

The background of the cover is an abstract painting. It features a dense, layered composition of dark, earthy tones—browns, blacks, and greys—with prominent, expressive brushstrokes. A horizontal band of lighter, more textured material, possibly a different medium or a layer of paint, runs across the upper portion of the image, just below the title bar. The overall effect is one of depth and complexity, suggesting themes of history, memory, or the subconscious.

TRAGEDY AND THE TRAGIC

IN GERMAN LITERATURE, ART, AND THOUGHT

EDITED BY Stephen D. Dowden AND Thomas P. Quinn

*Tragedy and the Tragic in
German Literature, Art, and Thought*

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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Edited by
Stephen D. Dowden
and
Thomas P. Quinn



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In Memoriam
Jane V. Curran
1953–2011

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Acknowledgments

AFTER THE ESSAYS IN THIS BOOK were composed and assembled in near-final form, we invited a select group to read the manuscript and come to Boston to join the writers in discussion. This event, open to the public, unfolded as a three-day symposium—properly speaking, it was a *conversazione*—on tragedy and the tragic in German literature, culture, and thought. There were no academic presentations, only open discussion of the ideas in the book. Our conversation took place at the Goethe-Institut-Boston on March 13–15, 2014, and was staged collaboratively by the Center for German and European Studies at Brandeis University together with the Goethe Institut. Sabine von Mering, director of the Brandeis Center, and Detlef Gericke-Schönhagen, director of the Goethe-Institut-Boston—together with their staffs—managed the event beautifully. Thanks for the symposium are due especially to our main funders: the German American Exchange Commission and the Max Kade Foundation.

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Finally, this book is dedicated to the memory of Professor Jane V. Curran of Dalhousie University. She was to be both an editor and contributor to the volume with an essay on Schiller. Her presence is sorely missed.

Introduction: The Pursuit of Unhappiness

Stephen D. Dowden

Ernst ist das Leben, heiter ist die Kunst.

—Schiller, Prologue, *Wallenstein*

SUFFERING AND DEATH ARE UNIVERSAL. They are the basal experience that tragic art addresses. But is tragic art in one form or another also universal? Are there times and places on which tragic thinking can have no purchase? If so, is our anti-mythic age of science and reason, of democracy and rapid technological progress an era unsuited to tragic art? The modern world is largely optimistic despite the massively destructive violence of the last century. Terrible things still happen to individuals, to families, to whole peoples. Yet when no wrong seems fully beyond prevention—an unforeseen possibility that with due diligence might have been planned for and averted—or at least beyond reconciliation, perhaps there can be no properly tragic sensibility. With the spread of democracy, literacy, interdependent trade relationships, and education, we increasingly govern our darker impulses more effectively. We empathize with others, discredit ruinous ideologies, and use our powers of reason to diminish the enticements of violence.¹ This optimism has a long history of its own. Tragedy was a specifically Greek form that hinges on the centrality of fate and destruction. But even in ancient Greece tragic art met with skepticism. Emphasizing the cool use of reason over the passions as expressed and aroused in art, Socrates and Plato took a dim view of tragedy's public influence. Tragedy lay also at a far remove from Hebrew and Christian Scripture and thought. In an act of supreme *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, God undoes Job's sufferings by rewarding him with a new wife, a new family, and riches. Christ rewards believers with the abolition of death and suffering under the sign of divine redemption.

A distant echo of this gift occurs in modern German literature, in the demonically achieved, divinely sanctioned resurrection of Faust's youth. Goethe's *Faust* does not quite abolish death, but it takes a step in that direction. Modern science has begun to treat old age and death as a fate that may become optional, a biological design flaw that may eventually be corrected by technical means: genetic modification, cloning, or some other intervention. We remain similarly optimistic about

human perfectibility in other dimensions of human experience. Our law courts and political institutions seek to rectify wrongdoing and prevent future suffering wherever possible. To take a conspicuous example, consider South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It aimed to make right the unspeakable cruelties carried out under apartheid by making peace between victims and perpetrators. It was a strategy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: mastering the past. Can such horrors be mastered? Is reconciliation possible? "To make peace," writes Susan Sontag, "is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulted and limited."² Tragic art is a species not of forgetting but of critical, future-oriented remembering. Its images and language and themes continue to haunt us long after the play or book or music is over. They can alter our consciousness and enlarge our capacity to think about and respond to suffering. In some powerful cases, not individual consciousness alone stands altered but also collective consciousness.

Yet at first the tragic mind seems despairing, fatalistic, and resigned. In Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* a choral song epitomizes the tragic outlook in this often-quoted passage: "Not to be born surpasses thought and speech. The second best is to have seen the light and then go back quickly whence we came" (ll. 1224–27). It is a gloomy, pre-Christian, un-Jewish, and unscientific outlook on life. It has resonated powerfully in the German imagination. Hölderlin takes these lines as the epigraph for book 2 of his tragic novel *Hyperion*.³ Nietzsche praises them as "the wisdom of Silenus" in sections 3, 4, 7, and 24 of *The Birth of Tragedy*. We might reasonably wonder what the point of art might be from the standpoint of so absolutely bleak a view. Why write poems or paint pictures or make music at all if suffering is certain, life is futile, and death with no afterlife the only way out? Why pursue unhappiness?

Friedrich Hölderlin, to take a concrete example, explains why. His tragic figures do not resign themselves to despair or exult romantically in death. Rather, destruction is to be integrated into a larger picture. Writing to a friend in 1798 he says he tries to "extract some benefit from things that have a destructive effect." He regards the elements of destruction as indispensable to the proper formation of his innermost self: "I must take them up into myself so that when the opportunity arises (as an artist, if that's what I want and am to become) I can place them as shadow next to my light."⁴ Tragic art does not relieve suffering or even offer consolation. Instead, art puts suffering to work in the service of understanding. It incorporates what is most painful into our lives rather than distancing it from us, purging it, letting it slip into the oblivion of repression or even genuine forgetting. Hölderlin's poem "Hälfte des Lebens" precisely enacts this tragic juxtaposition of light and shadow, joy and grief, love and death, as does, on a larger scale, his novel *Hyperion*: "The heart's wave," writes Hyperion to Bellarmin,

“would not foam up so beautifully and become spirit, if the ancient, mute rock, fate, did not stand opposed to it” (55).

To take an even simpler example, consider Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. There the accent falls on love, not on death, as it does even in the darkest moments of *King Lear*. Lear rages against the heavens with Cordelia dead in his arms. In both plays, death discloses love as urgent and vivid. Grief is love turned inside out and upside down. The dark and the light are—intractably, irreconcilably, tragically—intertwined. Still, tragic art does not preach submission to fate. The opposite is true. Antigone never submits. Flawed, doomed, old and weak as he is, Lear submits to nothing. It is in such ironic glimpses into freedom of spirit that tragic art reaches its decisive and most pleasurable expression. In the famous Tenth Letter of his *Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritikismus* (1795), Schelling observes that Greek tragedy honors human freedom by having its heroes defy their fates’ crushing power, what he calls “die Übermacht des Schicksals.”⁵ Tragedy explores human possibilities critically and does not flinch from the darkest ones. Rather, it submits them to a dialectical or ironic reversal. As George Steiner puts it, tragic defeat “crystallizes” human freedom in art.⁶ The tragic work of art is a crystal formed under the intense pressure of human suffering. Consequently, we experience such diamond-hard moments of insight, tragic insight, as moments of beauty and exhilaration. A pleasurable feeling arises out of the paradoxical affirmation that has occurred. “All art,” wrote Schiller—and he meant especially tragic art—“is dedicated to pleasure, and there can be no higher and worthier end than to make men happy.”⁷ Art, an as-if form of recollection, invention, and reflection, can transform even the darkest experience into a *promesse de bonheur*. “Broadly speaking,” observes Nietzsche in his late notebooks, “a preference for questionable and terrifying things is a symptom of strength; while a taste for the pretty and dainty belongs to the weak and delicate. Pleasure in tragedy belongs to strong ages and natures.”⁸ Plays such as *Lear* and *Woyzeck* offer this kind of pleasure, but so also do paintings by Kiefer, music by Schoenberg, stories by Kafka.

I

This book comprises a set of essays that explore the meanings of “the tragic” within the context of German artistic and intellectual life. It is not a survey and does not aim, so to speak, to cover the topic. It presumes a grasp of the history of tragedy and the tragic as presented, for example, in Blackwell’s *A Companion to Tragedy*.⁹ Rather than produce another companionable overview that condenses the received wisdom, the editors invited the essayists in this volume to press hard on the individual artworks and writings that strike them as challenging and problematical, revealing

or intriguing. Tragedy is of course familiar as an academic topic, and intellectual detachment has valuable uses. But if tragedy means understanding the world from the standpoint of suffering, ultimately tragedy and the tragic derive their urgency from lived experience. Experience is singular and must be lived individually, not generically. In the best cases, art can express experience in such a way as to make it available to reflection.

