

The Conflict with the Other. Premises of the Rebirth of Tragedy

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Abstract: Written under the impact of the war in Ukraine, the present text aims to verify a series of effects in a theatrical plan. The main effect: the conditions for the revival of tragedy as a theatrical genre. Such a hypothesis, of course, presupposes the reevaluation of some classical components of tragedy: the hero, the feeling of absolute injustice, the feeling of absolute loneliness, the new deities and the types of relationships that contemporary man develops in relation to them, the new dimensions of suffering, and so on. An important component of the study concerns the relationship with the Other. On the one hand, the Other as a stranger, and on the other, the other as a hidden self, with which we frequently come into conflict.

Keywords: conflict; tragedy; war; the Other.

War, Conflict...

Tempting for cinematography, treated in the most diverse ways, whether it occurred in Troy or in a dehumanizing future, the war has never been of much interest for the theatre along the history of this art. There is no doubt that the war topic has been frequently the focus of some stage productions, albeit either in an essentialized form or under the guise of symbols or visual metaphors, announced by sounds, colours, and of course, playing life and death. We have to admit that it is more and more infrequent to watch wars in the true sense of the word, with grand displays of forces, fierce clashes, and great casts engaged in physical confrontation on stage. War dramaturgy is itself in confusion; the theme is somehow lightly tackled but not entirely approached. Not even in the violent times of ancient history did the poets show the war; they only rendered it in words. Euripides, for instance, would send a messenger occasionally to report the events on the battlefield, while Aeschylus preferred to give minute descriptions of the vestments and attitudes of the seven commanders who besieged Thebes instead of showing us the siege per se. Shakespeare was also elusive about the war. He had no hesitations to show us the most cruel atrocities the humans are capable of, there is no historical play without the war being part

of it, but it is always alluded to or brought on stage indirectly through story telling sequences. Falstaff fought in battle, he also has captives, but Shakespeare preferred to show him in pubs, not in battle, be it just a mockery of it. In *Henry V*, which is maybe the play of the most intense belligerent atmosphere, we are always in the immediate vicinity of the battlefields, but never in the throng of battle. In *Anthony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare goes as far as giving us a sense of “soldier kisses”, thus subtly indicating the way in which war and love superpose, and in *King John*, one of the few texts in which the stage is taken by the battle field, the unconvincingly represented war is cut short by a political engagement.

The ambition of mirroring war with naturalistic faithfulness was totally abandoned in the 20th century, when all these “awry wars”, to paraphrase Sartre, had to be translated into other types of conflict. Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg were already interested in this theme, preferring to transport it in the realm of psychological wars, in the war between the individual and time or society, in confrontations among social classes, a.s.f., in the belligerent atmosphere of this or that character with its own self. Gorki’s political theatre moved most of the war zones within. Later, Brecht re-exorcized them, trying to focus the viewers’ attention again on the concrete nature of war. As a matter of fact, Brecht can be called the last important playwright of physical war, one who seems to be the last to tackle the subject. Re-reading Beckett, I sometimes have the sense of an absent war, with Vladimir and Estragon in the position of veterans confused by the fact that Godot, this white-bearded deity, who could be a decadent warrior god, keeps sending innocent messengers who announce peace, i.e. nothing. One does not need much imagination to see in the natural backdrop in *Waiting for Godot* the “ruins” of an old battle field. In the Romanian space, in a social context in which everybody talked about the war, Camil Petrescu created a drama of moral dilemmas, while Mihail Sebastian, exasperated by the everyday reality, took his characters out of the “conflict zone”, relocating them at pensions in the mountains or in small towns “in the midst of the field”, where people learn to gaze at the stars and to ignore history.

