is the arrangement of a variety of conflicts, voices and actions. The tragic is the arrangement of a single conflict in a concentrated plot. The novel grows; the tragic curls.

Form is also what Lukács is after in his *Theory of the Novel* (1914-1915). But he looks at it from above, rather than from below. 'The novel,' he famously claims, 'is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God' (Lukács, 1971, p. 88). Thus, the novel is the historico-philosophical form that reflects the quest for meaning of the problematic individual in a contingent and fragmented world. Needless to say that this problematic individual could be anyone of us, which is something that apparently we cannot say of Antigone or Alcestis. According to Lukács, the tragic hero 'assumes the symbolic attributes of life only in order to be able to perform the symbolic ceremony of dying in a sensuously perceptible way, making transcendence visible' (Lukács, 1971, p. 48). The tragic, therefore, seems to be an essentialist form, a glorious but outdated monument in a world that has lost the ancient totality of being. If the novel is the form of adventure, of

interiority and experience, the tragic is presented as the form of eternal fate and sacrifice. If the novel is the modern heroism of transcendental homelessness, the tragic is the outdated home of heroic transcendence.

In my opinion, both the Formalist and the Idealist cases offer a misleading description of the tragic. While it is true that ancient tragedies tend to be short and concentrated, the same could be said of comedies and satyr plays. We may wonder, therefore, if an argument based on the nature of drama is likely to be able to define the tragic as a literary form. But making the concept of the tragic a timeless essence, as German Idealism has tended to do, especially since Schelling, Hölderlin and Hegel (cf. Beistegui & Sparks, 2000; Szondi, 2002), does not seem to solve the problem either. If the tragic is a question of unavoidable destiny, moral conflict and heroic sacrifice, then surely there are very few tragedies, even amongst the surviving works of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides.

Are we thus condemned to use the term 'tragic' in an imprecise and intuitive sense? For some, the definition of the tragic is such a convoluted affair that we should simply rely on an empirical approach: the tragic would be what people usually call tragic, whatever that is. Notwithstanding such pragmatic prudence, I will take a shot at this very old sport of defining the tragic. Of course, I assume that my definition will present flaws and may be criticized for being normative. But at least it might explain why calling the novel a tragic form is not just a fancy whim. After all, was it not Plato (1935, p. 421, *Rep.* 10.595c) who said that Homer was the greatest of all tragic poets?

A New Definition

Allow me then to call tragic any form that *articulates dialectically the uncertainty of action and the fact of suffering*. The tragic reflects very simple human notions. One: that all action is uncertain; we act without knowing or controlling the consequences of our actions. Two: that there is suffering in the world, including our own suffering. The tragic articulates these two notions in a dialectical manner: suffering becomes action, action becomes suffering. The tragic, in short, is a dialectic of action (*praxis*) and passion (*pathos*).

Euripides, in spite of being considered a very untragic author by Nietzsche (1999), refers to this uncertainty of action at the end of many of his plays: 'There are many shapes of divinity,' says the Chorus in *Alcestis*, 'and many things the gods accomplish against our expectation. What men expect is not brought to pass, but a god finds a way to achieve the unexpected' (Euripides, 1994, *Alc.* 1159-1160). It is not exactly clear what Euripides means when he refers to the gods. But surely divinity is not the only source of uncertainty in the world. In fact, gods are very much dispensable in tragedy, as modern playwrights like Beckett or Bernhard well knew. Whatever the reason, immanent or transcendent, the fact is that our actions are entangled in a complex web of causalities, and we are never able to foresee what their consequences will be. This explains why there is nothing strange about a Christian, a Marxist, or even an Atheist tragedy.

As for the fact of suffering, being such a crucial element in all accounts of tragedy since ancient times, there is no need to give many examples. 'Residents of our native Thebes,' says the Chorus in *Oedipus the King*, 'behold, this is Oedipus, who knew the renowned riddle, and was a most mighty man.

What citizen did not gaze on his fortune with envy? See into what a stormy sea of troubles he has come! Therefore, while our eyes wait to see the final destined day, we must call no mortal happy until he has crossed life's border free from pain' (Sophocles, 1887, *OT*. 1525-1530).

Uncertainty and suffering. These are the ingredients of the tragic. It is essential, moreover, that these two elements are articulated dialectically. Oedipus, as Aristotle pointed out, is probably the most perfect example. The plague (suffering) pushes him to search for truth (uncertainty of action); and it is this same search which carries him to his doom (suffering). All Greek tragedies rely, in some way or another, on the same dialectic. Otherwise, the form would not appear as tragic. If there is only uncertainty of action there might be adventure, but not tragedy. If there is only suffering, then we might have a form of melodrama, but not tragedy. Once again, the tragic is the dialectic of uncertain action and unavoidable suffering.