Throughout we have attempted to hold fast to the lived singularity of experience as a point of orientation, as any study of tragic thought in the German context must. The Shoah looms on its historical, artistic, and intellectual horizon as nowhere else. Adorno once objected that the Shoah reduced the humanistic pursuits of poetry and criticism to “Geschwätz,” highbrow chitchat.¹⁰ It is a danger to be borne in mind. But art must have a role in making such experience accessible to thought. Adorno’s provocation is best taken as an enjoinder to keep art and intellect in close touch with experience, not to abandon criticism or art altogether. Does it make sense to speak of “tragedy” or “the tragic” when speaking of an event as massively horrific as the Holocaust? Surely true suffering exceeds the reach of mere art. As Stalin said, the death of a single person is tragic, but the death of a million is just a statistic. There is a disturbing counter-logic to his view. Without art and criticism to make them visible, to give them life and meaning, mere facts fade into insignificance. “Reality does not exist as such,” observed Paul Celan. “Reality needs to be sought and achieved.”¹¹

II

“The thread of tradition is broken,” said Hannah Arendt, “and we must discover the past for ourselves—that is, read its authors as if nobody has ever read them before.”¹² This is good advice. It is striking that an ancient form of theater should continue to exert so powerful a hold on the modern mind, whether in scholarly study or everyday speech. No doubt its grip on our imagination stems from the historical fact that Attic Greek poets compelled an elemental experience into expressive form with such exemplary success. So it has happened that “tragedy” persists in common speech to refer to any experience so catastrophic and irreversible that lesser words would seem a betrayal. To say that this traffic accident or that murder is “tragic” confers moral dignity and meaning on suffering, loss, and their aftermath. It stakes out a belief that this terrible event is to be remembered and honored as a matter of momentous importance. So the commonness of this way of talking in no way diminishes our concept of “the tragic.” Instead, it simply demonstrates tragedy’s compelling reach and power. It also suggests that we still need to understand more fully and critically what we are talking about when we use this language to speak about experience. It is in any

case clear that tragedy and the tragic are no longer strictly a matter of the theater and have not been for a long time. Like freedom, beauty, justice, or any such fundamental experience, tragedy will remain an elusive concept, but also one we will always seek to close in on.

The contributors to this volume close in from a variety of disciplines. The conventions of university life might make it seem logical to divide the book into sections that reflect the academy's established cubicles: a segment on tragedy in literature, another on philosophy, one on politics and history, a fourth on tragedy in the arts. Indisputable satisfactions attend such clarity of disciplinary bounds and responsibilities. However, we proceed instead by a roughly chronological rather than disciplinary order in the conviction that literature, philosophy, history, politics, and the arts intermingle productively when seeking to understand tragedy and the tragic. They are so blended that to separate them out into discrete units would mask something crucial: namely, that tragic experience precedes our disciplinary structures. To parse out the tragic according to academic departments may be more or less inevitable—as in the Indian fable of the blind men and the elephant—but this limitation needn't be reified and presented as an intellectual virtue in the book's structure. Consequently, we have not arranged these essays as a set of discrete standpoints from distinct disciplines. Rather, the organization encourages a holistic view, one that dissolves boundaries between disciplines rather than asserting their autonomy.

III

Himself a great dissolver of boundaries, Goethe presents an intriguing problem for tragic thought. Three essays in this collection concern themselves directly with him. According to the title Goethe gives his central work, *Faust* is “eine Tragödie.” Yet he also claims to have shied away from tragedy and the tragic in all his writings. How are we to understand Goethe's reluctance to embrace the tragic alongside his claim that *Faust* is a tragedy? Joseph Lawrence argues that Goethe displaces tragic knowledge from the protagonist, whose flaws are merely individual, onto modernity as a structured way of seeing the world, an outlook whose tragic character has been repressed. In the original *Faust* chapbook, the devil drags sinful Faust to hell, leaving behind blood and brains on the walls, a villain justly punished. In Goethe's version, Gretchen descends on a pink cloud and redeems Faust, averting a tragic ending in the usual sense. Faust's rejuvenation occurs in a way that foreshadows the renewal of life under the modern paradigm of science and technology. Faust is full of plans and projects for the future, but he is ungrateful for his power. Old and blind and apparently oblivious to the cost in human suffering of his varied achievements, Faust—in the end a civil engineer and real-estate

developer—hears the sound of shovels scraping and clinking in the dirt. He thinks it is the noise of men at work on his land reclamation project. Actually he is hearing the sound of his grave being dug. Faust's blindness is the blindness and forgetfulness of modernity. He has forgotten Gretchen and is blind to the true costs of progress, blind even to his own destruction, and unable to see with proper gratitude the ultimate source of his creativity. Greedily, he burns out the elderly couple who are (as the saying goes) standing in the way of progress. He confiscates their land, as Mephisto remarks, much as King Ahab disposes of the inconvenient Naboth. The biblical vintner was stoned to death so that Ahab could have his vineyard. Goethe's Faust has grown similarly cruel and callous. His final redemption is ironically tragic insofar as Faust remains blind to and ungrateful for the gift of redemption that has come his way.

Consequently, Lawrence describes Faust's redemption as a Goethean jest. His view may coincide with Goethe's own. Writing to Wilhelm von Humboldt, Goethe described *Faust II* as a set of "sehr ernste Scherze."¹³ One of these "Scherze" must be this (unfunny) joke from part I: when Faust's father dispenses medicine to cure plague victims, his medication turns out to be toxic and kills them instead. Faust repeats the blunder when he overdoses Gretchen's mother on sleeping drops and she dies. Another strange joke: in old age Faust has evidently forgotten his wager with Mephisto. Or again: Faust's vaunted refusal to linger and embrace the passing moment turns out to be a curse instead of a blessing. Here Lawrence's reading of *Faust* swerves close to Max Weber's 1917 reading of Tolstoy, according to which modern life is lived along a linear path that advances infinitely and without pause, never lingering to embrace the moment. For Aristotle, a tragedy must be a completed action, but our lives—modern lives—are never completed actions. Unlike the ancients or inhabitants of the medieval world, we moderns find ourselves inserted into a linear process that enriches life with new ideas, problems, inventions, knowledge, and desires but also can have no final resting point, no completion. The tragic bind is Faustian: "Ich tauml' von Begierde zu Genuß / Und im Genuß verschmacht' ich nach Begierde" (*Faust I*, line 3249). There can be no final satisfaction or conclusion.

As a result we may well be exhausted at the end—worn down by care as Faust was—but not fulfilled, at least not in the sense that the biblical Abraham could die contentedly, having finished a life that was whole and complete: "Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people."¹⁴ Modern life, says Weber, can only be stopped in its tracks, never finished: "For the man caught up in the chain of progress always has a further step in front of him; no one about to die can reach the pinnacle, for that lies beyond him in infinity."¹⁵ This Faustian structure of modernity can be described as tragic.

The inability or refusal to linger is linked to the theme that dominates Goethe's late works: *Entsagung*—renunciation or abstinence. Does a tragic outlook renounce the pursuit of happiness? Does the pursuit of happiness entail a refusal to countenance tragic suffering? The answers to these questions have complex nuances and points of overlap. Thomas Quinn interrogates Goethe's fine-grained exploration of these complexities in *The Elective Affinities* (1809). Goethe's conciliatory nature certainly had a bearing on his characteristic forbearance toward depicting violence and death. He was reluctant to drive dark situations to the horrific extremes of Greek tragedy. Still, the drowning death of baby Otto, followed by Ottilie's penitential death by self-starvation, followed by Eduard's grief-stricken reprise of her death, are horrifying enough. The cool equanimity of Goethe's prose style and the starchy manners of his protagonists keep these dark events at something of an untragic distance. Yet, Goethean detachment notwithstanding, the question of tragedy and the tragic emerges with urgent clarity. Goethe himself was not known for his renunciations (though the heroic restraint of his passion for Frau von Stein seems a notable exception). He largely indulged himself in life's carnal pleasures, especially women and wine, and he did so with insatiable gusto into old age. He was not much given to feelings of guilt.