The theatre stage does not seem to be a good host for true wars, those waged with weapons, canons, soldiers and trenches. The wars of the 20th century, so overwhelming and grandiose, are theatrically interrogated through their effects; the playwrights restore “slices” that they reshape to contain the present. No war is truly relevant if it does not include us one way or another seems to be one of the principles of the theatre discourses about the war. A soldier on stage, we have to admit it, has something dated; something inevitably archaic accompanies his appearance; he brings with him another time, a world we know from hearsay and with which we do not want to have anything to do. The demilitarization of the theatre stages seemed to be an

irreversible process, the 21st century inviting us generously to catalogue its new proposals: micro-biological wars, economic wars, technological wars. To many of us, a (physical or digital) virus looks more familiar than a soldier does. Maybe this is the reason why, in *The Return Home*, the play about the uselessness of war at “Matei Vişniec” Theatre of Suceava (2022), director Botond Nagy dresses his soldier characters in costumes that vaguely evoke military vestments that rather seem to be the remains of an old-fashioned outfit. Only the general wears a uniform, a casquet, and many decorations on his chest. Nagy feels the implicit ridicule of the costume and skillfully generalizes it through emphasis: the great general carries a huge bag of... corn puffs for a long while.

Sometimes, however, history will not heed human logic or aesthetic tendencies. Even in the moments when we contemplate the new list of wars of the 21st century, still traumatized by the SARS CoV (1&2&3...) war, a brutal, primitive war, in which true weapons, true bullets are used, a war “by the book”, as we thought we would never see again, has revealed itself to us... Ukraine’s invasion by Russia has brought back to our attention, aggressively, without sparing us from its atrocities, the theme of war, compelling us to meditate, among other things, upon the kind of relation art can still entertain with war these days.

War and Aesthetics. Or If I Were Ukranian...

The complexity and difficulties entailed by the war *mise en scène* have always been a challenge for the aesthetics through which art has tried to reflect it. If sometimes war has been tackled through existing aesthetics, with a Procrustean tuning meant to harmonize form and content, some other times war has generated its own aesthetics, even its own philosophies, such as existentialism, interested in indicating/denouncing the tensions between essence and existence. Then, it is plausible to accept that, without the two World Wars of the 20th century, the theatre of the absurd and implicitly the aesthetics of the absurd would not have been possible; they spring from the human being’s immense perplexity occasioned by the encounter with meaninglessness, with what defies reason and what is beyond reason, beyond Aristotle’s laws, beyond the cause-and-effect relation that we had deemed to be immovable, a major benchmark of human enterprise. Not even today do the Nazi concentration camps and their whole league of horrors make any reasonable sense; likewise, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children, the victims of wars with which they had nothing to do, human suffering in its most extreme forms, the fields of bones and rotting meat that feed our modern and flourishing world are pointless.

On the other hand, the absurd shows its limits; apart from a certain poeticity that is still part of its aesthetics, it is difficult to stick to the absurd

in a century when humankind has an explanation for virtually everything. The Neo-scientism that characterizes the 21st century excludes the powers of the absurd from everything; it refuses its access and exiles it in the museum of outmoded feelings of humankind. When by a simple click on the internet all the “how to-s” find a solution, when our lives are so minutely guided, oriented, programmed, filled with tasks that leave you no time for reflection, the blockage caused by the absurd¹ becomes an absurdity in its turn. The rhythms of today’s societies will not tolerate this; for the individuals who find themselves in this existential situation our societies have invented special clinics where illnesses such as depression, stress, schizophrenia, a.s.f. are treated.

Leaving the compensatory prejudices or rhetorics aside, we have to admit that, no matter how surprised we might have been by the war between Russia and Ukraine, we do not consider it is absurd. It is even more rational than the previous event we experienced, the Covid pandemic, because we find its certain origin: we can indicate its starting point: the decision of a person whose name we know – Vladimir Putin. Of course, the fact that such a person can live in the 21st century may seem absurd to some, but, except for this aspect, there is nothing absurd about a war of conquest and state reinforcement. This war is surely characterized by a voracity that the generations of the future will recognize.

Nor does surrealism know how to tackle the bloody story being unfurled tens / hundreds of kilometers away from Romania. If I were Ukranian and an artist would treat the drama I am undergoing surrealistically, I would feel sad and deserted by art, through art. The urgency, the imminent danger, the stark drama calls, on the part of the one living it, for attitudes of engagement and faithful rendering rather than oniric parantheses or poeticities that transfigure reality, betraying or hijacking it... Returning to the old realistic aesthetics would not be enough. Today, realism looks like merely one-half of a road, a groping through thickets of reality leading nowhere. Chekhovian realism, for instance, with all its symbolic escapades, still worked in a black-and-white world, with hues of white and hues of black. It is hard to imagine that if Chekhov had been Ukranian and lived today he would have found any relevance in the kind of realism he practised in the late 19th century.

