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SYMPLOKĒ STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY THEORY

Series editor: *Jeffrey R. Di Leo*

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Tragically Speaking

On the USE *and* ABUSE *of* THEORY *for* LIFE

KALLIOPI NIKOLOPOULOU

University of Nebraska Press / Lincoln and London

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Στη μνήμη της Μαρίας
Ζαχαριάδου-Κοσμίδου.
Η ζωή της με δίδαξε για την
αγάπη και την αλήθεια πολύ
περισσότερο από ό,τι με δίδαξε
η φιλοσοφία στα θρανία.

To the memory of Maria
Zachariadou-Kosmidou.
Her life has taught me more
about love and truth than
philosophy ever could.

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For when misfortune's fraudful hand
Prepares to pour the vengeance of the sky,
What mortal shall her force withstand?

AESCHYLUS, *Persians*

Yet there is a grace on mortals who so nobly die.

AESCHYLUS, *Agamemnon*

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Introduction

Cassandra told them what would happen, but they did not listen. The Trojans perished forever, and so did she. But from the cave of her madness, amid the ravage of her city and a handful of helpless women—in a state of complete obliteration that we moderns would rush to say renders any sense of resistance and of meaning impossible—this is what the virgin spoke:

> The Achaeans came beside Scamander's banks, and died
> day after day, though none sought to wrench their land from them
> nor their own towering cities. Those the War God caught
> never saw their sons again, nor were they laid to rest
> decently in winding sheets by their wives' hands, but lie
> buried in alien ground; while all went wrong at home
> as the widows perished, and barren couples raised and nursed
> the children of others, no survivor left to tend
> the tombs, and what is left there, with blood sacrificed.
> For such success as this congratulate the Greeks.
> No, but the shame is better left in silence, for fear
> my singing voice become the voice of wretchedness.
> The Trojans have that glory which is loveliest:
> they died for their own country. So the bodies of all
> who took the spears were carried home in loving hands,
> brought, in the land of their fathers, to the embrace of earth
> and buried becomingly as the rite fell due. The rest,
> those Phrygians who escaped death in battle, day by day

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came home to happiness the Achaeans could not know;
their wives, their children. Then was Hector's fate so sad?
You think so. Listen to the truth. He is dead and gone
surely, but with reputation, as a valiant man.
How could this be, except for the Achaeans' coming?
Had they held back, none might have known how great he was.
The bride of Paris was the daughter of Zeus. Had he
not married her, fame in our house would sleep in silence still.
Though surely the wise man will forever shrink from war,
yet if war come, the hero's death will lay a wreath
not lustreless on the city. The coward alone brings shame.
(*Trojan Women* lines 374–402)[1]

Though it is wise to avoid war, human nature seems incapable of heeding this wisdom. War comes to us, as it came to the Trojans, whether we invite it or not, expect it or not: this catastrophic inclination that governs human action is tragedy of the first order. It is a universal disposition that quickly makes of the perpetrator victim, and vice versa. To admit this is not cynicism, but to deny it ignores categorically the thousands of years of history that have not proved otherwise. Thus, even though in this play the Greeks were the conquerors and the Trojans the conquered, their fates could have easily been reversed. If the women of Euripides's play choose lamentation over castigating speeches against the enemy, it is because they somehow grasp that their situation is as much a general matter of human circumstance as it is the specific result of the Greek invasion and that had they themselves happened upon the fortune of the Greeks, they may have also behaved no better.[2]

It is well-known that Euripides wrote this tragedy with the Peloponnesian War in mind. Its first performance in 415 BC marked hardly a year after the Melian massacre, while a short two years later the war follies of the Sicilian Expedition contributed to Athens's ultimate defeat in 404 BC. There is no question that the line "the wise man will forever shrink from war" expresses what was for Euripides the ideal state of affairs. But tragedy depicts reality as it does ideality, and thus, the second half of Cassandra's line is as legitimate as the first and deserves equal attention: when war comes and cannot be averted, the virtuous ones prefer the way of courage. Inspired by Dionysian frenzy (ἐκβακχεύουσα[3]), the Apollonian priestess who had to shed her priestly

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regalia for the rags of a slave gives an impassioned defense of the "beautiful death," the tragic death.

How hubristic or naïve her statement sounds to the modern ear! A denial of finitude, a pointless idealization, a patriotic delirium, a false transcendence, an act of violence that aestheticizes death: all these are possible theoretical responses to this passage[4]—responses that hastily flatten the poignancy of this speech, which Euripides deliberately reserved for the lips of the defeated enemy. In conflating the affirmation of fate with violent triumphalism and in reducing the cry for human dignity to a declaration of false mastery, such theorizations overlook how they themselves violate the one whom fate has already violated. But most of all, in deconstructing the infinitude that tragedy allegedly advocates, they forget that suffering, shared mortality, and loss are equally tragedy's essence—albeit not without their other halves also present: perseverance, self-accountability, courage, and even elevation.

Cassandra's speech does not deny catastrophe, for the simple reason that such a speech could not even take place outside the scene of loss. Her words affirm the calamities of war but in a way that refuses the politics of self-pity and resentment with which the modern age has invested the predicament of the victim. It is because she sees the ruin all too vividly that she generously grants to her enemies their losses first, giving them the lion's share of grief. Though driven by their own insolence, the Greeks suffered more, she says, since their dead will always remain apart from their families and their ancestral lands. Their corpses will never be tended lovingly by their wives but will remain buried in a distant country. This is not simply a rhetorical ploy to console her audience of captive women or provide them with some cheap dose of schadenfreude at the casualties suffered by the enemy. It is a fact of war: not to see the body, not to identify the corpse, is never to be able to do the work of mourning. The Greek widows and orphans will have to suffer interminably this fate because of this exported war. Symmetrically, to expire knowing they will never be seen again by their kin and will lay anonymous and unmourned in the land they came to conquer—this is the loveless fate of the Greek soldiers.

But as she mournfully acknowledges the losses of the other side, Cassandra balances her words by singing of a peculiar heroism—that of the defeated. It is thanks to this Greek invasion that Hector was able to show his noble stature and become an illustrious hero. Even Hecuba's old age and measured

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demeanor do not stop her later from expressing a similarly strange gratitude for this divine destruction, which will allow Troy's grandeur to be remembered in the world of song and legend:

> The gods meant nothing except to make life hard for me,
> and of all cities they chose Troy to hate. In vain
> we sacrificed. And yet had not the very hand
> of God gripped and crushed this city deep in the ground,
> we should have disappeared in darkness, and not given
> a theme for music, and the songs of men to come.
> (*Trojan Women* lines 1240–45)

There is nothing insidious in Hecuba's haunting words or in Cassandra's song of glory. It is another fact of life; it describes the larger, often-inexplicable economy of forces that play around and against human acts. As victory comes at high cost, so too defeat does not preclude the human prerogative to dignity, the capacity to rise to one's circumstance despite all appearances and expectations to the contrary. What a feat for the Athenian playwright to put these words of peculiar sympathy for the conqueror, and at the same time of glorification for the defeated, into the mouth of the foreign enemy—a dispossessed, delirious, adolescent woman!