Forgetting came easy to Goethe. He had no trouble forgetting Friederike Brion, much to her disadvantage in life, as Helmut Walser Smith emphasizes in his contribution to this collection. Late in life, Goethe reflected on his talent for amnesia in a letter to Zelter: "I have always known how to treasure, use, and intensify this sublime divine gift."¹⁶ Was he as blind as Faust to the suffering that his way of life imposed on others—for example on his wife Christiane? Living as his mistress and then his wife was not easy for her in gossipy, snobbish Weimar. Despite his unconventional ways, Goethe was known also as a man who set great store by civility, its protocols, ceremonies, and codes. Established forms give shape to feelings that must otherwise go undefined and unexpressed and so escape reflection. They transmute feeling into action—for example, public rituals of grief and shared mourning. As the assistant puts it in *Elective Affinities*, "the highest excellence in man is without form and one should beware of giving it form other than that of the noble deed."¹⁷ Consciously and actively to renounce someone or something is also a deed, one that can be positive or negative, noble or ignoble. In May and June of 1816 Goethe declined to visit his wife in the last days of her life. He did not attend the graveside ceremony after she died, and he did not go to her memorial service either. His omissions—were they active renunciations?—are both strange and hard to interpret. Did he flinch from his wife's terrible death, from her tragic life? Did he renounce her? Was he unable to renounce her as a living presence in his life?

In *The Elective Affinities* Goethe unflinchingly explores the tragic implications of renouncing and of not renouncing, though with no trace of narratorial moralizing one way or the other. His standpoint is almost clinical in its impartiality. Charlotte and the Captain are paragons of conformist renunciation, yet their civilized self-control brings them no joy. Though alive to erotic pleasure, Eduard and Ottilie never manage to achieve happiness either. Their love for each other leads only to an overwrought renunciation that ends in death for them both. As conciliatory as Goethe may have thought himself to be, he offers his protagonists in this novel no happiness, no fulfillment, no sanctuary. In his essay on Goethe in these pages, Thomas Quinn links Goethe's emphasis on renunciation (*Entsagung*) to Freud's concept of discontent (*Unbehagen*) in civilization as explicated in his late work *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). The world is tragic when the fulfillment of desire leads to chaos or destruction and when renouncing desire leads to order only at the price of *Unbehagen*: discontent, unhappiness, disenchantment.

Goethe led a charmed life in most ways. Georg Büchner did not. Helmut Walser Smith notes that Georg Büchner's life experience—close friends were arrested, tortured, and executed for political views and activities he shared with them—gave him an unmediated sense of fear and suffering that Goethe did not know firsthand. Goethe did know cases of young women executed for infanticide, as Smith points out, yet the victims and their mothers came from a social class that was not yet fully available to the imagination. Literary representation had not yet integrated them into its picture of the world. More than anyone else in his time, Büchner enlarged and corrected the world-picture. In his fragmentary *Woyzeck* (1836/37), he gives compelling form to figures from the German underclass. Unlike Goethe's Gretchen and Ottilie—nice, middle-class girls—Büchner's Marie and her lovers belong to the lowest stratum of German society. Their world is one of radical confinement, and Smith gives exact details of the historical and political circumstances of their predicament. *Woyzeck* and Marie are caged. Almost every avenue of transcendence is closed to them. They have no access to social, political, intellectual or even religious release. The tiny bit of freedom open to them is erotic love. The Drum Major's virile sexuality draws Marie's love away from *Woyzeck*. Sick with grief, he tumbles into the well of loneliness and sinks like a rock to the bottom. The final, abject expression of his unfreedom is violence turned against Marie and then himself. Though commonplace (Büchner based his drama on three separate incidents of this sort), murder in such situations is obviously not inevitable. Milieu is not destiny. In life, such deaths are only cruel and senseless misery, not fate. As Schiller puts it in the prologue to *Wallenstein*: "Ernst ist das Leben." Life is one thing; art is another. In art, a violent denouement gives tragic form and meaning—and thereby even creates a feeling of

pleasure—to otherwise senseless cruelty. Tragic art throws a critical light that illuminates the circumstances that have led to a brutal death. The light, not the violence, is what gives pleasure. Life is serious, but art is festively pleasurable: “heiter ist die Kunst.” As art-insight, tragedy itself becomes an avenue of transcendence and thus also of the sunny pleasure we associate with understanding.

My contribution to this collection also concerns tragic art as an avenue of transcendence. The tragic powerlessness of Woyzeck and Marie finds a correlative in the plight of African-American slaves after they were emancipated in 1865. German philosophers, artists, and intellectuals have traditionally shown a powerful commitment to tragic art, and their thought can be fruitfully brought to bear on a uniquely African-American art form: the blues. Woyzeck’s tragedy is specifically a tragedy of erotic love, and in this it resembles any number of blues ballads. The theme of tragic love is obviously very old. But in the post-Enlightenment world, erotic love took on a new and unprecedented vehemence in novels, operas, poetry, and drama. The conspicuous ascendance of love stories in the nineteenth century stems partly from the rise of educated women readers with leisure time to reflect on matters of importance to them, but no doubt too from the shared sense that modern life had become more and more rationalized, secularized, bureaucratized, scientifically dispirited and disenchanting. Erotic love was a last stronghold of daemonic enchantment.

Heinrich Heine puts his finger on this elusive historical experience with easy exactitude:

Und alles schaut so grämlich trübe,
so krausverwirrt und morsch und kalt,
und wäre nicht das bißchen Liebe,
so gäb es nirgends einen Halt.¹⁸

Certainly this rings true for Woyzeck and Marie. Love is their only tenuous grip on the good life. And it is also true for African-American blues culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The blues’ most central theme is the daemonic force of erotic love, its mingled pleasures and dangers. The other common themes—money troubles, work, leaving town, train travel, jail, being black in a white world—usually find their way back to the central concern, which is eros. “The principal theme of the country blues, and probably of all blues, is the sexual relationship. . . . Most frequently the core of the relationship is seen as inherently unstable, transient but with infinite scope for pleasure and exaltation in success, or pain and torment in failure.”¹⁹ As in Büchner, the blues tradition’s focus on erotic love differs from the sentimental idealization of romantic love that then prevailed and still prevails in most popular culture. As Angela Davis puts it, “the historical African-American vision of individual sexual love

linked it inextricably with the possibilities of social freedom in the economic and political realms.”²⁰ To put it more simply: in the blues, erotic love expresses a longing for deliverance, because love is the one realm that seems to offer a taste of freedom and the promise of happiness.

Another foretaste of transcendence open to the disenfranchised is art itself: to sing the blues, to write a poem or a novel, to listen to music and dance, or see a play—these can contain an element of transcendence. As Nietzsche suggests, there is in art itself an element of freedom at work. If erotic love implies a secularized promise of redemption in the blues (this music emerged from slave spirituals), so does art—as make-believe—hold out the *promesse du bonheur*, by denouncing the merely real as one instance among many potential realities. The ability to transcend the real into the imagined and the contingent anticipates deliverance, even when the art in question delivers a tragic ending. When love is crushed, as in *Woyzeck* and as in “Delia” (the murder ballad I have selected for comparison and analysis), the work is significantly tragic, because in it erotic love is entwined with other themes of importance: justice, freedom, family, belonging, happiness, human flourishing altogether. In a French bedroom farce, little is at stake. In *Woyzeck* and in the blues, everything is at stake.

The view of tragedy my essay puts forward is that its darkness serves not a bleak view of a world that promises destruction and urges resignation, but a view that sees tragic art as a bracing illumination of our prospects within the limits of human finitude. Illumination—or specifically, *Aufklärung*—is the tie that binds Freud to classical tragedy. Wolfram Ette asks: Is there something characteristically tragic about the process of psychoanalysis? Is there something analytic about Greek tragedy, rather than strictly mythic? Does psychoanalysis build on a paradigm of enlightenment that already belonged to Greek tragedy? Ette suggests that Attic tragedy was in fact already a form of enlightening critique and not a superstitious ritual enactment of some divinely ordained, unopposable fate. Fate can be opposed, and in classical tragedy there are always—contrary to Aristotle—alternatives open for human intervention and action. Oedipus, for example, passes over reasonable opportunities to alter the outcome of his own story. Yet he represses what he knows about himself and his life. In the *Oresteia* we see Orestes reflect and consciously decide he must kill his mother. We see too that people who reason together and bond for the good of all can challenge fate. Moreover, the chorus structurally embodies the concept of reflection and critical distance.