Art has to resort to something different in order to give a credible, honest, and at the same time artistic message about the horrors of our times. Among other things, it should take into account a certain state of mind that, at

¹ It is interesting how concerned the authors of the theatre of the absurd were with tragedy. Let us remember Becket’s comments on Racine, the pastiche of Corneille’s *Le Cid* (*The Kid*), the “tragedy of language” Ionesco was talking about, and also how he melted the tragic into the comic and the comic into the tragic theorised in plays like *The Bald Soprano*.

least at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, seemed to be dominant. This state of mind, which looks like solidarity, has deeper roots; it comes from something we thought was lost or something we deemed to be an “affair” of the individual, not of the species. That something is nothing else but the age-old sense of tragic that fed tragedy. After the two years of collective emotional vulnerable exposure, marked by the physical and mental isolation brought about by the pandemic, caught somehow unguarded, all our sureties questioned, we were prepared for this new and old at the same time, strange, and yet deeply familiar experience: the experience of the tragic². If I were Ukrainian, if I were one of the thousands of refugees left without a “home”, if I heard the whiz of the shells, of the rockets, of the dying breath of the person next to me, maybe this experience of the tragic would have clearer contours than those I manage to sketch in front of a laptop, in a space where I can still feel protected as a theorist who is outside of the danger zone.

The Problematic Sense of the Tragic

In everyday life, the tragic³ continues to make its presence felt, with effects that are as devastating today as one hundred or one thousand years ago. The grief of a contemporary mother whose child dies is similar to that of a mother in the past; there is no doubt that this/that mother lives/lived a tragic experience. We watch her mourning hopelessly the dead body of her child and, in our turn, we have, more or less, the experience of the tragic, in that exact farrago of pity and terror Aristotle⁴ used to speak about. My projection in the mother’s suffering, the unuttered fear that I might experience what she experiences, but also the unfaked and at the same time helpless pity, are still

² Maybe not accidentally, one of the most complex books about the wars of the 20th century bears a suggestive title: Alistair Horny, *Hubris: The Tragedy of War in the Twentieth Century*, Orion Publishing Co, 2016.

³ Liiceanu dwells on the tragic conscience of European culture, a conscience outlined in an intimate connection with the founding tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. But for these tragedies, we would not have had a conscience of the tragic. This is why no approach to the tragic can be made outside of the aesthetic background. Tragedies would be “the documentary form of the opinions of the tragic”, necessary for a knowledge, be it relative, of the relations between the tragic and mythology. Gabriel Liiceanu, *Tragicul, o fenomenologie a limitei și a depășirii* [The Tragic, a Phenomenology of the Limit and Transgression], Second Edition, București, Editura Humanitas, 1993, p. 30 (translated into English by the translator of this article).

⁴ Likewise, Liiceanu drew attention to a certain precaution we should have when we tread the trodden path of Aristotle’s definition: “Aristotle’s definition of the tragic as the phenomenon that stirs our pity and terror, taken over, directly or indirectly, by the theorists of the aesthetics of tragedy in various European cultures, accredited a simplistic judgement of the tragic phenomenon; spreading the thought of synonymy between the tragic and the terrible, it made any misfortune capable of stirring compassion and dread a source of the tragic”. G. Liiceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 26 (translated into English by the translator of this article).

