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TRAGEDY: AN IRREPLACEABLE LOSS AND A DECLARATION OF IMMORTALITY

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ABSTRACT

The aesthetic structure of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.4 can be described by the formula "suffering-death-grief-joy", which is a *typical* one for tragic art.

The transition from grief to joy is one of the great secrets of the tragic. In his treatise of *Tragedy* David Hume pointed out that the tragic emotion has an element of grief, joy, horror and pleasure. To explain the nature of this phenomenon, one should go back to the historical sources of the tragic in art.

The ancient peoples whose economy rested on agriculture created legends about the gods who died and then rose from the dead; Dionysus in Greece, Osiris in Egypt, Adonis in Phoenicia, Attis in Asia Minor, and Marduk in Babylon. During the religious festivals in their honour, the grief caused by their death was succeeded by the joy of their resurrection. These legends arose from observations of a seed which "dies" when buried in the earth and "rises" in the form of a shoot. As social contradictions grew more acute, the naturalistic basis of such myths became more involved acquiring a clearly social character: the death and resurrection of the god was linked up to the hope for deliverance from suffering after death and for eternal life (the legends about Christ).

The *inevitability of the tragic* in the realm of events was expressed in *the transition from death to resurrection*, and in the realm of emotions-*from grief to joy*.

Tragedy, a word derived from the Greek Τραγῆδου, apparently meaning 'goat-song'. As to the reason of the name many theories have been advanced, some even disputing the connection with goat. It is applied to a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character with a fatal or disastrous conclusion; also to that branch of dramatic art which treats of sorrowful or terrible events in a serious and dignified style.

Man is mortal; consequently, the meaning of life, death and immortality are questions which cannot but profoundly concern him and to which he has always given a great deal of thought. The history of mankind abounds in tragic events. In its philosophical interpretation of life, art has a natural leaning towards the tragic. In other words, the individual, society and art are repeatedly faced with the problem of the tragic.

The 20th century has witnessed major social cataclysms: revolutions, wars, crises and drastic changes which have frequently resulted in complications and tension. Therefore, for our contemporaries, the theoretical analysis of the problem of the tragic is in a sense self-analysis and a way of understanding life. The other side of the condition of the world is the domain of the aesthetic category of the comic. The genius of Charlie Chaplin has found both a comic and a tragic expression. A blend of the two probably gives the best idea of the spirit of

our epoch. It is no accident that the works of art which deserve to represent our age to posterity are either comic or tragic.

Tragedy is a mournful song about an irreplaceable loss and a joyous hymn to the immortality of man. The essence of the tragic is shown when sorrow is supplanted by joy, and death by immortality.

In ancient legends, which lie at the sources of the tragic in art, the idea of immortality finds expression in the belief that there is life after death and that the dead hero will rise again.

This doctrine has a profound philosophical and aesthetic meaning: immortality does exist on Earth. Man continues to live in the fruit of his work and in the memory and deeds of his people. That is the idea behind the myths about resurrection.

THE UNIVERSAL PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE TRAGIC

Man leaves life forever. Death is the transformation of the living into the non-living. However, the dead continue to live through the living: culture preserves all that has passed, it is mankind's non-genetic memory. Each man is a whole Universe.

Tragedy is a philosophical art which poses and solves metaphysical problems of life, tries to grasp its meaning, and analyses global problems.

THE TRAGIC IN ART

Each epoch makes a contribution to the tragic in art, and each concentrates on the aspects which appealed to it most. The tragic hero possesses something which goes beyond the boundaries of individual existence, he is endowed with power, a certain demoniacal force, and he is the carrier of a principle. In ancient tragedy, heroes often had the gift of prescience. Prophecies, predictions, dreams and premonitions coming from gods and oracles were a natural element of the tragedy.

