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*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* is currently published by The American Society for Aesthetics.
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For over fifty years a strange contradiction has existed between the unfavorable reception and the actual, if unrecognized, influence of Hegel’s literary theory. “There was a time when it would have been essential to discuss Hegel,” D. D. Raphael observes in his book on tragedy; “but I think there is no need now. . .” This remark indicates quite typically Hegel’s current disrepute among English and American literary theorists and academic critics. Although scholars freely acknowledge the German philosopher’s impact upon twentieth-century metaphysics, ethics, economics, religion, and social studies, his teachings on the arts in general and literature in particular are usually held to be mistaken or outmoded. In reality, however, certain Hegelian concepts are centrally important in the lively debate on the nature of tragedy that has taken place in this century. Unfortunately, writers whose work shows a clear obligation to those concepts do not always understand or even suspect their obligation; sometimes, indeed, a commentator summarily dismisses Hegel as obsolete and wrong-headed, then proceeds to advance some Hegelian notion as his own.

A few English-speaking admirers of Hegel’s literary theory have appeared in the last sixty years. Probably the most outspoken, A. C. Bradley, in 1909 claimed that “since Aristotle dealt with tragedy. . . the only philosopher who has treated it in a manner both original and searching is Hegel.” Bradley built his own theoretical apparatus for the study of Shakespeare upon a Hegelian foundation; more recently, Kenneth Burke attributed his celebrated formula for the rhythm of tragedy—“Purpose, Passion, and Perception,” in Francis Fergusson’s adaptation—in part to “the Hegelian dialectic.” Others also have attested to Hegel’s continuing relevance, but they compose a minority. They are outnumbered by those who employ a Hegelian terminology yet are unaware of their source. This essay does not propose to judge the worth of the terminology. The point here is not that it ought (or ought not) to be accepted, but rather that in fact it has been accepted: several Hegelian distinctions, despite their author’s unpopularity, are truisms in the notebooks of our critics. As one such critic justly states, “it is amazing how much of its present capital criticism owes to [the Hegelian school] without even seeming to be aware of the character of the debt.”

Hegel’s comments on the nature and history of tragedy are contained in an exhaustive series of lectures on aesthetics that was offered from 1820 to 1829 and
published posthumously in 1835. Perhaps the pivotal distinction is Hegel's division of value in drama into subjective, or "phenomenal," and objective, or "substantive" components. The term subjective refers to the "personal conscious life" of the passionate individual seeking "self-determination." In contrast, the term substantive, denoting ethical, universal, or essential, refers to the enduring content of family, national, and religious codes. An ideal play exhibits characters who relate one component to the other: they may be interesting as unique individuals, but at the same time they make positive ethical claims that go beyond purely private or inward goals. Tragedy requires, first, that vital personalities be inflexibly committed to objective principles.

Objective principles, however, tend to contradict each other. Indeed, the existence of one ethical imperative calls into being its own corrective opposite because all imperatives are necessarily "one-sided." Tragic catastrophe results from the inevitable collision of two partial truths, each asserted with equal intensity by a heroic individual who claims a monopoly on virtue and justice. "Within a collision of this kind both sides of the contradiction, if taken by themselves, are justified; yet, from a further point of view, they tend to carry into effect the true and positive content of their end...merely as the negation and violation of the other equally legitimate power."

Conflict, then, provides the second condition of tragedy; the last stage, according to Hegel, is spiritual reconciliation. The contradictory ethical powers "annul" each other, thereby attesting to the existence of a more comprehensive reality that manifests itself through their antagonism but that embraces all "one-sided" assertions of truth. "That which is abrogated in the tragic issue is merely the onesided particularity which was unable to accommodate itself to this harmony... In tragedy then that which is eternally substantive is triumphantly vindicated under the mode of reconciliation." For the spectator the antagonists represent the complementary poles of a total substantive structure, just as polar extremes define the bounds of a total geographic structure. Tragedy posits a "genuine content" that supersedes in validity not only the personal needs or ambitions of individuals but also the partisan ideals of clan, community, and church.