states of mind that situate us in a direct relation with the tragic. However, the problem boils down to this: our incapacity of experimenting today with the tragic on a theatre stage, as the ancient Greeks are supposed to have done, watching from their amphitheatres the stories of Antigone, Hecuba and Medea, and in general of all these so-called “tragic heroes”. Nietzsche holds Euripides responsible for contaminating tragedy with doubt and reason, with mocking at myth and mythology⁵. He names Socrates and his contemporary, the “dubious” Euripides, explicitly as de luxe gravediggers of tragedy, and implicitly of the theatrical sense of the stage tragic. The German philosopher suggests that, when conscience entered stage, that enigmatic daimon with which Socrates used to entertain now and then, something got lost forever in the way the Athenians looked at the sky and imagined that something was there beyond the spheres of the visible. In the early 1960s, George Steiner, in his famous book on the death of tragedy, drew a firm conclusion: tragedy and the stage tragic are no longer possible in times when “we are no longer protected by God’s shadow”. He thus continues Nietzsche’s thought, indicating one more condition of the tragic: the unadulterated faith in gods or in any other instances of the Unseen that would decide upon the matters of life and death when it comes to the vulnerable human being. Steiner finds yet another culprit, one who drove away the last deities hidden neither in the skies nor in the underground lights but in the recesses of the subconscious: Freud. Maybe if it hadn’t been for Freud and psychoanalysis, the gods, renamed and transported to other homelands, would have been able to continue their divine existences undisturbed. They would have been called Terror, Guilt, Trauma and would have continued to keep us connected with the networks of the Unseen and of the... tragic. Finally yet importantly, another cause for the incapacity of tragedy to exist would be the Christian doctrine that rewards tragic suffering by cancelling it.

Symbolically speaking, the 20th century positivism/scientism tried to impose its own deities, but these gods proved to be utilitarian and so lacking in stateliness that much as you might try to see a deity in the idea of a car or, more recently, in Artificial Intelligence, you simply fail to figure out such meta-representations. More empty than ever, the sky we are watching from our present-day perspective offers us nothing else but precarious and worn out poetic images or meteorological information. The ancient Greek who,

⁵ “What was your goal, godless Euripides, when you tried to force this dying old thing (the myth – C.C.) to continue to serve you? It died of your brutal hands; and then you employed a masked myth, the simulacrum of a myth that, like Hercules’ monkey, knew only how to deck itself with ancient splendour.” Nietzsche, *Nașterea tragediei* [*The Birth of Tragedy*], in *de la Apollo la Faust* [*From Apollo to Faustus*], Foreword by Victor Ernest Mașek, translated by Ion Dobrogeanu Gherea, București, Editura Meridiane, 1978, p. 225 (translated into English by the translator of this article).

lying on his back somewhere on the outskirts of the polis, would gaze at the starry vault of the sky when nights were clear, felt something totally different from what we feel, in our adventures and exercises of urban romance and philosophical thinking at week-ends.

Formally speaking, in order for it to be a feeling of enough intensity to be represented on the theatre stage, the tragic has to meet certain conditions: the belief in the existence of deities that should be unpredictable in relation to the human being⁶, the sense of absolute injustice, the conviction that some blind necessity is ready to destroy our certainties, tragic heroism and undisimulated vocation for suffering, the public character of suffering⁷. Can these conditions be met today, in a world that has just overcome a pandemic and entered an unexpected war? Let us take them in turn!

Neo-Olympus or from the Fall of Troy to the Fall of Mariupol

In the thinking of the ancient Greeks, the Mount Olympus was not an abstraction; it was a topos as concrete as a topos can be, and it entertained a complicated and continually changing power network with the mortals' topos. Being intensely anthropomorphized, the gods almost became a "social class", one that had control and influence, but also one whose vulnerabilities people knew, and of which they would take advantage with shrewdness and cynicism now and then. Maybe this is why a considerable number of directors who staged ancient texts in the 20th century proposed interpretations that were intriguing at first sight: the Mount Olympus as a mafia network, Zeus as a Boss, Eros as a pimp, Aphrodite as a principle of feminism, Apollo – as a match-maker, etc. Transposed in this philosophy of power, the old Mount Olympus has kept its functions to the present day. In the common thinking of people, for the average people in today's civilized world, names like Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin, Emmanuel Macron, Boris Johnson, Kim Jong-un, Angela Merkel a.s.f. supplant the old deities, constituting a neo-Olympus as admired and as contested, as inaccessible and as concrete as the founding Olympus. For hundreds of millions of people, the president of the United States, no matter if he is called Obama, Trump or Joe Biden, represents a metaphor of supreme power. He can be hampered in

⁶ "Tragedy is that form of art that needs the unbearable burden of God's presence", George Steiner, *Moartea tragediei [The Death of Tragedy]*, translated by Rodica Tiniș, București, Editura Humanitas, 2008, p. 281. Another relevant passage: "The absolute tragedy, the image of the human being as not being wanted in life, as a creature *gods kill in their game, as playful boys would kill flies*, is unbearable for human reason and sensibility." *Idem*, p. 13 (translated into English by the translator of this article).