If, as Nicole Loraux has argued, the tragic voice (*phonē*) spoke what the political speech (*logos*) would not admit,[5] then Euripides's Cassandra has usurped the confident male voice that filled the rational assembly, and made it resound in the opposite landscape—in the ruins of the polis, in the song of a maddened, enslaved girl. In doing so, she transformed it: while the polis declares eternal victories in order to suppress its real losses, Cassandra's praise emerges *out of* loss. An Apollonian priestess and a Dionysian maenad at once, the mad prophetess has combined paean with threnody. At the end of the play, after her many efforts to raise her battered body from the dust and her many doubts regarding the value of perseverance in the face of futility, Hecuba again echoes Cassandra's strength in a different register, one more appropriate to her advanced age and its lessons of suffering. As the voice of the coryphaeus, leading the women hostages into slavery, she concludes:

> O
> shaking, tremulous limbs,
> this is the way. Forward:

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into the slave's life.
(*Trojan Women* lines 1327–30)

An acceptance of what lies ahead, a sober yet unyielding determination to rise up, to move forward into the bleakest of futures. Not because of some hope, not because of a hidden plan of escape, not because of a delusion of triumph, but because of the impossibility of lying on the ground in self-pity any further,[6] because it is the human prerogative to assume the worst of fates in a quiet splendor. To accept that her slavery was an inevitable external circumstance without *being* herself a slave: this is an ontological modulation of the subtlest order, a distinction that sounds as theoretically risky as it is actually necessary. Hecuba's last words open to a state of acceptance that is never acquiescence. Her minimal last utterance, her improbable decision to stand up beyond all exhaustion and futility: this physical and moral uprightness marks the great, if invisible to us, distance that separates noble resignation to one's fate from surrender to humiliation.

T. R. Henn used similar terms to describe tragic exuberance: tragedy refuses to reduce the human being to an agent of rationalization who merely copes with life's vicissitudes and nothing more. In tragedy, Henn writes, there is "implicit, not only the possibility of redemption, but the spiritual assertion that man is splendid in his ashes, and can transcend his nature" (288). Terry Eagleton quotes this passage as well but takes issue with its idealism: the grandeur of literature belies the horror of actual war, and "it is hard to see that the victims of Bosnia or Cambodia are particularly splendid in their ashes" (28). Interested in a materialist recuperation of tragedy, Eagleton, who otherwise disagrees with a host of other contemporary critics of tragedy, seems to agree with many of them on this cardinal point, which constitutes by now the staple of any ethical critique of tragedy: namely, that tragic art risks being a false aestheticization of real violence, just as tragic idealism may legitimize and excuse human suffering (28). Can we think the politics of tragedy beyond this elevation of suffering, which has never driven the conservatives away from endorsing tragic art but which has always pushed the progressives to shun it?[7] The core of Eagleton's project is to get around this scandalous definition of tragedy as the idealization of terrible faults that makes the genre sublime and shameless at once.

Of course, this very worry of tragedy's legitimization of human suffering bespeaks Eagleton's own idealism—an idealism attendant to any genuine

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Marxism—that implies that if only the philosophical (read, "idealist") conception of tragic art stopped justifying human suffering, the latter's occurrence could perhaps diminish or even vanish.[8] However, what is *tragic* in tragedy has nothing to do with justification or with reason's capacity for correction: the tragic flaw is ontological in its nature—not sociological or psychological—and it remains thus, regardless of our theoretical views of it. Nietzsche's antirealist, antipolitical approach to tragedy captures this element better. Tragedy does not equate the spectator with the protagonist any more than it equates the chorus with average citizens (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* 57–59). But in its hieratic remove from particular circumstances, the tragic ethos assumes its universal form, a form that can potentially apply to everyone by not submitting to anyone's specific realities. Not every victim of Cambodia can be like Hecuba, but if there is one—and tragedy grants us this certainty that there is *always at least one*—then in this fact lies tragedy's profoundest realism and ethical importance.

We may question the idealizations involved in Cassandra's and Hecuba's gestures. We may even suspect these women, since they make for unwieldy victims. Still, something in their example and their voice remains unshakable. What invests their voices with the dignity they lay claim to despite any objections to the contrary? What makes them into exceptions? Can we sustain again, afford again, hear again, the truth of that holy madness, despite all the claims that our modern condition is irreducibly different from the ancients? Or is Cassandra's speech simply that—madness, a madness we should shrink from, as does Hecuba herself initially?[9] But even if this is all it is, can we live at all without this madness?

In his famous remark on the nature of historical change, Karl Marx observed that history appears the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.[10] The history of modern philosophy is itself a good illustration of this: Kant wrote a tragedy of antinomies; Hegel, Dante's great heir, wrote the comedy by solving them. However, comedy quickly begat a larger tragedy—the modern tragedy (some may also call it tragicomedy) of being blind to the farcical nature of one's own existence and viewing it, instead, as progress. Though commonly read as a statement on the decline of history, this Marxian phrase may also be read as a pronouncement on the inaccessibility of tragedy as an explicator for our time.

In fact, since at least the famous eighteenth-century quarrel of ancients and moderns, the West's self-definition in relation to the Greeks has been

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articulated into two opposing camps: we either repeat the Greeks by imitating them (classicism, or neoclassicism, as it is also called), or we depart from them because our modern reality is radically different (German idealism and romanticism to poststructuralism).[11] Though this latter camp would claim a more nuanced position than simply that of renouncing the Greeks, it is in fact structured as an inversion of its opposite: where classicism emphasized continuity without difference, German idealism and its legatees emphasize difference stripped of any essential continuities of human nature. Since the crowning achievement of the Greeks was considered to be their art, the dispute over continuity or discontinuity was largely waged around the question of how modernity should receive the Greek art forms. Most importantly, given the scope of the present project, the debates that originated in German idealism (and its artistic counterpart in romanticism), which have continued to occupy continental philosophy and poststructuralist theory regarding the West's relation to the Greeks, hinge not just on any art form but specifically on tragedy and its ethical vision.

Friedrich Hölderlin, with whom this study begins and ends, invoked this epochal turn from the ancients to the moderns through the poetic figure of the caesura, a term he used to describe the balancing mechanisms of the Sophoclean tragic form as it distributed dramatic action over the course of time. He was also the one who, debunking the revivalist dreams of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, heralded the idea of radical discontinuity between ancients and moderns. His argument, brilliant in many respects, was later recast in one of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* as a critique of a type of historical memory that so indebts the present to its past that it paralyzes the present from creating anything in its own right and from engendering itself.[12] To be like the Greeks, Hölderlin said (and Nietzsche repeated)—namely, to be original in our own right—we have to forget about the Greeks. This epochal cut is the caesura that would balance out modernity's excessive historical debt, much as the early or belated entrance of Teiresias, according to Hölderlin, evened out the weight of the tragic action either at the beginning or the end of a Sophocles play, as was needed. Yet just as the entrance of the blind seer never happened at the same predetermined point, but according to the demands of the action's distribution in each play—as the middle always moved toward either end—the caesura too, as a historically balancing figure, should never be hypostatized in one temporal direction or another. What is ancient and what is modern—historical weight, that is—itself shifts with

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the passage of time; and in a simply arithmetical sense at least, modernity has already aged by now in calendar years, weighing the balance down on its side more than it cares to admit. Like Teiresias, then, the historical caesura must also be ready to reposition itself and to be renewed, particularly when it begins to settle comfortably in the guarantee of a recent renewal.