In Ancient Greek tragedy, the hero acted within the boundaries of the inevitable. He was powerless to prevent that which was imminent, but he acted all the same, and thus the plot was unfolded. It was not fate which carried the hero to the finale; his tragic destiny was his own doing. Take Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus-Rex*. Of his own free will and as a result of a conscious decision, he discovered the causes of the misfortunes which had befallen Thebes. But this "investigation" turned against the "chief investigator": Oedipus himself had brought the disaster about by killing his father and marrying his mother. However, even having almost arrived at the horrible truth, Oedipus did not terminate this investigation but brought it to a conclusion. He was free in his actions even if he realized that his death was inevitable. Oedipus is not a doomed person but a hero who acts independently and is guided by the will of the gods and that which has to be.

Greek tragedy is heroic. Aeschylus's Prometheus performed a heroic feat giving man fire, and was punished for it. The chorus sings glorifying the heroic in Prometheus:

Your heart is brave, you never will

Give in to grave misfortunes

The purpose of Ancient Greek tragedy is catharsis (purgation of the spectator).

In the middle Ages, tragedy was regarded not as heroism but as martyrdom. It revealed the presence of the supernatural, its purpose was to comfort. Unlike Prometheus, the tragedy of Christ is not that of a hero but that of a martyr. Mediaeval Christian tragedy emphasized suffering. Its central characters are martyrs. It is the tragedy not of purification but of consolation: the idea of catharsis is alien to it.

While in Ancient Greek tragedy extraordinary things happen as a matter of course, in mediaeval tragedy a place of importance belongs to the supernatural and the miraculous.

On the border between the Middle Ages and Renaissance rises the majestic figure of Dante. His interpretation of the tragic is both overshadowed by mediaeval ideas and marked by the light of hope brought

by the new era. *The Divine Comedy* is the second cornerstone of the aesthetic system of mediaeval tragedy: the miraculous and the supernatural. It has rather the intrinsic ordinariness of the supernatural and the real quality of unreality (the topography of Hell and the hellish vortex whirling the lovers are real enough) typical of the tragedy of classical antiquity, It is this return to antiquity adapted to an entirely different historical situation that makes Dante one of the first to express the ideas of the Renaissance.

Dante is much more openly compassionate towards Francesca and Paolo than the unknown author of *Tristram and Isolde* towards his heroes. The latter's sympathy is not really whole-hearted, he is sometimes disapproving or feels the need to justify his sympathy by supernatural reasons (the lovers have unwittingly drunk the love philter). Dante's compassion is devoid of hesitation and comes straight from the poet's heart, although he accepts the fact that the lovers deserve to suffer. The lines

*While to me thus one spirit was replying,
The other wept so, that for pitying dread
Faintness came over me as I were dying;
I fell, as falls the body of one dead*

Show clearly enough that Francesca and Paolo are martyrs, not heroes, and that Dante finds their martyrdom extremely moving. Mediaeval man explained the world through the divine. Renaissance man sought to explain it and its tragedies through the world itself.

In philosophy, the classical expression of this tendency was Spinoza's thesis treating nature as *causa Sui*. Art has reflected this idea even earlier. The world, including the domain of human relations, passions and tragedies, does not require a supernatural explanation; its foundation is neither fate or foreknowledge nor enchantment or witchcraft. To show the world as it really is, to explain everything by the intrinsic qualities of things, to derive everything from its own material nature-that was spirit of the new realism which found the most complete expression in Shakespeare's tragedies. The characters of Romeo and Juliet completely account for the circumstances of their lives. Their actions spring from their inner selves. The fateful words, "His name is Romeo, and a Montague, The only son of your great enemy", do nothing to change Juliet's love. She is not bound by any external reglaments. The sole measure and motive of her actions is her personality and her love for Romeo. Renaissance art revealed the social essence for the tragic conflict. Describing the world, tragedy proclaimed an as a free agent and asserted his free will. It would seem that the source of Hamlet's tragedy lies in the things which have happened to him. But Laertes has gone through similar ordeals. Why then is he not perceived as a tragic hero? Laertes is passive, while Hamlet consciously confronts the hostile circumstances. He chooses to oppose a "sea of troubles". The famous monologue is about this choice:

*To be, or not to be-that is the question.
Whether it's nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them-To die-to sleep-
No more...*