⁷ Other features of the tragic: "the brevity of heroic life, the vulnerability in front of murder impulses and the whims of inhuman nature, the fall of the polis." Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 18 (translated into English by the translator of this article).

exerting his power only by other “deities” that, in their turn, closely follow the games and mechanisms of power. It might sound like reductionism, but some of the dwellers of our planet watch the war between Russia and Ukraine as a *Götterdämmerung*, a confrontation of proud “gods” who sooner or later will make peace, who will certainly strike a deal with no admixture of the “mortals” and their will.

The media channels ensure a huge notoriety for these gods, one that is superior to the one enjoyed by the old deities. It is almost impossible for one not to hear at least one of the names mentioned above in the interval of one day. Moreover, each name is associated with an image carefully delivered in the public space, so that the intensity of the “god’s” presence in our lives rules out vagueness and approximation.

Consolidating this sense of distance/intangibility and also of closeness/familiarity gives legitimacy to the neo-Olympus and new relevance to the discussion on the gods’ camp and the mortals’ camp. Mythology insinuates itself once again into the real, cracking and rendering it relative. The erotic whim that led to the famous Trojan war is now echoed by a territorial whim, and the fall of Troy and Mariupol are examples of *gods’* will exerted over some *human*⁸ actions.

The Sense of Absolute Injustice

In ancient literature, tragedy sometimes springs from the sense of an absolute injustice. This is, for instance, the case of Antigone, for whom the interdiction of burying her dead brother and the contempt for a venerable tradition seem to be supreme abuses. Likewise, Medea, who left her homeland to marry Jason, acts under the impulse of the same sense of boundless injustice⁹. Oedipus, in his turn, knows that he is subjected to the injustice of a fate decided by the gods, like Orestes who, tormented by the Erinyes for having killed his mother, frequently thinks of Apollo, the god who had demanded that he committed the crime. In each of the cases mentioned, the source of injustice is precise; there is no room for doubts or hesitations. Characters like these cannot put up with injustice; they are

⁸ It was fascinating and terrifying to watch, when the Russian invasion had just started, the declarations of some Russian soldiers who simply had no idea what they were doing in the country they were attacking. Retrieved from <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/international/presa-soldatii-rusi-capturati-nu-stiau-ca-invadau-ucraina-ei-credeau-ca-se-afla-la-exercitii-in-crimea.html>

⁹ Apart from the theme of the war, how can you help thinking of Medea when you find out about the mother who hurled herself together with her two children from a block of flats, exasperated by a contemporary “Jason”? Retrieved from <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/caz-socant-la-timisoara-o-mama-s-a-aruncat-de-la-etaj-impreduna-cu-cei-doi-copii-cu-varste-de-3-si-6-ani-1925937>

stupefied and they wonder why life chose them to treat so unjustly. Arrived at Colonus, long after he had found out the truth, Oedipus still keeps traces of his initial perplexity, and the echoes of the thousands of “why-s” he asked himself in the beginning will not leave him in the seconds before he dies.

It is exactly this sense of absolute injustice undergone by the tens or even hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians whose lives seemed stable, predictable, settled; they found themselves under attack, slaughtered, humiliated and forced to take exile. They did nothing wrong, many of them led morally valid lives, paying their taxes, doing their duty as claimed by the modern society in which they lived. An immense injustice descended upon the streets of Kiev, Donbas and Mariupol, and, together with it, the tragic contour of some destinies started to become more and more clear. This time again, the source of injustice was precisely identified: Putin, in his double hypostasis – a man of no morality and principle (Jason type), an irresponsible and discretionary god (the type of the gods created by Euripides: selfish, and more often than not failing to assume the consequences of arbitrary decisions).

For the rest of us who watch this pointless war, some sort of moralizing singers in a choir, the sense of uncertainty has been stronger than that of injustice: nothing is truly certain, stable, firm, no certainty is final. A necessity which is blind and deaf to the contemporary individual’s arguments can shatter, in just a fraction of a second, all the material and moral values we have built for ourselves.