Following Hölderlin's lead, Friedrich Nietzsche also declared that tragedy was impossible in the modern world, having died with the appearance of Socrates in ancient Athens.[13] By relying on theoretical reason, Socrates, according to Nietzsche, introduces for the first time thought's delusion of mastery: "the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion [delusion] accompanies science as an instinct and leads science again and again to its limits at which it must turn into *art*" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 95–96).[14] As Hölderlin did, Nietzsche sees that reflection has become our mode of action, our instinct, and even our art. Unlike Hölderlin, however, for Nietzsche there is no "tragic" without tragedy, which as a genre already translated what was tragic in the Greek's life. The worldview is thus inseparable from the artistic medium that expressed it. Tragedy's eclipse was, for Nietzsche, a decline, the mark of a falsely optimistic culture that, lacking in mental strength to deal with life's blows, relied erroneously on reason's ability to parry them.[15] In other words, we continue to live tragedies but without the means to understand them as such. This is the tragedy of what Nietzsche calls "Socratism," or the age of theory—which, most tragically, does not see any flaws with its own certainties.

Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of tragedy has been echoed by a wide range of contemporary thinkers, many of whom lay a justifiable claim to his legacy. At the same time, however, they are strangely quick to bracket the melancholy with which Nietzsche describes the end of the tragic world, for melancholy is disturbingly close to nostalgia, and nostalgia is a disease that contemporary theory would not want to see afflict one of its forefathers.[16] In fact, the dominant theoretical position since World War II has been almost diametrically opposed to Nietzsche on this point, finding that tragedy serves only to evoke Dionysian ghosts, ones whose mythic embrace too often justifies violence against the Other, and that catharsis itself risks becoming a fascist principle that aestheticizes pain. Tragedy, one senses, should have disappeared down the dark path of myth from where it took its source material to

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begin with; myth—another word that is supposed to make everyone shudder nowadays, summoning, as it is said to do, the worst specters of Europe's recent past, offering a primitive and violent way of understanding that has no place in any serious epistemology.[17] Consequently, tragedy's death has been viewed as a necessary—even positive—stage in its translation from an ancient theatrical genre to a modern philosophical idea: "the tragic."[18]

This has been particularly true of thinkers allied with poststructuralism, a term that functions here as a specific shorthand for the postwar textualist turn of French thought. Emanating out of the historicist understanding of truth that culminated in Hegel's philosophy, and was further radicalized by Nietzsche and Heidegger (the latter two having been somewhat canonized as poststructuralism's father figures), poststructuralism has impacted not only continental philosophy's but also literary criticism's receptions of antiquity and its ethicopolitical values. Although readers of continental philosophy have a more systematic understanding of this poststructuralism than that which is applied within literary theory, I contend that, despite this fundamental difference, the translation of Greek tragedy into the idea of the tragic has resulted in the elision of the tragic spirit in *both* the philosophical and theoretical versions of poststructuralism (the latter often being colloquially referred to as high theory).[19] Having first served to usher in the climax of Western metaphysics in German idealism, this idea of the tragic also marks the very rift of that discourse—the caesura, or turn—that has led to "the beyond-the-tragic" of contemporary thought's attempts to revise metaphysics and move beyond it.

Because poststructuralism denotes a rather large and diverse field of inquiry that encompasses both philosophically based discourses like postmodernism and deconstruction and socioculturally based ones like critical theory and social construction theory, I should state that my concern for it in this project is necessarily limited to its contested relation to tragedy: in regards, that is, to its explicit—and more often, implicit—dismissal of tragedy as a viable mode of being in and understanding our world.

On the former, philosophical side of the spectrum, two assessments of the end of tragedy will be most operative in this study: (1) Nietzsche's alignment of tragedy's end with modernity's optimistic belief in the omnipotence of rationality, coupled with his clear preference for the lost tragic world; and (2) the post-Nietzschean belief that the end of tragedy is a moral and ontological necessity and that even any recourse to the tragic might be ethically complicit with metaphysical violence. Born in the shadow of the disasters of

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twentieth-century Europe, deconstruction and its theological offshoots locate an ethical danger in investing faith in the notions of subjective autonomy, presence, "full speech," resistance, and so forth—all vital to the tragic experience, *along with* their opposites (fate and the gods, mortality and the acceptance of loss). Ever since, the thrust of the theoretical enterprise in the humanities has been to a large extent the discovery and overturning of binaries, or even the neutralization of the tension whenever polarity is acknowledged—a neutralization that can take on various forms, of which deferral and undecidability are some of the most privileged.[20] Even philosophers who affirm the importance of the tragic do so only in its German idealist and poststructuralist guise—namely, not as tragedy but as the *philosophy* of tragedy. This translation has so modified the core principles of the tragic world that it has rendered them virtually unrecognizable, attenuating all the *political* force with which tragedy once addressed the *actual* nature of conflict and the importance of human responsibility.

On the latter, cultural side, social construction theories (more prominent in the United States than Europe) and critical-theoretical models (whether dealing with race, gender, sexuality, colonialism, and even artistic production and reception) often maintain the category of the subject, but only as a culturally constructed entity, void of any effective sense of individualized decision and action. In other words, social construction and cultural theory cannot provide adequate explanations for individual acts that transcend their environmental determinations and become exceptional.

Thus, the various strains of both deconstruction and cultural criticism—often thought to represent opposing ends of contemporary theory—share a determinist view of the human being: we are either thoroughly passive at the hands of necessity ("necessity" now having been renamed "alterity") or entirely defined by preexisting cultural codes. Some of the questions that arise out of this revaluation of tragedy are: How much, in the name of originality, have we hypostatized the "truth" that our human condition is and *will remain* exclusively different from that of the ancients? How much, in our quest for originality, which is itself a Greek ideal, have we moved to the other extreme of the spectrum, and when would it be the proper time to reapply the caesura as a redirection? In other words, what if classicism and romanticism/German idealism are but the same Teiresias entering through two different doors at two different times—a cyclical repetition in history of imitation versus originality and vice versa? Are but a full turn like that of Euripides, whose

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avowed modernity even in the ancient world did not stop him from bringing tragedy back to its most ancient cultic beginnings in *The Bacchae*? Furthermore, how original really is this strategy of the "unhistorical" beginning for modernity, when in fact it is a lesson already offered in the Greek example, as both Hölderlin and Nietzsche concur? Although Hölderlin and Nietzsche's understanding of the original is not limited to what is chronologically new, but describes a leap in historical time, it is also important to remember that the nature of this modern leap is the same as that of its ancient occurrence; and this sameness should matter. Thus, of all else, it is perhaps this paradox of original sameness that sets modernity into a tragic temporality—a race whose course has already been run, yet inevitably will be run again. If this is the predicament of the present, then it continues to be essentially a tragic one, which is the reason why both these thinkers grappled with the question of tragedy even as they pronounced its end.

Hence, for both classicism and romanticism, tragedy has been the site where certain ethical debates have been waged from the Enlightenment on. Questions of whether the human being is determined by outside forces (the divine, necessity) or by individual will (self-consciousness); of whether ethics proceeds from the other rather than from the self; of whether our relation to our historical and cultural origins is continuous or discontinuous; or of whether the very question of origin is itself ethically and epistemologically viable—all are central to Greek tragedy.