Ette wonders whether or not psychoanalysis, both as theory and therapy, presents fate-like processes in such a way that they can be submitted to critique and so be made accessible to reasoned intervention. If so, are the means by which this critique is carried out in any way comparable to tragedy? They are, he argues, emphasizing the resemblance of

fate to the unconscious. It is worth noting that this identity is implicit in Freud's language. A crucial essay of 1915 is known in English as "The Drives and their Vicissitudes." In German the essay is called "Die Triebe und Tribschicksale": the "drives" and "drive-fates." The instincts that drive us with the force of fate are those at work on an unconscious level. Similarly, the tragedy of Oedipus is the story of a man becoming enlightened about things he urgently needs to know. Psychoanalysis brings repressed conflicts to consciousness so that they can be faced and dealt with directly. A tragedy does not enact a preordained ritual destruction—the outcome of Orestes's tragedy is happy—instead, the public ritual of tragic drama serves the process of enlightenment and the possibility of remedial action. Analysis and tragedy have in common a hope of healing by raising to conscious reflection the mechanism of a compulsion that we have caused and that dominates us without our knowledge.

Ette concludes with comments on Schopenhauer, for whom tragedy stages resignation, and on Walter Benjamin, who distinguishes between ancient tragedy and modern *Trauerspiele*. In his explication of Benjamin's view and its sources, James McFarland illuminates a very dark outlook on tragedy's prospects. Benjamin views tragedy in terms of his fundamental orientation toward a modernity characterized by rupture, discontinuity, hiatus, and death. Unlike Nietzsche, who views tragedy as a renewable resource for the modern world, Benjamin thinks it to be wholly unavailable and unrenowable. Ancient tragedy is so irretrievably lost to us, according to Benjamin, that even a theory of tragedy has become impossible. In a world stripped of divine grace and transcendence, Benjamin can offer no theory of tragedy, only a set of viewpoints.

For Benjamin, tragedy remains an essentially moral phenomenon tied to death, not a psychological one (as for the liberal intellectuals of his day) or an aesthetic one (as he viewed Nietzsche's understanding) or a defining, ahistorical moment of existential heroism (as in Georg Lukács). Benjamin's account hinges on messianic time, which is to say, the end of time at its fulfillment (in contrast to linear, Faustian time). Seen from the perspective of ultimate redemption, the tragic hero's death enacts the fate of all mortals, none of whom inhabits fulfilled time. But the hero's death also has a messianic aspect. It looks forward prophetically to the abolition of death at the end of time, and a present-time social meaning insofar as it is not the hero's own insight or psychology that counts but the perspective of the audience. The audience catches a glimpse of messianic time in the hero's sacrificial death—or in the defiant hero's near death—as a primordial event in the nation's legendary history. The ancient gods who oversaw the hero's destiny are the same gods who bound the community into a whole in the then-present, in Attic time, and stood as its guarantors. Language plays a special role here. It is not practical or informative (what Benjamin thinks of

as “bourgeois” language), but poetic in a radical sense. From Hölderlin, Benjamin adopts and adapts a view of tragedy as the unique constellation of words that, by disrupting ordinary usage, allows primal forces from beyond language to break in on human awareness.

However, all this belongs to the remote past of Greek antiquity. For Nietzsche as well as Hölderlin—they are both cheery, upbeat fellows by comparison with Walter Benjamin—the tragic mind and art of ancient Greece can potentially be transformed, renewed, and opened onto the future. In his essay here, Bruno Pieger focuses attention on *Hyperion* and the unfinished drama *Empedokles*. He carefully documents the tensions that hold together Hölderlin’s thought. He sees the poet’s struggle with the tragic not in an idealistic or harmonious dissolution of these tensions, but in the very tensions themselves. To integrate these tensions into one’s life does not make them less tragic according to Pieger, but it does make life livable. The question of Hölderlin’s relevance for today is explicit throughout the essay. According to McFarland’s contribution, Walter Benjamin’s romanticism is much darker: no renewal is possible. In the modern, secular, historical world, tragedy has degenerated into *Trauerspiel*—grief-drama. Roughly parallel to Lukács’s vision in *Theory of the Novel* (1916), which takes the modern novel to be a fallen form of the ancient epic, Benjamin’s viewpoint presents the baroque *Trauerspiel* as a ruin of antique tragedy, a degenerate modern form in which death reigns supreme; in which history rather than messianic forces define time; in which divine judgment finds no purchase; and in which art—also in forfeit of divine sanction—lacks the gravitational pull to draw its community together into a living, flourishing whole. As McFarland puts it, when placed on stage in the present, the reenactment of tragic sacrifice “no longer enjoys the retrospective confirmation of the present community but, in the moment it occurs, opens onto the future differently.” Differently indeed: the judgment of the gods seems merely arbitrary, its claim to authority groundless, the cohesion of the community just a matter of historical contingency.

According to Benjamin, the modern—which is to say, historical—world is a derelict ruin, which figures in baroque theater as a stage prop that is to be taken literally: “In the ruin, history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise, history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay.”²¹ More than any other modern event, the Shoah would seem to underscore his view. Does dwelling on the Shoah end up trivializing the significance of past events by transforming them into ideology or, worse, art? Ruins can be beautiful, as Romanticism showed, but photos depicting the ruin of Nagasaki or the devastation in Dresden or Berlin are not. Photographs of stacked corpses at Bergen-Belsen are neither beautiful nor sublime. Does such modern historical fact outstrip the power of tragic art to alter

consciousness in a positive way? Against the background of the Holocaust, Jeffrey Bernstein explores the interrelations of Franz Rosenzweig's thoughts on tragedy in the context of Jewish history and religion as they are related to those of Leo Strauss. Rosenzweig died before the Second World War, but Strauss survived well into the postwar era. Their colleague Gershom Scholem, also a survivor, wrote not about tragedy but about lamentation and its effects on language in the Jewish tradition. While the language of tragedy is related to that of lamentation, writes Bernstein, lamentation does not offer catharsis. According to Scholem, it destroys the signifying power of the word: "Lamentation is language at the point of disappearance."²² Possibly, yet perhaps not: lamentation belongs to the grieving process. Scholem may be less persuasive than Rosenzweig, whose spirit and language did not knuckle under to the horrifying disease that slowly killed him. The word never failed Rosenzweig in his own life, but he did not live to think and write about the Shoah.

Does tragic art—drama, poetry, literature, music, painting, or possibly even photography—serve as an outlet for mourning? Music provides a documentable instance. Karen Painter draws on the Mitscherlichs' thesis that after the war was over, Germans found themselves unable to mourn either their own dead or the victims of Nazi atrocities. Painter observes that *during* the war Germans were officially forbidden to mourn even their own dead. After Stalingrad, when the tide turned against Germany, the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, commonly known in English as the Nazi Party) began to oppose the commemoration and mourning of civilian losses. This prohibition consolidated, she notes, the official spin-control of National Socialist civic ideology: the dead were to be "honored" as lives sacrificed for the fatherland rather than grieved over. The death of a loved one was officially insignificant, except as an "honor." In public arts practice this meant musical programming at ceremonies was to be grand or heroic rather than tragic. Nazi leadership, Goebbels in particular, viewed music's national role as entertainment and uplift. Painter argues that concert halls formed an important venue in which this directive from above could be and was resisted, and in which public mourning could be recovered: "In so doing, music directors and others responsible for programming stood in silent defiance of Goebbels's edicts against mourning." Painter's precise documentation of local practices sheds light on the public meaning of tragic art. Classical Greek tragedy—an extinct, historical form of public art—cannot be resurrected but only invoked as a model. But maybe classical tragedy is not so much a lost possibility as a conspicuously successful historical instantiation of something, an artistic act, that in fact remains common, for example in wartime musical programming. It offers a sense of tragedy that does not celebrate heroism or redemptive sacrifice but is more linked to the work of bereavement, grief, and mourning.

Does tragedy entail a heroic outlook, a defiant embrace of death, even a love of death? Nietzsche is often misunderstood on this count. As Karsten Harries observes, Nietzsche's view of tragedy turns on love for the world, *amor mundi*, rather than a nihilistic enthusiasm for violence and death. Reading Aeschylus, Nietzsche accentuates Prometheus's love for humankind in *Prometheus Bound*: love for the human world presides over Greek tragedy, a love that concedes nothing to the dismal wisdom of Silenus but draws strength from irrational, life-affirming hope. In Christian thought, the link between reality and understanding was sanctioned by divine authority, but with the rise of reason and science—what Nietzsche calls the death of God—that thread snapped. Confidence in human agency replaced it.