Hegel made his chief contribution to recent literary criticism when he applied this theory to the history of Greek and "modern" (post-medieval) tragedy. He contended that Greek dramatists conceived the tragic genre in its purest form because their characters express human energy directed toward the achievement of aims more "serious" than unrestrained self-indulgence. Modern drama, in contrast, has celebrated the egocentric personality divorced from ethical commitment. In ancient tragedy (with the exception of Euripides, who anticipated the later style), "the varied exposition of personal soul-life and exceptional character [does not] obtain the fullest play... In modern romantic poetry, on the contrary, it is the individual passion, the satisfaction of which can only be relative to a wholly personal end... which forms the subject-matter of all importance." A Sophoclean character wholeheartedly and unchangedly champions some ethical value; a Shakespearean character—"placed within a wide expanse of contingent relations and conditions, within which every sort of action is possible"—senses the ambiguity of conventional codes and so experiences indecision or estrangement from those codes. The "romantic" figure may therefore opt for "unhampered" power and freedom even if to do so necessitates the commission of heinous crimes. And if "substantive ends," such as family loyalty or patriotism, are apparent they serve merely to augment the exploitation of individuality. After the glory of "classical art, which displays to human vision that which has become unveiled to it as substantive being in man's vital personality," ethically neutral or negative conclusions were reached by "the romantic art of the individual soul-life, that inward world united to the absolute medium of its self-conscious energy."
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Reasons for the current unpopularity of this doctrine should be obvious. For one thing, contrary to the prevailing fashion among English-speaking critics in this century, Hegel stresses the role of a transcendent or at least impersonal ethical force in tragedy; and he de-emphasizes the importance of the individual's "noble endurance of pain," as Bradley phrases it.10 Most modern writers on tragedy, Wimsatt and Brooks write, "have not been interested in ultimate metaphysical questions. They are thoroughly secular and man-centered. What they see in tragedy is primarily a glorification of man's power to endure." W. Macneile Dixon, deriding (and misinterpreting) Hegel's view, argues the case more forcefully:

the individual is the Absolute of poetry,...Necessarily, therefore, she lends a careless ear to the tales of that other Absolute, the grand Vacuity, the Whole contemptuous of its parts, the One who never had—or has lost—consciousness and eccentrically distributes to the Many what he lacks himself.10

Hegel's insistence on the ultimate rationality of a substantive essence, it has been further argued, glosses over the observable presence of irrationality and moral chaos in the tragic world. "No one has seen more profoundly than Hegel into the nature of the tragic situation and its stark clash of equally legitimate rights," Sidney Hook admits. But his solution...makes the philosophy of history a theodicy, an exercise in apologetics. It thereby vulgarizes tragedy. For it attempts to console man with a dialectical proof that his agony and defeat are not really evils but necessary elements in the goodness of the whole. The position is essentially religious." 13

Another point that habitually irritates students of drama in Great Britain and in the United States is Hegel's approach to the historical development of tragedy. It especially nettles lovers of Shakespeare, who according to Hegel plumbed the depths of "individual idiosyncrasy" in brilliant but amoral personality portraits. Hegel, they protest, misreads both Greek and Shakespearean tragedy by maintaining that the first conforms to an absolute objectivism.14 Nor is he content, they warn, simply to relegate modern drama to an ethically inferior status; he finds it to be, finally, only a transitional interlude occurring between the artistic maturity of the ancients and the eventual decay and death of all art when philosophy, religion, and politics achieve greater sophistication. Croce, in his Aesthetic (1901) and in What Is Living and What Is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel (1906), was probably the first to complain that Hegel predicts the "withering away" of the arts. Since then his objection has been repeated by, among others, John Crowe Ransom;15 René Wellek;16 and E. F. Carritt, who indignantly asks,

These spirited protests outline the recent antagonism to Hegel's viewpoint. No thinker so thoroughly wrong, they imply, could possibly contribute anything pertinent to a contemporary discussion on tragedy: the bias of an untenable metaphysics distorts the aesthetics, the theory of art, the literary history and criticism. Paradoxically, however, Hegel's proposals—biased and outdated as they are taken to be—permeate twentieth-century literary theory and criticism. The idea of colliding positive opposites, for example, has been embraced by scholars as reputable and as diverse as Gilbert Norwood, a classicist who calls Aristotle to account for failing to bring up the concept of a "collision of opposing principles";18 Horace M. Kallen, a philosopher who declares that "a decision for one good as against its rival is the matrix of tragedy";19 and Willard Farnham, a medievalist who speaks of "man's inability to reconcile apparent contradictions in ethical laws." 20