Tragic Heroism and the Public Nature of Suffering

There is a lot of written critical reflection on “the tragic hero/ine”, that character upon which the befuddling blows of fate are made to fall. That kind of character is not essentially positive; Medea’s murders or the killing at the crossroads committed by Oedipus are two of the most obvious examples of tarnished biographies, integrated and melted into the “character description” of the hero/ine. To be truly tragic, the hero/ine has to end up badly, by dying or by a ceaseless and terrible psychological burden grinding one’s soul¹⁰. There have been endless debates over which is the most tragic character in ancient literature. We will not repeat them here; we will only point out that

¹⁰ George Steiner pushes the definition of tragedy to the extreme: “What I identify as *tragedy* in a radical sense is the dramatic representation or more accurately the dramatic confirmation of a view of reality in which the human being is considered an unwanted guest in this world (...) However, absolute tragedy can be found only in situations when Sophocles’ assertion according to which *it is better for one not to have been born at all* is considered an essential truth or when the final conclusion concerning the fate of the human being is expressed by Lear’s *never* uttered five times.” Steiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13 (translated by the translator of this article).

death was not perceived as a guaranteed end of suffering. Let us not forget that Oedipus blinds himself to prevent an encounter with his own father, whose sheets he has defiled.

Considering the war in Ukraine and trying to identify such a possible hero/ine, one would feel hugely tempted to cast President Volodymyr Zelensky to play that part. The planetary sympathy capital he still enjoys is immense. Relying on his charisma, he has known how to build and interpret his role as a leader ready to fight the war through, valuing his country above everything else and bracing up for the peril of death every single second. In the early days of the war there were quite a few headlines reading: “Zelensky’s wife says she and children have not seen president since start of the conflict”¹¹, “Zelensky survives three assassination attempts in one week”¹², “Zelensky refuses US offer to evacuate, saying “I need ammunition, not a ride”¹³, etc. The dramatic formula underpinning the military conflict in Ukraine becomes clear for every freshman of dramatic art: the confrontation between a hero (Zelensky) and an anti-hero (Putin), which is the eternal archetypal conflict between good and evil.

In the early days of the war, Zelensky was the true effigy of a tragic hero in whose under-eye bags one would read genuine suffering and that existential fatigue characteristic of the great figures on the brink of falling into the abyss. Nonetheless, from the moment Zelensky became aware of his own tragic vocation and started to display it by a range of carefully studied means, the authenticity of the tragic got lost. His heroism, which continued to be positive and inspiring, became a dramatic one, leaving the territory of genuine tragedy. Military or political heroism does not necessarily imply a tragic component; on the contrary, more often than not, it rules it out. However cynical it might seem, it is death only – which is not desirable, of course – that may restore the tragic aura Volodymyr Zelensky originally promised to emanate.¹⁴

¹¹ Verity Bowman, *Volodymyr Zelensky's wife says she and children have not seen president since start of the conflict*, “The Telegraph”, 9 April 2022, retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/04/09/volodymyr-zelenskys-wife-says-children-have-not-seen-president/>

¹² Gerard Kaonga, *Volodymyr Zelensky Survives Three Assassination Attempts in One Week*, “Newsweek”, 3 April 2022, retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/volodymyr-zelensky-assassination-ukraine-russia-invasion-survive-war-1684801>

¹³ Sharon Braithwaite, *Zelensky refuses US offer to evacuate, saying ‘I need ammunition, not a ride’*, 26 February 2022, “CNN Edition”, retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/26/europe/ukraine-zelensky-evacuation-intl/index.html>

¹⁴ “...any realistic approach to the tragic theatre must have its origins in the event of the catastrophe. Tragedies end up badly. The tragic hero/ine is crushed by forces that can neither be fully comprehended nor vanquished by rational caution (...) Tragedy is irreparable.” G. Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 21 (translated by the translator of this article). Musing on Kirkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death*, Ileana Mălăncioiu firmly distinguishes the tragic from despair:

To speak the truth, the war we tackle here has other tragic heroes. In the spring of 2022, I became the owner of a collection of photos taken by Florin Ghioca. Most of the pictures foregrounded the features of Ukrainian refugees; plain and not meant to be designedly artistic, the pictures are troubling by the intensity with which they reveal the most deeply hidden layers of human suffering. The tragic flutter makes its presence felt in a mere glance, in a discreet face expression, in an apparently banal posture. These great anonymous exiles are, I believe, the true tragic hero/ines of our times. To them, we can add the thousands of innocent casualties of a war they neither wanted nor understood.