Like Nietzsche, Heidegger believed that such hubristic self-confidence is misplaced, that reality exceeds the grasp of scientific thinking. But unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger does not tie tragic knowledge to a love of his fellow human beings and the world humans have created for themselves. For Heidegger, that world has become a ruin not worth saving, the “moribund semblance of a culture [that] caves in and drags all forces into confusion and lets them suffocate in madness,” as he put in his Rectorial Address of 1933.²³ Hence his pronouncement in the *Spiegel* interview of 1966: “Only a god can still save us.”²⁴ A Christian millennialism underlies Heidegger's sense that we must passively wait out divine intervention and redemption. In Harries's words, there is “no trace here of that active Promethean love of mankind that is unwilling to allow the dismal wisdom of Silenus or claims to godlike self-sufficiency muffle the many ‘blind hopes’ that still make life seem worth living. Aeschylus's *Prometheus* may be invoked by Heidegger, but the spirit of that tragedy remains distant.” Still, even for Heidegger, tragic insight into the final impotence of knowing leads not to resignation but to a surge of freedom and hope. Hence the crucial significance for him of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Tragedy liberates the individual to leave behind what has been seemingly established and accepted as common sense. It frees her to become creative, as Antigone is tragically freed. She is a very “strange” and even “terrible” girl—*deinon* for the Greeks, *unheimlich* for Heidegger—and so an embodiment of a radical authenticity. The tension between her self-assertion and the conventional order, a tension that resists reconciliation, Heidegger takes to be essential to tragedy.

In Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei's account, too, Heidegger accentuates violence and catastrophic destruction. He belongs to a tradition of thinking about tragedy that she links to the sublime in an arc that runs from Aristotle and Kant to Nietzsche and Heidegger. They endorse heroic violence and sacrificial death. In Aristotle, spectators get pleasure from the hero's catastrophic fate through catharsis. In Kant the disinterested observer of the sublime experiences painful pleasure: an inner violence

that sacrifices the imagination to reason. Nietzsche celebrates a Dionysian violence and pain that, if not disciplined by the Apollonian, must end in destruction of the subject and perhaps of human reason altogether. All of these aesthetic accounts of catastrophe or sacrifice render violence inevitable and necessary. They all recommend tragedy as a variety of cathartic pleasure, of aesthetic or existential consummation.

But Gosetti-Ferencei also identifies a rival tragic tradition stemming from Hölderlin and Walter Benjamin. This alternative view does not presuppose heroic violence and sacrificial death. She argues that their modern counter-tradition of the tragic offers a critique of tragic heroism, one that emphasizes loss and the ineffability of catastrophe. It rejects redemption through heroic sacrifice. The paintings of Baselitz and Kiefer bear out her views of this alternative tradition of tragic insight. The fracture paintings of Baselitz critique the concept of tragic heroism and sacrifice. Anselm Kiefer's indirectness and abstraction respect the immensity of his thematics: wartime destruction, suffering and, especially, the Shoah. Gosetti-Ferencei finds Kiefer's strategies of representational indirection adumbrated in Hölderlin's concept of the tragic. Hölderlin wrote of tragedy as human understanding "unter Undenkbarem wandelnd."²⁵ This strange phrase is richly polysemous. It implies that tragic art enables human understanding to stroll leisurely among imponderables or, more literally, "beneath something unthinkable." It further implies the possibility of achieving an intimate familiarity with these incomprehensibilities while at the same time allowing them to transform the understanding that lingers among them. For Hölderlin, tragedy does not provoke a pleasurable pain that comes of cathartic release or heroic sacrifice. Rather, at the outermost reach of tragic suffering there is absolute loss, a final boundary of language and artistic representation. Yet in art the unthinkable still comes into view, so to speak, even if once apprehended it does not speak directly. Gosetti-Ferencei finds this oblique, aesthetically ethical experience embodied especially in the paintings of Kiefer.

Also emphasizing the ethical, Mark W. Roche begins with an assessment of tragedy's decline as a literary genre in the narrow sense. Rather than pin tragedy to a lost traditional form, he notes patterns of its continuation in a small number of contemporary dramas. But further, Roche finds tragedy revised and continued in a form he calls "the drama of suffering"; second, tragedy also persists as parody. Parodic expressions of the tragic, though, not only mock tragedy but may also indirectly and paradoxically restate the case for tragedy. And finally he finds that tragedy has migrated into literature beyond the stage—for example, into novels and films—and also outside of literature altogether, as Dowden, Painter, and Gosetti-Ferencei also contend.

Robert Pirro takes up tragedy and the tragic in the context of narrative fiction. W. G. Sebald's storytelling is an especially rich case. His

narratives have a tragic feel, yet Sebald himself is wary of using the concept “tragic,” and he even made a case for refusing the concept altogether when applied to the Holocaust and to the monstrous suffering on all sides in the Second World War. The lived experience of suffering, and suffering as it appears retrospectively in art, are two different things. An element of self-deception compromises the artist’s attempts to look at the past, Sebald warns, “even if you redesign it in terms of tragedy, because tragedy is still a pattern of order and an attempt to give meaning to something, to a life or to a series of lives. It’s still, as it were, a positive way of looking at things. Whereas, in fact, it might just have been one damn thing after another with no sense to it at all.”²⁶ His fatalistic view of history recalls that of Walter Benjamin to the extent that the postwar world appears to him to be not “tragic” but worse: an incoherent shambles, a gutted ruin populated by ghosts who have no prospect of release. The mood of this writing is depressively melancholic, suggesting a sorrow beyond words or even beyond mourning. Yet Sebald’s narrative pursuit of unhappiness would also appear to resemble Anselm Kiefer’s painting by virtue of the strategies of indirection they share. Even if Sebald sought to withdraw from tragic meaning, to renounce it, he may not have succeeded. His fiction corresponds closely to Nietzsche’s understanding of the tragic as a union of the Dionysian and Apollonian: a reality too unbearably horrific to look at directly (the Dionysian) that is nevertheless assimilated to indirect knowledge by the ordering vision of art (the Apollonian). Moreover, Gosetti-Ferencei’s understanding of Hölderlin’s sense of the tragic applies here, too. Sebald’s narratives could be described as a poetry “unter Undenkbarem wandelnd.”

Robert Pirro examines Sebald’s imaginative achievement in the light of Hannah Arendt’s understanding of the tragic character of the Greek *polis*. In Sebald’s work Pirro finds references to historical instances of the popular aspiration to self-rule, an ambition that manifests itself in the sorts of revolutionary and independence movements that Arendt uses the language of tragedy to address, especially in *On Revolution*. Against the background of her politically inflected view of tragedy, Sebald’s own tragic politics takes on visible form, even if only in a fleeting and muted way. Barbara Hahn similarly explores the claim of tragic thought, drawn as much from Kant as from ancient Greece, that informed Arendt’s thought. Though Arendt never consolidated her views into a theory of tragic art, her repeated and emphatic recourse to the language of tragedy demonstrates its importance to her view of history and politics as much as art. From Kant she takes the thought that wherever pride and human dignity prevail, “it is tragedy rather than absurdity which is taken to be the hallmark of human existence. Its greatest representative is Kant. . . .”²⁷ In this spirit Arendt rejects postwar German attempts at mastering or overcoming the past—*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—in her Lessing Prize

speech in 1959. “We can no more master the past than we can undo it,” writes Arendt. “But we can cope with it. The form this coping takes is the lamentation that arises from all memory.”²⁸ Like Sebald, she rejects the thought that meaning is intrinsic in historical events. Meaning must be created, by lamentation for example, or by tragedy. Writing about William Faulkner’s tale of the First World War, *A Fable*, she invokes tragic pleasure as a way of enabling acceptance of the fact that such a war could ever have happened at all. “I deliberately mention tragedy,” she writes, “because it more than other literary forms represents a process of recognition” (*einen Erkennungsprozess*),²⁹ which is to say: a process of enlightenment.

A crucial thought linking the essays in this volume into a whole is this: there is in tragedy—and in tragic art of all sorts—an underlying cognitive and ethical imperative at work. As art, tragedy is one of the essential formulations of human experience, bringing to first expression the unrecognized or, in some cases, unbearable truths of lived experience. In his study of tragedy, *Of Germans and Other Greeks*, Dennis J. Schmidt contends that tragic art “nourishes an ethical sensibility that is crucial for the formulation of an ethics and politics responsive to contemporary life.”³⁰ This metaphor of “nourishing” is apt. Even at its bleakest, tragic art feeds and sustains the spirit, enables rather than demoralizes, illuminates rather than darkens. This is why for Schiller and for Nietzsche the word “heiter” accurately captures the spirit of tragic art.