Other appropriated doctrines could be mentioned,21 but the most prominent borrowing concerns Hegel's notion of ob-
jectivity and subjectivity as the criteria of Greek and modern literatures. In formulations closely resembling Hegel's, a remarkable number and variety of authors have announced that post-medieval tragedians, notably Shakespeare, are ethically neutral or anarchic, in contrast to a decisive, clear-cut declaration of positive values in Greek tragedy. General studies of literature and of tragic drama make the point frequently. "Shakespeare," Alan Reynolds Thompson asserts, "lacks the pious spirit underlying Greek tragedy. He was a worldling, in love with the variety of life, profoundly moved by its mysteries but unconcerned to solve them. He is unlike them [sic] in being the poet of the individual, not the type." William Van O'Connor reiterates the idea: "the intention behind a Greek tragedy is usually quite apparent; that of the Shakespearean tragedies is questionable, puzzling... To Sophocles, the moral doctrine was the thing; to Shakespeare, almost the enigma was the thing." Howard Baker believes this too: "modern treatment makes tragedy a direct outgrowth of the disposition of the protagonist and the peculiar situation in which he finds himself.... It leads therefore to psychological drama.... The Greeks (with the usual modifications in regard to Euripides) [were] interested, as it is said, 'in justifying the ways of God to man,'... not the revelation of what the individual man himself is." And George Boas, while working out a myth-and-ritual theory of drama, decides that "our drama has become a conflict of persons, not of moral claims."  

Books on single playwrights have joined the chorus singing of Greek objectivity and modern subjectivity. "Our response in Shakespeare's mature plays," Clifford Leech contends, "is toward no particular line of conduct; we are not even led to a preference for some kind of ethical code.... [In] the tragedy of Sophocles or Seneca or Thomas Hardy... the antimonies are more or less logically resolved, but in the Shakespearean tragic picture not even the value of Stoicism is certain." Similarly, C. M. Bowra finds that Sophocles "was not content, like Shakespeare, to arouse the emotions and no more.... He is more casuistical, if the word may be allowed, than Shakespeare, who, though he presents extreme forms of evil and shows how horrible they are, does not call on us to judge between competing causes or to decide on which side right lies. This Sophocles sometimes does."  

Non-academic writers have enlisted themselves in the cause also. W. H. Auden explains the difference between Elizabethan and Sophoclean tragedy as a difference between "internal" and "external" drama; and Arthur Miller offers a like argument: "the Greek playwright and his audience sought to pluck a plan, a moral and ethical principle mysteriously at work upon human beings and their society. The hero exemplified the working out of the concealed principle; thus he was conceived not as a personality so much as an exemplar.... [Contrarily] the realistic approach... is best suited to a portrayal of man's relations with other mortal men rather than with the timeless, the grand forces of social and moral law."  

Occasionally a writer takes special care to disavow Hegel's relevance at the same time that he adopts Hegel's insights to define the contrast between Greek and later tragedy. Prosser Hall Frye devotes most of an essay to an attack on Hegel's "confused" interpretation of the terms "classic" and "romantic." Frye would seem to be unusually vigilant against the insidious influence he condemns: he refers to critics who, unaware of their "debt," have been swayed by Hegel "in spite of the bankruptcy of [his] school." But then he presents the following thoroughly Hegelian opinion:

Now, as a matter of fact, the interpretations of classic and romantic literature seem in a broad and general way to be informed by two distinct ideas or conceptions of life. [In classical literature] life is at bottom an illustration of moral principles, whose main interest is human and rational.... From the literary point of view life has always presented itself to the romanticist as a subject of powerful if impermanent sensations, a spectacle of inexhaustible variety and brilliancy, capable of an indefinite amount of emotional stimulation."
gel of any kind—even uncomplimentary—Frye advances this orthodox version of the Sophocles-Shakespeare contrast: “Sophocles’ nature...is fundamentally moral and relevant without coincidences and exceptions.... Shakespeare was...concerned rather to reflect life than to interpret it. He was more interested in posing the problem than in solving it.... [His plays show] the inconclusiveness of nature apart from principle.” 31

The academician who comes closest to Hegel’s phrasing while disavowing Hegel’s influence is probably S. H. Butcher in his well-known commentary on Aristotle’s Poetics:

Greek Tragedy, in its most characteristic examples, dramatises not the mere story of human calamities, but the play of great principles, the struggle between contending moral forces. The heroes are themselves the concrete embodiments of these forces. Religion, the State, the Family,—these were to a Greek the higher and enduring realities, the ideal ends for which he lived.... Seldom, at least in the older tragedians, do passions purely personal animate these tragic heroes: they are free from inward discord and self-contradictions: the ends they pursue are objective and rest on a belief in the abiding reality of the social organism....

The modern drama introduces us into another world of poetic emotion. A richer and more varied inner life is opened up. The sense of personality is deepened. Even the idiosyncrasies of human nature become material to the dramatist.... The discovery of unsuspected depths in human nature has brought into prominence the subjective side of ethical portraiture and subjective modes of viewing life.32

Butcher makes no mention of Hegel as he develops this interpretation, although earlier in his commentary (p. 114) he remarks on the ease with which the unwary, “almost without knowing it, find [themselves] putting into [Aristotle’s] mouth not his own language but that of Hegel”!