Sometimes, the tragic can also die of excess, by falling into what could be called the *hubris* of the tragic. When the form gives too much weight to the uncertainty of the human condition, it may turn into nihilism, undermining the value of all praxis and giving way to a cynic outlook on life. Conversely, if it gives too much weight to suffering, if it lingers in the languor of *pathos*, the tragic may artificially ascend to the sublime. In order to protect itself from these untragic extremes, the tragic can only rely, so to speak, on its own weapons. Thus, against nihilism, it needs to stress that suffering is an individual fact; not an abstraction, but concrete and tangible experiences of fellow beings in distress. And in order to prevent the bloat of sublimity, the tragic needs to insist that all human actions, and most especially those undertaken by heroes, are

necessarily uncertain. Hence, the thin veil of irony that the truly tragic casts over any form of heroism.

The tragic effect results from this precarious articulation of uncertainty and suffering in a dialectical form. According to Aristotle, this effect may be described as *eleos* and *phobos*, pity and fear (Aristotle, 1902, *Poet.* 1449b). It can be argued that the main source of fear is precisely the uncertainty of every human action, which immediately appeals to our own predicament. And the main source of pity is of course the pain and suffering that our fellow beings experience. Now, whether those two emotions are purifying or innerving is a question for psychologists or psychoanalysts, but perhaps not for literary critics to solve.

Is the Novel Tragic?

The problem I would like to address here is a simpler one. Granted that any form that articulates dialectically the uncertainty of action and the fact of suffering is tragic, can we say that the novel is a tragic form?

Certainly, the idea that *all* novels are tragic seems indefensible. By now, we are already well aware of the infinite diversity of novels. As Franco Moretti reminded us, 'countless are the novels of the world' (Moretti, 2006, p. ix). So, rather than making a universal argument, I would like to point out that the novel *may* indeed be tragic and that the divide between the two in literary theory should be overcome once and for all.

The modern world, in which the novel thrives, is surely very different from the ancient. But some things have not changed; at least not as much as many of us would have liked them to change. Uncertainty is today as stark as ever.

We might not fear the gods anymore. But even our physical laws are undermined by chaos and the irreducible complexity of nature. And there is no doubt that suffering still prevails, as it has always done. War, genocide, exploitation, hunger, torture, death... Novels reflect all that. And they do it as well as drama, if not better. But can novels articulate the uncertainty of action and the fact of suffering in a dialectical form? Can they be tragic?

Well, there is little doubt that at least some of them can. Take, for example, K.'s pleadings through the corridors of an incomprehensible judiciary system in Kafka's *The Trial* (1992 [1925]). Is that really so different from Oedipus's relentless inquiry into the murder of Laios (*Oedipus the King*)? They both seek to know. They both suffer the consequences of wanting to know. Or consider, as another example, Raskolnikov's murder of Alyona Ivanova and his ensuing redemption in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1950 [1866]). Is that really so different from Orestes's ordeal (*Oresteia*)? They both commit a heinous murder. They are both chased by the Furies and finally redeemed through suffering.

Of course, I am not claiming that one can simply reduce any of these works, rich with meaning and suggestion as they are, to their tragic form. But the fact that we can identify a structural affinity between them indicates that there is no reason to separate novels and tragedies as if they could never walk under the same roof. What these and other examples show is that the novel is definitely able to articulate the fundamental elements of the tragic, the uncertainty of action and the fact of suffering. Indeed, its protean structure might be better adjusted to do that than drama ever was.

Yes, I know, the novel grows. But it may grow in endlessly descending spirals. And yes, the hero of the novel is a problematic individual, a homeless wanderer. But he may also wander into the dark and become a *pharmakos*, the victim of a sacrifice.

If the novel and the tragic are usually depicted as two separate things, it is basically because in tragedy this sacrifice is supposed to be heroic, a form of greatness or transcendence. But this idea seems to rest, almost entirely, on a pervasive misinterpretation of the tragedy. There is nothing really 'heroic' in human action, much less in human sacrifice. Oedipus and Antigone, not to speak of Phaedra or Ajax, might have never been the kind of heroes that Racine, Hegel or Camus, amongst many others, have repeatedly praised. There is nothing ennobling or liberating in their suffering. And if they appeal to us as they do, it is only because they act without knowing and they suffer without understanding, for which we recognize them as fellow human beings (cf. Williams, 1979).

The Form of Democracy

This means that the novel may be as tragic as any tragedy ever was. Not only that, but the protagonists of a tragic novel need not be the great and noble figures that philosophers and moralists have tried to project onto readers since the age of Aristotle. A sentimental housewife, a crippled vagrant or a boy with a harelip may become, thanks to the novelistic prose, tragic heroes of the likes of Electra, Philoctetes or Heracles. And so we need to recognize that, rather than being an antiquarian curiosity, a nostalgic look at the times of monarchs and patriarchs, the tragic novel is in fact the form of democracy.