Does comedy have the same cognitive force that tragedy does? Felicitas Hoppe—whose contribution came as a speech delivered to the contributors of this volume and other guests at a colloquium on the German tragic in March 2014—suggests that this question needs exploration. “That we continue to insist on tragic love, tragic accidents, illnesses and deaths—that we always talk about tragic but never comic fates—probably comes down to the fact that we ascribe to tragedy alone and not to comedy the power of conferring meaning.” Tragedies frequently have comic elements, and even very dark works of modern literature are often funny. But how can art be both dark and light at the same time? In his coda to this collection of essays, Thomas Quinn draws on the thought of Theodor Adorno to turn a light on the fundamental paradox—the negative dialectic—of tragic art and the fundamental paradox of modern German art. In any book about tragedy and the tragic in the German world, the absolute darkness of the Shoah has to be central. Adorno’s most famous, most notorious comment about modern art was that, after Auschwitz, the writing of poetry must become impossible. As Quinn observes, “Adorno’s dictum about writing poetry after Auschwitz was hardly meant as a ‘thou shalt never write poetry again’ but rather as a ‘thou shalt write poetry as never before.’” Poetry that evades truth and reality is not really poetry at all by this standard, which is why the problem of kitsch becomes important in the twentieth century, not as a

question of merely good or bad taste but as a more fundamental question of how art relates to life ethically. It is a question of what good art might do anyone, or what harm—the harm, for example, of writing German poetry as if the Holocaust had never happened and consequently living as if it meant nothing more than an operational accident of history, a glitch that occurred somewhere else a long time ago but doesn't really affect us now. The good that poetry might do is the good of giving voice to unique and specific experiences and thereby making them accessible and intelligible without reifying them into universal scientific or philosophical truths. Art can go places and do things that science and philosophy cannot. The poetry of love is the classic example, but by the same token there must also be a poetry of suffering, and this would be tragic poetry.

Yet plainly a danger lurks here, too. Suffering might be aestheticized, turned into kitsch. By now the phenomenon of Holocaust kitsch has become familiar. Perhaps it would be best for the most cruel experiences of history to be met with humbled silence rather than risk reducing, or sentimentalizing, or otherwise falsifying them as kitsch. Yet, as Quinn points out, if poetry were to remain silent, barbarism would have the last word. To ignore the negative would be immoral. To see it only in a despairing light would be equally intolerable. Suffering must be properly respected with truthful expression, even if such expression carries a risk. Seeing the world for what it is requires “taking a stand and adopting a standpoint,” says Quinn, “a point from which one can speak of good or evil, hope or despair, dreams or nightmares.” Tragic art shines a light into very dark experience, shows it for what it is: “this light does not have the strength to prevent the tragedy, because the time of the tragedy portrayed is the past—and the past cannot be changed. But this light is utopian, it shines from another time and another place, a time and place no more or less real than our imagination.” This utopian standpoint is that of redemption, or rather of the need for redemption, which implies its existence.

Strikingly, Quinn addresses Adorno's book of aphorisms and anecdotes *Minima Moralia* as his most tragic work. Among other comments in it, Quinn singles out this one: “Liebe ist die Fähigkeit, Ähnliches an Unähnlichem wahrzunehmen.”³¹ Love is the ability to perceive like in unlike, a critical gift. Adorno was no romantic opponent of critical reason, but here he attributes a critical capacity also to love. Even in the most hard-nosed critique there remains a defining splinter of the irrational, but it is not an impurity to be expunged. It is instead a constitutive feature without which critique would be a reified monstrosity, distant from life, self-satisfied academism. It is through this crack in the most rigorous intellectuality that a messianic light shines, recalling perhaps the “inextinguishable light” that breaks through through the door in the Türhüterlegende of Kafka's *Der Process*. As Adorno writes elsewhere,

“there is hope in Kafka’s work, it is in those extremes rather than in the milder phases: in the capacity to stand up to the worst by making it into language.”³² Tragic art transmutes the worst into language, music, art, and poetry and so stands up to it.

Notes

¹ So argues Steven Pinker in his *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), 115.

³ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion, or, the Hermit in Greece*, trans. Ross Benjamin (Brooklyn: Archipelago, 2008), 123.

⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Adler and Charlie Louth (London: Penguin, 2009), 109. Letter of November 12, 1798, to Christian Ludwig Neuffer. Translation amended.

⁵ F. W. J. Schelling, *Schellings philosophische Schriften, erster Band* (Landshut: Philipp Krüll, 1809), 192.

⁶ George Steiner, *Antigones: How the Antigone Legend Has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 3.

⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *The Bride of Messina, and “On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy,”* trans. Adam Lodge (London: Dodo, 2007), 92.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), 450.

⁹ Rebecca W. Bushnell, ed., *A Companion to Tragedy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,” in *Prismen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1997), 30.

¹¹ Paul Celan, “Antwort auf eine Umfrage der Librairie Flinker, Paris, 1958,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 168. All translations in this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹² Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 204.

¹³ “Ganz ohne Frage würd es mir unendliche Freude machen, meinen werten, durchaus dankbar anerkannten, weit verteilten Freunden auch bei Lebzeiten diese sehr ernststen Scherze zu widmen, mitzuteilen und ihre Erwiderung zu vernehmen. Der Tag aber ist wirklich so absurd und konfus, daß ich mich überzeuge, meine redlichen, lange verfolgten Bemühungen um dieses seltsame Gebäu würden schlecht belohnt und an den Strand getrieben, wie ein Wrack in Trümmern daliegen und von dem Düenschutt der Stunden zunächst überschüttet werden.” Letter of March 17, 1832 in Goethe, *Briefe* (Munich: Hanser, 1958), 1163.

¹⁴ Genesis 25:8 (KJV).

¹⁵ Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David S. Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 13.

¹⁶ “Diese hohe Gottesgabe habe ich von jeher zu schätzen, zu nützen und zu steigern gewußt” (Goethe, *Briefe*, 1095).

¹⁷ Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971), 206.

¹⁸ Heinrich Heine, *Buch der Lieder*, Die Heimkehr, no. 39. Cf. Theodor Adorno, “Toward a Reappraisal of Heine,” in *Vermischte Schriften*, pt. 2 of vol. 20, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 447.

¹⁹ Giles Oakley, *The Devil’s Music: A History of the Blues*, updated ed. (New York: Da Capo, 2003), 55.

²⁰ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 10.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 2009), 177–78.

²² Gershom Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem—1913–1919*, ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 216.

²³ Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University,” trans. Lisa Harries, in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, ed. Günther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 13.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten,” interview with Rudolf Augstein and Georg Wolff, September 23, 1966; first published in 1976 in *Der Spiegel*, May 31, 1976, 193–219.

²⁵ J. Ch. F. Hölderlin, “Anmerkungen zu Antigona,” *Theoretische Schriften*, ed. Johann Kreuzer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), 103.

²⁶ Sebald, in an interview by Eleanor Wachtel in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories, 2007), 57–58.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 361.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” in *Men in Dark Times*, trans. Clara Winston and Richard Winston (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 21. Translation amended.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁰ Dennis J. Schmidt, *Of Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001), 3.

³¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 191. Translation amended.

³² Theodor Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Sherry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 254.

1: The Confinement of Tragedy: Between *Urfaust* and *Woyzeck*

Helmut Walser Smith

IN THE DEATH OF TRAGEDY we read that George Steiner considered Goethe's composition of *Urfaust* to be the moment when German literature nearly embraced the full force of the tragic but then stepped back from its implications. This essay will follow Steiner's insight and ask why the tragic was not, circa 1772, fully embraced. Steiner had already argued that the coming together of creative genius and a historical setting propitious for tragedy is an altogether rare occurrence.¹ Others, like Erich Heller, have seen the problem in a complete lack of any tradition that would have allowed Goethe to look more insistently at the problem of evil.² Some critics, such as Nicholas Boyle, see in Goethe's pulling back a psychological necessity: the great poet needed to develop other aspects of his creative genius.³ And many scholars have suggested that the truly tragic was incompatible with Goethe's optimistic, universal character. No doubt there is considerable truth in each of these interpretations. Yet they emphasize Goethe's personality traits at the cost of concentration on the vast social and historical changes surrounding the years 1772 to 1775, when *Urfaust* was written, and focus on genre considerations to the exclusion of an analysis of the tenuous connection between intellectuals and ordinary people.