Tragically Speaking examines this translation that began in German idealism and culminates in poststructuralism, with its attendant shift from modernity's claim that tragedy is no longer possible to the more current conclusion that even the tragic cannot be placed beyond ethical suspicion. Though this translation of tragedy into the tragic and the ethical has helped continental philosophy articulate a nonmetaphysical type of thinking, this has not been without its costs. This book not only focuses on these costs but argues that they are themselves tragic—the site of a loss that remains unaccounted for by the current theoretical insistence exclusively on the gains and the originality of the translation.

For instance: What happened to the political dimension of tragedy in its German idealist (and more recently, continental- or French-driven) translation? Does the corresponding ontologization of politics into the ethical and then the political not entail a certain attenuation of the real, a bracketing of

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the actual world for the idea of the world (an idealization that, ironically, nonmetaphysical philosophy ascribes heavily to Plato)? How did tragedy's language of contestation, which assumed agents and their actions, recede seamlessly into the language of singularity and alterity, which replaces the political subject with a theological personal impersonality?

Indeed, of the various losses, it is the elision of politics that might prove the most costly, as becomes apparent in the disparagement of any notion of heroism in contemporary thought. Tragedy, based as it is on the necessity of heroic agency, offers models of resistance. To declare that tragedy is no longer accessible to us also marks off a certain understanding of courage, self-presence, and will, without which any real politics is impossible. Hölderlin's conclusion that tragedy-as-act (the tragic performance) is no longer possible produces exactly this effect: tragedy's public, outward staging of conflict (the actual, the performative, the collectively experienced) becomes interiorized into the private, purely ethical provenance of the tragic (the speculative, the introspective, the singular relation to a singular Other). The resultant era of modern antiheroism, I believe, has led gradually to the current and profound distrust of resistance in most contemporary continental and cultural-theoretical discourses.

Nicole Loraux's exclusive emphasis on tragedy as a mourning song—namely, as a lyrical, antipolitical cry that bespeaks our universal passivity before fate without the attendant epic elements of human decision, responsibility, and agency—is a good example of this strictly antiheroic tendency. Her denial of any sort of agency might be the very reason why she has been so often cited and well received in the work of deconstructive readers of Greek thought such as Michael Naas. Despite my own profound indebtedness to her antipolitical interpretation of tragedy at crucial junctures of this project, I also need to qualify her insights by insisting that tragedy remains irreducible to either a simply epic (rational, deliberative, political) or a simply lyrical (mournful, irrational, antipolitical) interpretation. As a culmination of all hitherto practiced Greek art forms, Attic drama was both formally and thematically speaking a balanced synthesis of epic and lyric, Homer and Pindar, action and contemplation. And as if to drive further the inextricability of these opposites—to stress the coexistence of activity and passivity, will and fate—tragedy realigned chiasmatically the traditionally communal character of epic narration to an individual's dramatic acts and the traditionally subjective character of lyric poetry to the communal movement of choral songs. Emphasizing one

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pole while sidelining the other—as happens in much of poststructuralist theory, which consistently favors passivity and irrationality over activity and reason—is itself a politically symptomatic gesture, even as it carefully tries to distance itself from actual politics. In downplaying tragedy's contestatory character, which continually involved Athens's actual political scene no matter how allegorically, this modern reinterpretation severely delimits rather than enriches the political horizon once opened by the tragedians.

Additionally, in pursuing how tragedy was reinscribed into the tragic, I focus on the tragic dimension of philosophical thinking itself, particularly as it insists on distancing itself from the immediacy of the tragic world, trying to demythologize what it perceives to be the demonic traces of action, blood, contingency, and passion. While tragedy has provided indispensable examples for philosophy's ethical inquiries, philosophy regards the indeterminable world of tragedy with suspicion—and yet keeps returning to it. Such returns, however, belong themselves to the tragic register: just as in tragedy we learn nothing from repetition but are led to repeat by necessity, so philosophy cannot help revisiting this space that it wishes to avoid and ultimately to invalidate. Accordingly, philosophy's preoccupation with tragedy becomes all the more tragic when it explicitly calls for the end of tragedy, as has happened since German idealism, at least, and possibly even since Plato, though his end was configured as a banishment of an all-too-vital art form rather than the declaration of its demise.

In short, despite its negative treatment by the philosophical tradition and the death knell sounded by even its most ardent philosophical advocates, tragedy has managed to maintain posthumously its privileged status in ethicopolitical thought. This is a rather commonly known fact. What is not discussed, however, is the too obvious paradox of this posthumous existence, this afterlife of tragedy—where the term "afterlife" should resonate in its field-specific sense of *Das Nachleben der Antike* (the afterlife of antiquity), the branch of classical studies in Germany that explored the continuing impact of ancient culture on modernity. What is the status of such a life outside any possibility of revival? Memory, quotation, and even fruitful misquotation of the dead are possible answers to this question. In this sense, there is certainly nothing jarring or paradoxical about the notion of an afterlife. In fact, nothing past is simply dead, though this truism too might prove a tenuous admission of infinitude for contemporary theory, which has staked so much of its ethics and politics on the notion of finitude, critiquing any hints of idealization, transcendence,

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and infinity as variant delusions of Hegelian sublation, Christian resurrection, and the fascist myth of invincibility.[21]

But even if we can all accept that the past still animates and is animated by the present, modernity's clear and insistent verdict on tragedy's obsoleteness should have removed tragedy from that list of things past that might concern us. How can something so ancient be of ethical importance—whether our ethics is theoretical or practical—after we have decided that there is an irrecuperable ontological rift between ancients and moderns? Such a rift may well entail that tragedy is a theoretically obfuscated, even nonviable, field of knowledge for us, since we can hardly understand its categories. Even more than its theoretical impenetrability, it seems that tragedy should have no practical pertinence in a world that claims to be no more subject to tragic forces and principles. Yet the critical interest in tragedy has not in the least subsided.[22]

Given tragedy's continuing importance alongside its repeated death sentences, an almost perverse question arises: How dead is it really after all these blows? Or rather, to put the question more pointedly and hopefully in a more revealing manner, what does our modern obsession with tragedy's death say about *ourselves* rather than about tragedy? What does it say about our modern wish to be spared of it? In trying to answer these latter questions, I bring Nietzsche's critique of "theoretical optimism" to bear on the discursive practices of contemporary theory.

I would locate some of contemporary theory's optimism and antipathy to tragedy in its "democratic" worldview, which now pervades all aspects of existence and desires to be the overarching legislating principle behind all relations. This view is shared by both aforementioned branches of contemporary theory, no matter how differently each articulates its concept of democracy: a democracy-to-come, a liberal parliamentary democracy, a radical communitarian democracy, a pluralist multiculturalist one, and so forth.[23] While fully appreciating the ethical merits of democratic vision in the history of political philosophy, as well as the improvements it brought about in civic life, it is important to note that tragedy expresses that which exceeds civic relation.[24] It expresses the world of personal intimacy on the one hand and the clash of cosmic forces on the other, which admit as much suffering and injustice as they do joy and dreaming—events and mental states that occur within but point beyond the civic sphere. Thus, the community forged by tragedy is not so much a theoretical cipher at the verge of a messianic futurity, an

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abstraction deferred to the end of time (which, of course, never ends!), but a community of perpetual consummation, destruction, and regeneration: it is made of the stuff of generational atonement; of intimacy and exclusion; of decisions between the horrible and the more horrible, which choice makes all the difference for understanding what remains always at stake for all of us in different guises. The problem, however, is that not *all of us* have the resources to rise to that understanding, and tragedy admits unapologetically to its incapacity to teach anyone, let alone *everyone*—a deeply undemocratic and inegalitarian admission, for which tragic literature has been consistently shunned by theoretical logic.