In that sense, it is always useful to recall that Greek tragedy thrived, not under aristocratic or oligarchic rule, but in the Athenian democracy of the 5th century BC. This is surely no coincidence. In democracy, even in a limited one, men participate in collective decision-making. More than simple subjects, they are citizens. And it is through political life that they become aware of the autonomy of their reason, but also of its limits and its perils. According to Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, 'the tragic sense of responsibility emerges when human action becomes the object of reflection and debate while still not being regarded as sufficiently autonomous to be fully self-sufficient' (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1981, p. 4). We may add that this sense of the tragic re-emerges whenever the idea of autonomous or self-sufficient human action weakens once again, without disappearing altogether.

Thus, the model of the tragic *agon* is not an obscure ritual buried in time, but the common life of the *polis*. In spite of the appearances, the great conflicts of tragedy emerge, not from royal mythologies, but from the speeches at the Assembly, the deliberations of the Council, the confrontations at the Courts, as well as the discussions of citizens and sophists in the agora of Athens. This is the core of tragedy: the realization that our actions and our passions are inevitably, indeed fatally, tied. And this is what *politics*, in a fundamental sense, is all about.

Far from being the monolithic and univocal form portrayed by many critics, the tragic is in fact a form of dialogical imagination. And it is perhaps its most ancient expression. Certainly, the *polis* that saw the birth of tragedy is not yet the plurilingual and multinational world where Greek and Roman novels could be spawned. But the agonistic and discursive representation of political life in

Attic tragedy is undoubtedly at the core of genres like the Socratic dialogue or the Menippean satire, from which the ancient novel stemmed (Bakhtin, 1982). As Mikhail Bakhtin himself pointed out, the tragic and the comic share the purpose of opposing the 'abstract idealization and sublimation' of high rhetoric (Bakhtin, 1996, p. 463). And yes, he also added that laughter was superior to the seriousness of tragedy in fulfilling this endeavor. But one may wonder if the strict separation of the comic and the tragic, which has informed classicist poetics since Aristotle, needs to be enforced beyond its historical determinants. After all, it was Socrates himself who insisted, at the end of the *Symposium*, that 'the true tragic poet was also a comic poet' (Plato, 2008, p. 63, *Sym.* 223d). And we have enough examples in modern literature, from Shakespeare to Kafka, Beckett or Bernhard, to suspect that no fundamental rule is broken when 'the worst returns to laughter' (Shakespeare, 1945, p. 930).

By now, of course, we are all well aware of that. What we tend to forget is that the seriousness of the tragic continues to live in the spirit of the modern novel. And it is not something regretful, but of the utmost importance that it should continue to be the case. Rather than celebrating the carnivalesque diversity of contemporary writing, we should demand more from novels. In a time when the multitude blends into the fluid marketplace and polyphony sounds with the hollow ring of global business, the truly democratic novel is not the one that dances to the tune, but the one that shouts and spits like the wounded archer in his solitary island. Because outside of the carnival, there is suffering. At the doors of the exciting garden of world literature, people die of hunger and disease. People kill and torture each other every single day throughout the world. No novel will ever be able to change that, and we all

know it. But at least we should demand that novels speak about what matters, instead of jumping into the narcissistic celebration of the liberated word. We should demand that they be, once again, *tragic*.

But this has nothing to do, as some may fear, with accepting the fatality of Destiny. Paradoxically, it is the carnivalesque novel that becomes, by exchanging the Real for the Imaginary, the true subject of fatalism (Žižek, 1989). The tragic novel, on the contrary, is not a form of resignation. While some may claim that the tragic has a cathartic effect, similar to the one induced by Buddhism's denial of the will or the flight into the metaphysics of art, it need not be so. The tragic can also help us to reflect. It can make us angry. It can even move us to action. Because the tragic does not speak about fate and heroism, necessity and resistance (cf. Camus, 1953, 1955). It does not announce a revolutionary reversal of fortune or the messianic redemption in the body of the victim (cf. Eagleton, 2005; Benjamin, 1996, 1998). It simply reminds us that we can neither control the consequences of our actions nor avoid the suffering that they will cause. Rather than speaking of sublime greatness, the tragic is the voice of modesty; it speaks of weakness and limitation. And it is precisely for this that we recognize it as deeply human.

Coda

Epicurus, a man who had some sense for the tragic but none for metaphysics, thought that 'some things happen of necessity, others by chance, others through our own agency.' We simply do not know. But this does not exempt us from responsibility, nor should it deter us from action. As he said,

'our own actions are free, and it is to them that praise and blame naturally attach' (Diogenes Laertius, 1931, p. 659).

The tragic – and the novel that aspires to be tragic – is not a call for resignation, but a compelling reminder that today's world still is, as it has always been, 'out of joint' (Shakespeare, 1945, p. 878).

What we make out of it is only up to us.

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