Roughly two millennia after Aristotle's assertion that "a tragedy is an imitation of personages better than the ordinary man," the question of who can be represented as tragic remained open.⁴ Precisely this openness allows us to see in *Urfaust* a rich, contradictory initial embrace of what Steiner calls the "low tragic"—one that, contrary to Aristotle, and to the *Ständeklausel* (estates clause) of Johann Christoph Gottsched, involved ordinary people as the subject of genuine tragedy. But the embrace was reluctant. *Urfaust*, it will be argued, also represented the failure to see, hear, and empathize fully with the "people" whose voice the intellectuals of *Sturm und Drang* hoped to recapture but in fact sentimentalized. To heighten contrast, the essay then takes up the moment when, according to Steiner, German drama drew closer to low tragedy: Büchner's *Woyzeck*. What separates the possibilities of

the tragic is neither genius nor genre, I contend, but a more immediate and political engagement with the people. This engagement has been commented upon before. What has escaped the notice of criticism is the degree to which the possibilities of tragedy were mediated through the possibility, real and imagined, of confinement.

I

On the steps of the Strasbourg hotel “*Zum Geist*,” Johann Gottfried Herder met an unknown writer five years his junior, the young Johann Wolfgang Goethe. There followed an intense friendship, with Herder impressing Goethe as a man of immense intellectual fermentation. Herder had been released from his tutoring duties for a sojourn in Strasbourg, where he hoped to have surgery on the tear ducts in his eye. He was, in effect, temporarily blind. After their initial meeting, Goethe regularly visited Herder in a dark room to which Herder was confined on account of a series of unsuccessful eye operations.⁵ Much of what would become essential to the new sound of German poetry and its turn to the people was first discussed in this dark, confined room.

As there was no scribe in this lightless venue, we can only imagine what Goethe and Herder said to each other. Yet in the social and personal constellations in which they exchanged ideas, and in their subsequent discussions, we can discern the context in which the parameters of the new German literature and the possibilities of low tragedy were first confronted. From Goethe’s extensive account in his autobiography, *Poetry and Truth*, we know that Herder introduced Goethe to a wide field of learning and the newest thinking in literature and aesthetics, and that Goethe was a willing satellite, a “friendly moon of the earth,” as he later wrote.⁶ The encounter, exhilarating and productive, nevertheless imposed a “hard test” on the young Goethe, as it called into question the writer’s previous sense of himself. By this time, Goethe, aged twenty-one, had written a series of inconsequential poems, which he had just consigned to the fire. Herder, however, was already a dedicated educator, a prolific if polemical writer, a prodigious reader of texts, equally at home in history, philosophy, and poetry, and a remarkable polyglot, having mastered a series of ancient and modern languages. Herder, moreover, had already achieved fame through his *Fragments on German Literature*, and he had written major works of aesthetic criticism.

In Herder’s aesthetic writings, his principal models were the English and Scottish bards. There was no road forward, as he conceived it in Strasbourg in 1770, that did not run through the British Isles—through the odes of Macpherson’s *Ossian*, the songs of Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, and the ballads strewn throughout the works of Shakespeare. The importance to Herder of the bardic tradition can

hardly be underestimated. Like Percy, Herder intended to collect “popular songs,” which he translated for the first time in 1773 as “*Volkslieder*” (from which, translated back, we have the English term “folk songs”).⁷ He also expected to find them both in print and on the streets, and intentionally blurred the familiar distinction between oral and written transmission of poetry and song. What mattered was whether a poem or song was popular in tone. Rough and unmannered songs, according to Herder, had survived with fewer foreign accretions; they reflected the wonder of a nation as it existed in childhood, not among polished nations. The nation *in nuce*, the original German way of thinking, would then guide German literature back to a path of its own, not one dictated by the fashions of France or the metrics of the classics. Hewing close to life, the new literature would reflect how ordinary people loved and feared, how they touched, saw, and heard the world around them.

In the dark room in Strasbourg, Herder and Goethe almost certainly talked about this turn to the people, their senses, and their sensibilities. The turn is newer than we sometimes suppose. The early sixteenth century saw glimmers of interest in the fourth estate, especially among humanist ethnographers like Johann Boemus, and in the etchings of the brothers Sebald and Barthel Beham. These and subsequent renderings suggest compassion, pity, sometimes moralism, but never valorization. To this general posture the eighteenth century, at least in the first two thirds of it, added only practical ideas for improvement but not a change in perspective. When travelling along the postal routes during his tour of Germany, Friedrich Nicolai, for example, reflected on how to ameliorate the miserable lot of the poor—but his view remained on high, looking down, speeding by, instructing but not walking among the people. And he certainly did not draw literary inspiration from them.⁸

By the 1770s, however, a sentimental sense of the people had begun to set in. One can see this in the form of contented, industrious peasants gathering the harvest in the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough and in the depictions of upstanding French families rendered by Jean-Baptiste Greuze. Rousseau was the fountain of this new sentimentality concerning ordinary people. Historians speculate that an “agricultural revolution,” aided by the beginnings of a general warming, also contributed to a sense that the rural population was finally winning its battle against harsh nature. In England, where artists painted yeoman farmers in an unthreatening countryside, the scales had already tipped. Circa 1750, rates of mortality, furiously volatile in earlier eras, had begun an agonizingly slow, fitful, if less-crisis-ridden, descent, so that for the first time, there was no precise correlation between mortality and the price of grain.⁹ Moreover, though malnutrition continued to plague, and caloric intakes of ordinary populations remained meager, famine, largely man-made in any case, visited the countryside less and less: in England for the last time in 1812, though

in Germany the last crises of the “ancient type” struck later—in 1816, 1831–32, and 1847/48. Telling, too, was the increase in population. Both England and the German lands evinced growth rates of between seven and eight people per thousand per annum in the years between 1750 and 1800, leading into a nineteenth century of still more spectacular growth. Spurred by rational agricultural techniques and higher prices for agricultural products, the initial population increase was achieved by a combination of increased fertility and declining mortality.¹⁰

The result, as the historian Wolfgang Hardtwig has suggested, was the coming to a close of a strict division in Europe between the prosperous civilization of the cities and the raw fight for subsistence that characterized the countryside.¹¹ And in fact, the Herderian cultivation of this rawness may be seen as nostalgic—possible only when the rural life and death struggle eased. For the first time, the citizens of cities could imagine their compatriots in the countryside as belonging to the same cultural universe, as kith and kin.

The revolutionary thrust of this elementary, if still hesitant, shift in mentalities cannot be stressed enough. In 1800, only 10 percent of the people in the German lands lived in cities: the vast majority lived in the countryside and in small towns of five thousand people or fewer. But by the mid-eighteenth century an involved network of roads had been built, and the horse-drawn carriage had increased speed over walking more than fourfold, making travel in small-town Germany relatively easy.¹² Carriages left major cities many times a day, and in the densely trafficked roads of southern Germany coming and going could often be calculated to the hour. Finally, cities were beginning to lose their walls—figuratively and literally, as the fortifications, gates, ramparts, drawbridges, and moats were slowly torn down in more than a thousand cities in the German lands, making of many of them, as Goethe wrote in *The Elective Affinities*, “nothing more than big villages.”¹³ If the great wave of de-fortification did not occur until the Napoleonic wars, it was nevertheless true that people in cities, still the prime sites of cultural production, only slowly opened to, and took interest in, the countryside and the people who lived there.

II

The meeting of Herder and Goethe in Strasbourg neither caused nor inaugurated the German turn to the countryside. It may stand, however, as its enduring emblem. In a series of intellectually intense conversations, begun in the dark room in Strasbourg, Herder turned Goethe’s attention to rural villages as a site of a different kind of truth—sensual, original, and close to nature. For Goethe that truth was to be found in German-speaking Alsace, and in particular in Sessenheim, then a

community of some 800 people about forty kilometers northeast of Strasbourg. As all admirers of German literature know, it also came in the form of a young woman, eighteen-year old Friederike Brion, with whom Goethe fell, seemingly, in love. They first met in October 1770 and corresponded thereafter; there were visits in early 1771, and Goethe stayed with the family from May 18 to June 23. It is from this visit that we have Goethe's sensitive drawings of the village, and his accounts of rural celebratory life. His extended stay no doubt suggested to the Brions that in accordance with custom he had become Friederike's fiancé. Expectation of life-long partnership was also implicit in the concluding lines to one of his Sessenheim Songs. "The tie that binds us is no weak band of roses," he wrote in a poem he gave Friederike as a present, along with a ribbon.¹⁴ Scholars immersed in the explosive moment of German literature may see in these lines Goethe overcoming Anacreontic cadences and breaking into a more lasting form. Upon reading them later in life, Rahel Levin Varnhagen took Friederike's perspective. She "screamed out loud," as she put it: "I had to, otherwise my heart would be dead." Goethe knew the force of his words—"such words one should not write, not him," Levin protested.¹⁵ Marriage was in any case an expectation that Goethe rudely frustrated in August of the same year. In a letter from his family home in Frankfurt am Main, he forbade further contact, seriously compromising the standing of Friederike, who was then ill, and never thereafter wed.