This "democratic" impetus underlies theoretical optimism and its concomitant heightened rhetoric about the end of tragedy in poststructuralist circles. Strangely, though, this same contemporary theoretical appeal to democracy is articulated in a prohibitively exclusive academic discourse, which alienates nonspecialist audiences, even if they are otherwise humanistically educated. The counterargument—that linguistic convolution is necessitated by the difficulty of the concepts treated—can be valid, but the abstract formulae of much theoretical language risks forming a bulwark against the very problems it claims to be addressing. Behind it the thinker retreats into an ever-greater self-referentiality. The dissonance between the terrible immediacy of world events and the safely self-referential language of the theoretical humanities that claims to explain them is but one of the tragicomic marks that follow the unproblematic reliance on the powers of theoretical reason.

Thus, Marx and Nietzsche meet at a point where the Greeks had already stood: comedy is the other face of tragedy. Socrates knew this when he said in the *Symposium* (223d) that a good tragedian should also be able to write good comedies. Yet comedy should complement, not replace, tragedy. Hence, when modern thought from Hegel onward proclaims this downward spiral of nihilism to be yet another glorious supersession in the history of philosophical progress, we have already entered a farce, one designed to distract from the age's inability to deal with—let alone affirm—the tragic nature of the human. Nietzsche's epochal diagnosis of theoretical optimism certainly does not exempt post-Nietzschean philosophy from its own untragic nihilism, nor does the latter's critique of rationality, nor even its insistence on its own antisystematicity. Rather, poststructuralism's ultrarhetorical turn may be the very mark of a rationalistic prejudice that wishes to correct tragedy and ultimately dispense with it as well as of an optimism that seeks to subordinate

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the world to the complexity of theoretical reason. Indeed, it should be noted parenthetically that the difference between reason and rationalism has been dangerously underestimated in modern thought, which collapses them into each other, critiquing all reason as if it were *always* rationalistic and as if the cult of the irrational would remedy rationalism's excesses. Thus, the Greeks of reason and serenity were too easily revised to become a primarily Dionysian people (the "fiery" people of Hölderlin and Nietzsche) and were then disavowed in view of the excesses of Germany's nationalist fire. However, since this nationalist fire has been also theorized as both apex and symptom of modern rationalism, reason (and with it, Apollonian balance) had to be disclaimed as well, most likely to our ethicopolitical detriment. That both these sides persist perennially in their interplay, despite our "nonmetaphysical" theorizations of them, remains tragedy's challenge to us today. On the other hand, theory's attempt to exorcise reason's and passion's demons at once often results in a rationalistic, but not necessarily reasonable or spirited, endeavor.

Let me anticipate the likely objection that contemporary theory is far too self-reflexive about the metaphysical penchants for certainty and rational adequation, and these are exactly what it is trying to combat. Yet the resort to self-reflexivity as panacea does not necessarily heal, but often worsens, the wound: among other problems, self-reflexivity too often serves less a process of fruitful meditation than it provides a cover for self-referentiality and self-indulgence. That uncertainty and antisystematicity are the favored new theoretical positions and that much contemporary theoretical prose assumes a creative or performative use of language (without for the most part risking the terrible possibility of failure that genuine creation always has in store) do not automatically absolve theory from the charge of weak optimism that inheres in discursive thought.

This situation is not so surprising but shows the dulling effect of reflection and hyperdiscursivity; language, and theoretical language in particular, seems to explain away everything, particularly through the self-referential declarations of its own instability, incompletion, open-endedness, and so forth—terms that have become so well-worn as to become illegible. On the contrary, tragic drama demanded not to be simply read as text. Rather, it engaged in a thoroughgoing manner—both aporetically *and* cathartically—not only the cognitive faculties but everything else in the human body and mind. That theory may not see tragedy's persistence in the modern world, however,

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does not mean that tragedy has lost its relevance. As for us moderns, it turns out that our unquestionably self-confident reliance on theory shares much of the hubris and hamartia of the tragic genre, but regrettably not much of its ennobling nature. Modernity's irreducible difference from the ancients lies not in the fact that tragedy is obsolete or that we inhabit a radically different ontological position but in the ever-more-tragic fact that we are not able to recognize *our tragedy* and call it by its name.

Despite whatever parameters, disclaimers, and qualifications one can try to set when defining a large field of knowledge, as I have tried to do here with poststructuralism, it is impossible not to meet with the charge of generalization. This charge will be all the more readily launched given the critical nature of my overview. Thus, I am thoroughly aware of the potential objections to my generalized use of the term poststructuralism, as I also understand that there are fine points of difference between various theorists and strands of contemporary theory. I would not draw from the later thought of Michel Foucault in the second part of this book had I not respected such differences within the theoretical field and, even more importantly, the radical intellectual changes that take place within the work of a single thinker. Foucault, courageous and honest in admitting to the unexpected turns and outright inversions of thought's journeys, composed his own palinode from poststructuralist denouncer of the subject in all its forms to ascetic thinker of the care of the self, provoking meanwhile all sorts of disputes and disappointments among friends and foes alike. Still, isolated variations—no matter how illustrious—do not in any way undermine the reality of my general claim that poststructuralist theory does not eschew but rather exemplifies the rationalistic optimism of modernity that its own father figure, Nietzsche, had denounced. After all, not all generalities are necessarily untrue, and many a substantive argument would risk never being made out of fear that its generalization will be insensitive to its few exceptions.

Interestingly, this is probably the unspoken assumption that modernity applies to its study of the past, even though it may not always do so sagaciously: "The Greeks," said Hölderlin with a strange certainty, when he really meant the tragedians and more specifically Sophocles and his two plays *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*. "The Greeks," said Heidegger again, meaning only the best of their kind, who for him were the pre-Socratics. "The Greeks," said Nietzsche too, who in his famously moody thinking devoted almost as much time to that intellectual nemesis he despised and admired at once,

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Socrates, as to his idol, Aeschylus. Of other Greeks—poets, artists, legislators, or philosophers—continental thought and contemporary theory have little, if anything at all, to say. Heraclitus, Sophocles, Plato (or Socrates in his place), and Aristotle seem to do the work of representing the immense variety of philosophical and artistic currents the ancient Greek world produced.