Butcher is no anomaly: not one writer quoted here on the subject of Greek and modern drama seems to be aware of his indebtedness. Quite the contrary—there is wide agreement that Hegel’s theories on literature are worthless. How can one account for this remarkable discrepancy? One reason may be that almost no one in England or America actually reads Hegel, in part no doubt because of the difficulty of his style. A fresh English translation of the aesthetics is badly needed; the only translation of the complete work, done in 1920, has long been out of print.33 “One of the few things on which the analysts, pragmatists, and existentialists agree with the dialectical theologians is that Hegel is to be repudiated,” Walter Kaufmann comments in a recent study, yet “oddly” enough “Hegel is known largely through secondary sources and a few incriminating slogans and generalizations.” 34 In view of the fact that certain Hegelian distinctions have become part of the vocabulary of responsible scholarship, it would be more sensible to determine with some care the merit and limitations of Hegel’s statements on drama rather than to accept or reject out of hand an oversimplified summary. And now it is a particularly appropriate time, as the bicentennial of his birth approaches (1970), to study and to credit a thinker whose ideas have guided battalions of both knowing and unwitting followers.

1 The Paradox of Tragedy (Bloomington, Ind., 1960), p. 23. In an extensive survey of discussion on tragedy in the “past three or four decades,” George Kimmelman, “The Concept of Tragedy in Modern Criticism,” JAAC IV (1946), 141–60, refers to Hegel only in passing.


3 See the essay cited above, and Chap. I, Shakespearean Tragedy, 2nd ed. (London, 1905). In both works Bradley modifies Hegel’s theory considerably because it “applies only imperfectly to the works of Shakespeare.”


In their introduction to Hegel on Tragedy, p.
Greek Tragedy, contrast to the generally unfavorable reception in Great Britain and in the United States, Hegel has of philosophy at the University of Oklahoma, Gustav E. Mueller, a great thinker, teacher, and author—inspired but never dominated by Hegel. I am grateful also to Professor Seymour Pitcher for helpful suggestions, and to the State University of New York for two summer grants.


A few years after Hegel died, Kierkegaard in "The Ancient Tragic Motive as Reflected in the Modern" (1843), Either/Or: A Fragment of Life, trans. D. R. and L. M. Swenson (Princeton, N. J., 1944), I, 117, voiced a similar misgiving: "It is certainly a misunderstanding of tragedy, when our age strives to let the whole tragic destiny become transubstantiated in individuality and subjectivity."

Though Hegel developed and refined this distinction between classical and modern art, he did not originate the idea. In Germany earlier formulations were proposed by Schiller (1793), Friedrich Schlegel (1793-96, 1812), and Schelling (1800).


On Hegel and Shakespeare, see Bradley, "Hegel on Tragedy," pp. 378-85; Gilbert and Kuhn, History of Esthetics, p. 454; and Wellek, Romantic Age, p. 333. D. W. Lucas, The Greek Tragic Poets, 2nd ed. (New York, 1959), p. 139, disputes Hegel's often-cited reading of Antigone "as an example of the fusion of two partial rights"; so also does Cedric H. Whitman, Sophocles (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), pp. 84-85. Anne Paolucci, "Bradley and Hegel on Shakespeare," Comparative Literature, XVI (1964), 211-25, argues (unconvincingly, I believe) that Hegel did not find Greek tragedy to be of a higher order than Shakespearean tragedy—that, on the contrary, he saw the latter as "the fulfillment of ethical life."


two nineteenth century ideas in criticism have proved seminal in our time. One is Hegel's dialectical view that a conflict of opposites is the driving force in tragedy."


"The Anatomy of Drama" (Berkeley, Calif., 1942), pp. 245-46.

Climates of Tragedy (Baton Rouge, La., 1943), pp. 121-23.

Induction to Tragedy (Baton Rouge, La., 1939), pp. 162, 168.


Sophoclean Tragedy (Oxford, 1944), pp. 6-7.


To cite one Continental dramatist on the subject, in 1946 Jean-Paul Sartre, in "Forgers of Myths," trans. Rosamond Gilder, The Modern Theatre, ed. R. W. Corrigan (New York, 1964), p. 782, declared that "we return to the concept of tragedy as the Greeks saw it. For them, as Hegel has shown, passion was never a simple storm of sentiment but fundamentally always the assertion of a right."

"The Terms Classic and Romantic," Romance and Tragedy, p. 36.


The recent (1962) Paolucci edition, which includes extracts taken from the 1920 Osmaston translation together with other writings of Hegel on tragedy, is also out of print.

From Shakespeare to Existentialism (Boston, 1959), p. 89.