In the 1770s in the villages of France and Germany, marriage was not a private, sentimental association between two loving partners but rather a public, social tie, in which familial, communal, and occupational interests played a decisive role.¹⁶ Regulating it was also the way rural society maintained population control, with women typically marrying later, around the age of twenty-four to twenty-six on average, and then having many children, typically eight or nine, a third of whom would not survive into adulthood.¹⁷ Regional variations influenced these numbers, as did economic conditions, with a relatively prosperous decade, such as the 1770s, allowing women to marry earlier without endangering the delicate rural population balance.

The amorous interlude, however questionable, occasioned inspired lyric innovation. In one poem for Friederike, entitled "Welcome and Departure," we hear Goethe in the first stanzas speak in the rough, adventurous tones of Ossian, "wild like a hero to battle," riding past oaks in "robes of mist" (*Nebelkleid*) "where darkness looked out of the bushes with a hundred black eyes."¹⁸ This was the voice Herder sought—close to nature, masculine and assertive, and full of mystery. Goethe also followed Herder's appeal to collect folk songs, and in September 1771, Goethe sent Herder twelve folk songs that he had collected "from the guttural of the oldest grandmothers" in Alsace and had "carried as a

treasure of my heart.”¹⁹ Herder delighted in the Alsatian ballads, full of “jumps and springs,” which in fact can be dated to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when such songs were first transcribed, with some ballads older still.²⁰ The most famous of the songs was the last, “Rose upon the Heath,” later put by Schubert to music. Goethe claimed to have written it down from memory, though perhaps it was his own composition, drawn in part from a seventeenth-century song book in Herder’s possession.²¹ It too is a simple ballad of love and violence, perhaps even rape. One wonders, too, if it is a self-reflection. “I will pluck you,” says the boy to the rose: “I will pierce you,” the rose replies.

The wild boy broke
The little rose upon the heath anyway
The rose defended itself and pierced him
But afterwards he forgot
In his pleasure his pain.”²²

Herder included the composition, which he took to be authentic, in his *Old Folk Songs* and in his contribution to the collection *Of German Character and Art*, published in 1773. This manifesto of the *Sturm und Drang* movement emphasized the sway of emotions and the sensual experience of the world. It consisted of five essays: two by Herder (on Ossian and on Shakespeare); one by Goethe, entitled “German Architecture” but in fact a hymn to Strasbourg Cathedral; one by an obscure Italian art historian (Herder’s rebuke to Goethe’s Gothic preferences); and a long excerpt from Justus Möser’s preface to his *History of Osnabrück*. When *Of German Character and Art* appeared, it achieved instant popularity, with Herder’s call to search for “folk songs, provincial songs, and peasant songs” in the “streets and alleys and fish markets” inspiring a generation of young German intellectuals. They scoured the libraries and sometimes even went into taverns in search of the authentic voice of the common people. They also composed poetry of their own in the tone of the people. Gottfried August Bürger, perhaps the most emphatic proponent of “popular” verse, read folk songs to his maid, hoped for the applause of the village schoolmaster, and declared the local tavern a more authentic forum for his ballads than the court theater.²³ He was hardly alone. The elder Justus Möser and the young Goethe also waxed enthusiastic about collecting, as did younger members of Herder and Goethe’s circles in Strasbourg, such as J. M. R. Lenz, who wrote a tragic comedy about unprincipled army officers and the adultery of an ordinary woman; and Matthias Claudius, who published ballads and folk songs in *Der Wandsbecker Volksbothe*, perhaps the first newspaper in Germany that deliberately cultivated the language of the people.

If Herder’s efforts had always been directed at finding a voice that could cultivate a new sense of humanity, it was the creativity of the

young Goethe that imparted genuine expressive power to the new literature, notably in *Götz von Berlichingen*, a historical tragedy, consciously Shakespearean, published in 1773 and taking as its subject an independent knight who in the time of Luther struggles for freedom against the designs of a covetous and powerful neighboring state; and in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, an epistolary novel published in the following year that explored the self-destruction of the sentimental, feeling heart. As is well known, it ends with the protagonist, consumed by his impossible love for the already married Lotte, shooting himself and taking an agonizing twelve hours to die. For most of his life, Goethe was known as the famous author of *Werther*. But it remained deficient as tragedy. Lessing, for example, could not countenance the ending. “Do you imagine a Roman or a Greek youth would have taken his life in *that* way and for *that* reason?” he asked in a letter to Johann Joachim Eschenburg, a well-know translator of Shakespeare. The tragic demanded something more elevated. Tawdry obsessions, Lessing huffed, the ancients would “have excused in hardly a girl.”²⁴

Erich Auerbach famously argued that antique theory separated “the realm of the heroic and the sublime from the practical and everyday,” and that it was only in the world of Christianity, and then only in Christ’s incarnation and the Passion, “that the two are merged.”²⁵ The consequence of the separation of styles, he maintained, was that Western literature, with few and incomplete exceptions (notably Dante), resisted the convergence of the everyday with tragic seriousness and instead cultivated a literature exclusively concerned with the affairs of one class, the nobility, while eschewing, in Auerbach’s words, “representations of everyday life in which that life is treated seriously, in terms of its human and social problems or even its tragic complications.”²⁶ Full emancipation from this doctrine of the separation of styles only occurred in the nineteenth century, in France, with Stendahl and Balzac and Zola, and then in prose, not verse. As Auerbach puts it:

When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of distinct levels of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment.²⁷

That this departure occurred in France suggests the hidden argument of *Mimesis*. Writing in exile in Istanbul between 1942 and 1945, Auerbach faulted German literature—from Lessing, through Goethe and Schiller, and including nineteenth-century novelists such as Gottfried Keller—for

failing to develop a realistic idiom that described the everyday trials, tribulations, and tragedies of non-noble subjects in a manner unclouded by mystifications. German literature, he implied, was hampered by a certain narrowness of political horizon, a reflexive abhorrence of radical change, and a tendency to dull the dynamics of realistic, sensory detail with the counter-assertion of harmonious development. The failure was particularly noteworthy because, in Auerbach's reading, late-eighteenth-century Germany produced a philosophy, historicism, that insisted that epochs be grasped in their particularity, a creed that demanded of writers neither moralism nor class prejudice, but rather attention to detail. Herder was the lodestar of the new approach. But in Auerbach's view, Herder remained content with generalities. Meanwhile, Goethe retreated into Olympian detachment (especially after the French Revolution), and only Schiller, and then in an improbable play (*Kabale und Liebe*), came close to dissolving the separation of styles necessary for the convergence of the common and the tragic. "In the age of Goethe," Auerbach concludes, "no further attempts were made toward the tragic treatment of an average contemporary bourgeois milieu on the basis of its actual social situation"²⁸

Yet, and despite the judgment of Auerbach, it was precisely in bringing the tragic closer to the common that the new literature of Storm and Stress found its greatest expression. There was little that predestined the Faust story for this role. A sixteenth-century German tale, reworked in England by Christopher Marlowe as the *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, it came back to Germany by the end of the seventeenth century via chapbooks and puppet theaters. In this period, Faust had become a synonym for the superstitions of the unlearned. "Only the rabble drags around D. Faust and other such books," the arbiter of early-eighteenth-century good taste, Johann Christoph Gottsched, remarked, emphasizing in his *Critical Art of Poetry* of 1730 that a serious German poet should desist from staging such popular spectacles.²⁹ In his famous "Letter Number Seventeen" of the *Letters Concerning the Newest Literature*, Lessing took aim at Gottsched's "Frenchified" rules, which he thought sapped literature of its vitality. "Our old plays have much that is English in them," Lessing insisted, and cited the sixteenth-century *Doktor Faustus* as evidence, believing that it has a number of scenes that "only a Shakespearian genius was capable of conceiving."³⁰

Lessing had already begun to work on the Faust legend, and good evidence suggests that a now-lost manuscript was largely complete. In any case, scholars have reconstructed the skeleton of three versions, one with the devil, one without, and one in which the devil essentially personifies the destructive element in Faust's striving for knowledge. What we know is that in Lessing's version the tragedy, if it can be called that, is all about Faust the scholar, and the problem is not knowledge per se but