In acknowledging and accounting for my own generalizations, I certainly do not mean to reproduce modernity's tendency to generalize about the past while demanding for itself a more nuanced and complex treatment. Rather, in foregrounding this temporal prejudice, I also wish to note that just as the carefully practiced generalization has its advantages, so the generalized fetishization of carefulness has its pitfalls. Nuance has a great value, but the insistence on nuance often serves intellectual safety, and by risking nothing else, it risks becoming a symptom of the theoretical optimism and the quietude of reason Nietzsche criticized. For all its avowed indebtedness to Nietzsche, contemporary theoretical writing shares very little of Nietzsche's own power of conviction and even less of the offense he feared not mounting against his contemporary academic establishment.[25]

Methodologically, I am not interested in explicating specific writings on tragedy by various philosophers or producing a sequential chronology of tragedy's reception. This kind of commentary is already rich and abundant in the scholarly bibliography on tragedy.[26] Rather, I trace a certain genealogy of tragedy and the tragic, beginning with Hölderlin's translation of tragedy into what became the most enduring German idealist version of the tragic and concluding with the implications of his vision for the contemporary philosophical taboo on the tragic-heroic death. The intervening chapters examine the place of tragedy today by pursuing several key issues and debates that have developed around the contested and now-repressed terms of presence, selfhood, will, and heroism in modern thought, as well as try to restore to the Greeks their own philosophy of the tragic in Plato.

As I have discussed, poststructuralism has radicalized the death of tragedy into an ethical argument in which the very idea of thinking tragedy in relation to our particular historical catastrophes entails a violent aestheticization and a corresponding diminution of the reality of these catastrophes. In contrast, I propose that tragedy is of the utmost ethical *and* political importance, in part because the profundity of tragic thinking lies exactly in its sustenance of opposition as complementarity, not as hierarchical binary in need of correction.

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Further, I maintain that the insistence on the radical rift between ancients and moderns is merely another attempt to defend the boundary between philosophy and tragic reality, a boundary that theoretical thinking has tried to keep intact from ancient times onward. Put differently, the fetishization of this rift relies on and bespeaks the rationalist optimism that modernity has "progressed" to overcome tragedy's dark archaism. Thus, despite the fact that many contemporary theoretical discourses view themselves as critiques of rationalism and progress, they share in the long-standing philosophical antipathy to tragedy. They are unwittingly more Platonic than they think when it comes to certain moral dicta and certain attachments to discursive reasoning, while at the same time they share little of Plato's formidable understanding of the divinely inspired, nontheoretical nature of art—an understanding that made of him not only a philosopher of the tragic but a tragic philosopher as well.

Titled "Old Quarrels," part 1 of this book comprises two chapters addressing the quarrels that have defined the modern reception of tragedy historically and philosophically. First comes the quarrel over the Occidental or Oriental nature of Greece in German idealism, which was precipitated by Hölderlin's "Orientalist" interpretations of Sophoclean tragedy as well as by his observations in the "Letters to Böhlendorff" regarding the ontological difference between Greeks and moderns; according to the German poet, Greek nature stemmed from Oriental holy pathos, whereas modern, Occidental nature is self-reflection. This announcement of an epochal turn lies at the source of poststructuralist arguments about the end of tragedy and the absolute discontinuity between ancients (Orientals) and moderns (Occidentals). In addition to arguing against Hölderlin's historicist thesis of an ontological shift, this chapter also offers a critique of the still-overlooked poststructuralist historiographical bias that continues to ignore the issue of modern Greece's virtual absence in this European heritage debate.

The second chapter treats the quarrel between philosophy, on the one hand, and (tragic) poetry and art, on the other. Articulated most succinctly in Plato's *Republic*, this quarrel resurfaced in Hegel's modernity. I opt for a tragic reading of Plato by juxtaposing his expulsion of the poets with Hegel's declaration of the end of art in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. Whereas both champion the victory of philosophy over poetry, I argue that Plato's ban issues from a cathartic understanding of tragedy's powers—thus, being itself a *poetic and tragic reaction* that grants art rightfully its universal and diachronic

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appeal—while Hegel's pronouncement thinks of art purely in terms of a historical logic, which diminishes art to being a function of timely concerns. In reading Plato tragically, I side with Stephen Halliwell's thesis that Plato was also the first philosopher of the tragic, contrary to the German idealist legacy, which maintains that the Greeks had to wait for modernity to be granted a proper understanding of their artistic process. Moreover, by engaging some passing but interesting remarks on Plato by Giorgio Agamben, I contend that Plato's tragic philosophical predilection is inextricably tied to his very suspicion of tragedy and of art in general: it was because art mattered to Plato that he bothered to censor it. In sharp contrast, the infinite freedom and formal autonomy of modern art—celebrated from Hegel to Adorno and beyond—misses the Platonic experience of creativity, which involves an ontological and political unsettling. The modern obsession with art's freedom translates Plato's high tragedy into the weaker register of theoretical reason, where formal autonomy is nothing but a sorry symptom of the diminished impact art has had in modernity. Formal autonomy is, in other words, the artist's last trace of pride in a society that cares little of his or her accomplishments.

Part 2, "For the Love of Truth," contains three chapters that elaborate variously the connection between tragedy and the philosophical desire for truth. My aim in this section is threefold: firstly and most importantly, to show that Platonic philosophy and tragedy share a quest for truth, as Socrates follows the example of tragic heroes who risk everything for the telling of truth; secondly, to suggest that this tragic-heroic stance of truth-telling, whether performed on the dramatic or the Socratic stage, offers a model of political resistance; thirdly, to propose that of all modern and contemporary philosophical practices, it is genealogy—as conceived by Nietzsche and continued by Foucault—that most faithfully bears philosophy's initial tragic marks, thereby also staying true to its most radical ethicopolitical spirit. Since my interest in the truth-seeking function of Platonic thought and tragedy dovetails with Foucault's later work, the first of these chapters is devoted to Foucault's writings on *parrhesia* (truth-telling), which signaled his turn to Socrates and tragedy (Euripides in particular). Opposing deconstruction's language games and departing from many of his own earlier views that enabled social construction theories to submit everything to cultural determination, Foucault's treatment of parrhesia helps me reintroduce the philosophically and culturally contested notions of presence and self-relation—notions that are pivotal both to Plato and to tragic theater.

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Concurring with Foucault, who reads Socrates not as a rhetorician but as a truth-seeker and a truth-teller, the next chapter analyzes Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Apology* as dialogues that show the path to truth to be a tragic path. Although philosophy has viewed itself as the sole pursuer of truth, I maintain that tragedy is imminent in truth's pursuit and thus always inextricable from it. Truth's elusive nature along with the blindness and misunderstandings that follow its pursuit constitute the very core of tragedy. Tragedy is, in a strong sense, the search for truth gone awry. Admittedly, the notion that misunderstandings are unavoidable in the search for truth could be read as akin to some rhetorical approaches to philosophy that focus on truth's dependence on language. At the same time, however, to designate these misunderstandings as tragic—as I do here—is obviously to diverge from such approaches that rush to celebrate and capitalize on the inevitable ambiguity of language. Instead of focusing on the axiomatic primacy of language and its rhetorical plays, I side with Plato, who did not consider language to be the "house of Being" but understood it as a human faculty that more likely obfuscates than illumines the ascent to truth.[27]

While the structure of the *Apology* as tragic theater may be immediately apparent to the reader,[28] a brief explanation of the *Phaedrus*'s tragic dimension is due. The *Phaedrus* illustrates the tragic movement of thinking in a twofold manner. Firstly, in contrasting the love of truth to the fetishization of sophistry, this dialogue explains and performs the very drama of philosophy as a search for truth. It thus anticipates the modern philosophical turn that, by historicizing and relativizing truth, not only produced a crisis of legitimation but also effected something counterintuitive to its own ethical objectives: although historical truth may appear less exclusive and more democratic than immutable truth, it is also potentially more violent and restrictive, since what is historical remains bound to humans, their special interests, and their power struggles. Historical truth cannot but also be the truth of power, of unjust law and brutal authority—the truth that Socrates would never grace by that name.