For tragedy to be fulfilled, the suffering it implies has to have a public character. In the Greek tragedies, the chorus used to always have, among other things, this role of being a witness. It would keep a record of the events, it would comment on them and it would make sure that they were passed on after the hero/ine died. On the verge of leaving this world, Hamlet feels he needs such a witness; he asks Horatio to tell the story of what and how things happened. Had Horatio died, Hamlet's tragedy would have been incomplete. More than ever, the public character of the war in Ukraine, livestreamed, reported from its hot areas, its filmed disasters posted on the social media networks, is a certainty. Images such as Florin Ghioca's reached the media¹⁵ as valuable, painful and public documents of human suffering.

Is a rebirth of tragedy possible?

When, in the din of ambulance sirens, we would periodically receive news about the death of one more friend, acquaintance, colleague, and when, from another war of fake news, of duels between pro- and anti-vaccine camps, of the feeling that it is impossible to fight something you neither know nor see, I tried to make sense of how art can reflect panic, anxiety and extreme depression. In principle, the rebirth of tragedy as a dramatic genre but also as a spectacle would be possible. As argued above, some of its fundamental prerequisites are met: merciless and reckless gods, the background of absolute injustice, blind necessity, tragic heroism and the public character of suffering – we have them all in plenty in our complicated and meaningless times.

Technically speaking, the language stylistics – a lofty condition of tragedy writing from Aeschylus to Racine – could find its refuge in a totally

«being tragic means, beyond any doubt, infinitely more than being in despair. To be more accurate, it means despair plus the loss it entails.» Ileana Mălăncioiu, *Vina tragică* [The Tragic Guilt], Third Edition, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2013, p. 132 (translated into English by the translator of this article).

¹⁵ I also asked for his permission to use them as illustrations for the spring issue of “Dacia Literară” magazine, published by the National Museum of Romanian Literature of Iași.

new poeticity, as yet not theorized but intuited, forefelt, lived by the people of our century. It is a rather unreflective poeticity that would blend cry, action, attitude, genuine experience of the unbearable, confession, revolt. The tragedies of the 21st century, if written, would be confessional, violently engaging documents of what we have become and of how the suffocating lack of reason gathers more and more ground in the apparently well-organized fields of our existence.

The rebirth or, why not, reinvention of tragedy is not, however, something one would expect only in drama, both as dramaturgy and as art. Such an endeavour, which is not totally conscious and planned, but dictated by the desire to express what we mean generically by *Zeitgeist*, must have similar echoes in the literature, philosophy and arts of our time. Thus, we would be in the situation of experiencing again the special interest in tragedy and the tragic of the German idealistic philosophy of the 19th century, rendered concrete by attempts at rejuvenating tragedy as a dramatic and literary genre¹⁶, a rebirth abandoned *en route* under the pressure of the new positivist philosophies and the siren songs they were murmuring.

I would like to conclude by considering that a horizon of ethical reflection is worth taking into account in this argument for exploring a new sense of the tragic experienced by contemporary society through the war. Desiring a 21st century marked by the tragic for art's sake only means valuing art more than life. Ultimately, it would be preferable for humankind to be spared from this gloomy and aggrieving feeling, even if tragedy might never be possible in its absence¹⁷.

(Translated by Dana Bădulescu)

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¹⁶ See the thorough study of the relation with the tragic entertained by the German philosophers of the 18th and 19th century written by Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic. Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 2014.

¹⁷ "The death of tragedy is not a spiritual gain, and it should not soothe us – on the contrary, it should worry us", Ileana Mălănciu wrote in the 1970s (*op. cit.*, p. 6, translated by the translator of this article), and there was truth in her statement. On the other hand, the restoration of the conditions in which the tragic would be possible makes us feel ill at ease and troubles us even more...

- from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/04/09/volodymyr-zelenskys-wife-says-children-have-not-seen-president/>
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