Secondly, in questioning authority without ever assuming to be one, the *Phaedrus* itself has become as much a blind spot in contemporary thought as Plato's philosophy was for many during his own time. In other words, it is through its own history of philosophical reception that the *Phaedrus* illustrates the tragedy of truth's distortion. Plato directs this dialogue on love and inspiration against two targets: first, against the prevailing Sophistic

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establishment, which subordinated truth to the mechanics of cold rationality and rhetorical manipulation; second, against those who actually mistook him for a rigid rationalist and a Sophist. Ironically, then, Jacques Derrida's reading of this dialogue in "Plato's Pharmacy," which has been celebrated precisely for the freshness of its rhetorical approach vis-à-vis the canonical insistence on the centrality of love in this text, is actually a return to the very establishment that Plato was speaking against. "Plato's Pharmacy" treats this dialogue as an exemplar of the inherent instability and untranslatability of philosophical language, arguing that the multiple and mutually contradictory connotations of some of its terms foreclose the possibility of any stable meaning even at the level of the Greek original. Nonetheless, this realization does not stop Derrida himself from obtaining some surprisingly stable, albeit "hidden," meanings out of this dialogue—namely, that the *Phaedrus* relies on various problematic hierarchies, such as those of presence over absence and speech over writing. Derrida's politics of linguistic suspicion thus uncannily repeats a rationalist, sophistic mode of reading that implies authority, even as it tries to destabilize it in others. Over and against Derrida's line of thinking, I elaborate several other arguments by classicists Giovanni R. F. Ferrari and Seth Benardete, who focus on the speech/writing binary not so much as a hypostatized distinction but as an effect of Plato's critique of the inflexibility of authority, whether such authority be scholarly, legal, or moral in kind. In pitting love against law, the *Phaedrus* ensconces itself in the tragic repertory, which rehearses this strife repeatedly and of which *Antigone*—the last conceptual unit of this book—becomes the supreme example.

Following the readings of these Platonic dialogues, the concluding chapter of this second part turns to *The Bacchae* in light of Foucault's interest in Euripides and parrhesia. Even though Foucault treats this tragedy cursorily, preferring to map the passage of parrhesia from the old inspired truth-seekers to Athens's civic orators (the Sophists) in Euripides's *Ion*, I maintain that *The Bacchae* gives us a more compelling—if also catastrophic—understanding of the ascent to truth. The play sets a fatal confrontation between two irreconcilable modes of truth-telling: human and divine. That the human element is utterly destroyed at the end of this confrontation bespeaks the tragic Socratic insight that human wisdom is worth little or nothing.

Lastly, entitled "Passions," part 3 consists of two chapters that explore the ethical and political importance of tragedy through the figure of Antigone, the tragic heroine who more than any other has inspired continental philosophy

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from German idealism onward. While the first of these two chapters treats Sophocles's *Antigone* and its critical rereading by Judith Butler, the final chapter, "Antigone's Children," undertakes the tragic question of the intentionality of one's death, while relating it to two acts of collective self-sacrifice as a form of resistance in modern Greek history. Siding against Butler's appropriation of the play for the purposes of social construction theories, and steering clear of the deconstructive ethical formula that "we are simply exposed to the Other," chapter 6 maintains that Sophocles shows in the character of Antigone the perfect harmony between outer destiny and subjective will, between self-knowledge and self-accountability, between words and deeds. Antigone, like Socrates, is a musical character, one whose *logos* harmoniously corresponds with her *bios*. Furthermore, Antigone's adherence to the unwritten law—namely, her desire to ascend to what is eternally true and not obey what is historically dictated and didactically written—offers a vindication of the *Phaedrus*'s truths on the tragic stage.

That one can choose one's death is a fundamental tragic prerogative. Yet the notion of death as an object of human will has been consistently attacked by poststructuralist theory—most notably in the thought of Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas. Naturally, in an era that has killed the subject, the idea of death as a subject's intention sounds simply absurd. Indeed, it could well be said that contemporary theory's aversion to tragedy stems precisely from tragedy's exposition of death not only as fate but also as an object of human intention. The book's final chapter approaches this issue through a close reading of Hölderlin's poem "Stimme des Volks," which reflects on mass suicide as a mode of resistance in the ancient city of Xanthos. Subsequently, I forge a link between this tragic notion of the intentionality of one's death and two modern acts of communal resistance in the nineteenth-century Greek struggle for independence: the 1803 collective suicides of the women of Zalongos in Epirus and the 1866 explosion of the Arkadi Monastery in Crete by its besieged inhabitants. Both acts repeat in modernity the Antigonian lineage (and tragic lineage more generally) of self-destruction in the face of the intolerable. The dark circumstances under which these people were called to make a decision in common and to undertake an action so unthinkable to the comfort of theoretical contemplation emphasize the nature of tragedy as *action* and political experience (drama, deriving from *dran*, means "to act"[29]) rather than as text subject to individual ethical reading.

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With no Anglo-American disciplinary equivalent to the cumbersome German *Das Nachleben der Antike*, this book has to be situated somewhat awkwardly in a transitional space—something we may call the relation of ancients and moderns. The difficulty of assigning it clear academic borders might well be because my own concerns with tragedy have for a long time exceeded the category of academic interest, forming instead a crucial endpoint in an autobiographical story.

Having studied the classics in the earlier part of my education in Greece, I was compelled already then by the vision of the tragedians, which I later sought to rediscover in the modern European lyric's preoccupations with catastrophe. The step to poststructuralism came naturally, as did the step back to German idealism and romanticism that brought me full circle: tragedy, again. As my excursion into German idealism incited my interests in the Greeks more than in the moderns and as my research into the Greeks intensified, I encountered a fundamental impasse with many of the ethicopolitical inversions, assumptions, and neutralizations that contemporary thought has helped canonize in the humanities over the recent decades: the fetishization of absence over presence, and writing over speech; the insistence on the authority of the text over the authenticity of an act; the concomitant evaporation of the political into the ethical; the false certainty that the theorist's self-reflexive retreat is the only legitimate response to the call of thinking. All these premises can only be possible if one first ends the tragic worldview, which would run counter to and upset all of them.

Tragedy as a "grave act" requires presence, speech, self-relation, and self-accountability; these modes of self-presentation involve a *public* dimension and are all necessary if our acts are to be thought of not only as responses to the singular, theologized Other of contemporary ethics but to the many others of actual political contestation. Furthermore, even my ethical obligation to the Other does not simply proceed from that Other, to whom it nonetheless remains always directed. It proceeds first and foremost from my relation to myself, from my presence to myself. Surely, the Other, Necessity, Fate, and the gods taunt me; they require me to respond. But how I respond—my ethical choice, that is—has very little to do with them and all to do with me. Even to recognize that there is another in front of me and even to grasp that I am obliged to respond to this alterity require me to have a prior ethical relation to myself. This priority holds true even if one assumes the modern notion that the self is itself split and thus always other to itself—namely, if one accepts

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Hegelian alienation as the mark of Spirit, as the process of self-objectification through which the human being attains self-consciousness, differentiating itself from the rest of the natural world; for such a division is still generated from *within* the self. It is the self who first divides itself (hence, *self*-division, *self*-split) and, in this capacity, shows itself to be unlike the other creatures who, despite encountering members of their kind, can never effect the same movement of otherness *within themselves*. Hegel's awareness of this ontological priority is shown in the fact that he returned the alienated aspect back to the self—a recuperation poststructuralist critiques have found totalizing and oppressive to the nonidentical.

Can I live with myself if I do such and such? This is the question from where all responsibility begins. This is why even though Antigone and Ismene share very similar sociocultural environments (they are of the same family and social standing and have been raised with the same moral values) and even though they are both confronted by the same Other (the corpse of Polyneices), they act in radically different ways, because each has a different relation to herself and to her own limits. Can I live with myself—that is, can I be *present to myself* in my decision? This is the essential question that the profoundly moral being, however, hardly ever needs to ask; in other words, it hardly needs to other itself before answering it. Recall that Antigone never poses it, as she never divides herself before deciding. Her decision is immediate: she would have always buried that brother, no questions asked. Thus, to extrapolate from this rather heuristic question a process of self-objectification that amounts to an absolute split and an irreducible otherness of the human being from itself is at best a theoretical overstatement. Tragedy, in contrast, understands that self and other, presence and decision, necessity and freedom pose for us real and worldly problems that require philosophical agon and urgent answers, not linguistic games and hyperbolic constructs that make the world appear and disappear with a sleight of hand. Hence, my title, *Tragically Speaking*, emphasizes exactly this importance of speech as self-presence and responsibility (as in tragic theater) for any effective criticism of the rationalizing and solipsistic impulses of the theoretical endeavor.

It goes without saying that such a project of trying to engage what has repetitively been deemed as irrecuperable must face realistically not only its limits but its very "impossibility," as the contemporary theoretical vocabulary would say. It is not hard to see that the impossibility of writing tragedy in the modern world can extend equally to the impossibility of writing *about*

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tragedy. To begin to write on tragedy may itself now belong to the sphere of farce. Yet like many others, I too have found the call of tragedy so irresistible as to risk this repetition. *Tragically Speaking* is the speaking of this repetition; and in many ways, this is a book about repetition. It is also, however, a book written from a certain theoretical dislocation, a being-out-of-step with one's time, affirming something that has actually been made a moral taboo in the modern world, the more it is given lip service in political speeches and popular opinion alike: freedom. By no means do I refer to this commodity that the West has been exporting violently everywhere in its "free markets"—this ugly economic and supposedly democratic correlative of the philosophical egoism of free will. Rather, I remain captivated by another kind of freedom—invisible, unnameable, and even censored in the present language of perfect submission, but not necessarily inexistent.

Tragedy has been the stage where I have encountered it at its subtlest but most enduring form, for tragedy shows freedom neither as licentious play nor as the sure success of the all-mastering, rational human will. Tragic freedom, always in tension with the overwhelming order of things, comes not as a cheap reward but as a constant responsibility most likely accompanied by loss. It appears never as an optional choice but as an ineluctable necessity: one simply *has to*. The question is what one *does* with this "has to." Though external circumstance may more often than not repeat itself, tragedy illuminates the subtle differences in each individual's response to life's unalterable predicament. William McCollom writes, "Choice is at the heart of tragedy. Any philosophy which denies the reality of the self or of its activity, including its choices, destroys at the same time a necessary basis of tragedy" (4). This book is concerned with such theoretical efforts, both deliberate and unwitting, to efface the necessity of tragedy (and thus of freedom) and to do so ostensibly in the service of an ethical agenda: unfastening ethics from its traditionally individualist and allegedly violent entanglements with the categories of the self and choice. Needless to say, the theoretical imperative behind this revaluation assumes a particular notion of the self as always being selfish and of choice as always meaning control—notions that could not be further from the tragic universe. In so destabilizing subjectivity qua selfhood, this new ethics inadvertently destabilizes the field of responsibility as well: if there is no choice, there is also no consequence. Human meaninglessness is affirmed no more with tragic regret but with a nonchalance that can only be afforded by theoretical distance.

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Thus, this book is also a departure from the lessons learned of my own theoretical education, into a territory yet uncharted—one that cannot be mapped within the Occidental (the European or American) theoretical perspective any more than it can be restricted within the Oriental parameters Hölderlin and others rushed to ascribe to it. This ancient terrain beckons us but remains strange as well—something of a historical enigma, the site of a peculiar harmony and a terrible contestation at once: the harmony and contestation between absolute and contingent, infinite and finite, God and mortal, blood and word, fate and freedom, Orient and Occident, philosophy and art. In relation to this balanced strife and the striving toward balance, let us recall H. D. F. Kitto's understanding of the function of the golden mean in Greek culture:

> The doctrine of the Mean is characteristically Greek, but it should not tempt us to think that the Greek was one who was hardly aware of the passions, a safe, anaesthetic, middle-of-the-road man. On the contrary, he valued the Mean so highly because he was prone to the extremes. . . . He sought control and balance because he needed them; he knew the extremes only too well. When he spoke of the Mean, the thought of the tuned string was never far from his mind. The Mean did not imply the absence of tension and lack of passion, but the correct tension which gives out the true and clear note. (252)

Greek balance is not anodyne any more than the extremes it tries to bridge obey a neat hierarchy: the opposing extremes are *both* equally important, just as the balance and strife that alternately regulate them are themselves equally important. It is from these fragile but miraculously held complementarities—*and not from hierarchical binaries*—that tragedy sprang, and it is to the perpetual recalibration of these opposing forces that tragic experience always points. Tragedy speaks these oppositions despite all philosophical attempts to silence it, and it has spoken them in different languages and different forms, though its exclusive expression remains Attic drama: it speaks them in the decisions of individuals and groups to resist in the face of total annihilation, in acts of love and sacrifice, but also in the fury of revenge, the fit of jealousy, and the plight of any exile to find a land to die. It speaks them despite the fact that official thought may deem these experiences inadmissible for being too "empirically" contingent, too "anthropological," and not sufficiently philosophical, thus calling into question their symbolic efficacy and even their historical legitimacy.

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True enough, repetition is not only sameness but difference as well: nothing recurs exactly the same way. Time takes care of that, and we do not step in the same river twice. However, difference does not eliminate the persistence of that something that keeps reappearing, returning, piercing through. The question of the tragic has been one of these around which modernity has critically returned to define itself in its difference from the ancients. Indeed, as I have already outlined, tragedy has offered the locus of more than a linguistic or cultural translation: it has been interpreted as the translation of ontological dispositions, of what it means to be a modern versus a Greek. But if the discourse on tragedy proves itself to be a site of repetition, it is most likely because tragedy's own structure admits first and foremost to repetition. By speaking the unavoidable, tragedy opens to eternal returns, for mortals cannot conquer the unavoidable even as they are always driven to confront it. Tragedy is the inevitability of its own repetition. To say or to think otherwise would be farce.

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