George Bernard Shaw said once, jokingly, that intelligent people adjust to the world while fools try to adjust the world to themselves; therefore, it is the fools who change the world and create history. In fact, this is a paradoxical way of formulating Hegel's idea of the tragic flaw. A sensible man is guided by common sense and the accepted prejudices of his time. The tragic hero is motivated by the need to fulfill himself no matter what. He is an independent individual who is free to choose the course and object of his actions. And it is his character and his actions that lead him to his ruin. The tragic climax is predetermined by the personality of the hero. External circumstances can only come into conflict with his character traits and lay them bare, but the reason for his actions lies within him. Consequently, he is the cause of his own death. According to Hegel, everything is the result of the hero's tragic flaw.

Hegel said that tragedy has a capacity for analyzing the condition of the world. In Hamlet, for example, we read: "the time is out of joint", "Denmark's a prison. " – Then is the world one". – "A goodly one, in which, there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one of the worst". There is deep meaning in the idea of the deluge. There are times when history overflows its banks and takes a long time to resume its normal course and flow, now unhurriedly, now rapidly, into the future. Happy is the poet who, living in a tempestuous age, manages to reveal the essence of his time in his writing: he touches history itself; his work necessarily reflects at least some of the major aspects of mankind's historical progress. In such epochs, art becomes the mirror of history. Modern tragedy has continued the Shakespearean tradition of going right to the heart of contemporary events and tackling global problems.

Critical realism of the 19th century (Dickens, Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol et al.) has made an essentially non-tragic character the protagonist of the tragedy. In life, tragedy became a common occurrence, and its hero-an alienated, private and fractional (according to Hegel) individual. As a result, tragedy as a genre disappeared from art, but as an element, it has penetrated all artistic kinds and genres, expressing the desperate conflict between man and society.

The tragic can cease to be an attribute of the life of society only when society is humanized and brought into harmony with the individual. The desire of man to overcome the discord in life and recover the lost meaning of life-this is the concept of the tragic and the idea behind this theme as developed by critical realism of the 20th century (Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Leonhard Frank, Heinrich Boll, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, George Gershwin, et al.).

Tragic art reveals the social meaning of man's life showing that his immortality is realized through the immortality of his people. A major theme of tragedy is man and history. Making an abstract of Friedrich Theodor Fischer's Aesthetic Oder Wissenschaft der Schonen, Karl Marx noted that the true theme of tragedy is revolution. A revolutionary conflict must become the centre of modern tragedy. Tragic heroes are motivated not by personal whims but by the historical process which raises them on its crest.

THE ESSENCE OF THE TRAGIC

Tragedy is a stern word filled with hopelessness. It leaves a shadow of death, its icy breath is immediately perceptible. But similar to the dawn whose light and shadow make objects more expressive, the idea of death makes man acutely conscious of life's beauty, poignancy, joy and complexity. When death is near, the hues of life are all the more bright, its aesthetic wealth, sensuous charm and grandeur of the ordinariness are all the greater, and truth, falsehood, good, evil and the very meaning of human existence are all the more striking.

Tragedy is always *optimistic*: in it, even death serves life. *The tragic*, then, shows (1) death or acute suffering of the individual; (2) the inability for the people to replace the loss; (3) The immortal socially valuable features of the individual and their continuation in the life of mankind; (4) global metaphysical problems of existence and the social meaning of human life; (5) the ability of the tragic hero to act freely in the circumstances; (6) The philosophically interpreted condition of the world; (7) the contradictions which cannot be resolved at a given stage of historical development; (8) expressed in the form of art, the tragic purifies people.

Great art has always welcomed progress, and in its progress it hurried life. Its desire is to attain the ideal as soon as possible. What Hegel called the tragic flaw is in fact an amazing ability not to conform to the imperfect world but to proceed from the ideal of life as it should be. The conflict with the world is fraught with deadly consequences for the individual: the clouds gather, and in the end death strikes like lightning. But it is the individual to conform, who refuses to conform, who makes the world a better place and opens new vistas for humanity by his suffering and death.

The kernel problem of tragic art is expanding the scope of man's action, a break through the historically established boundaries which have become too narrow for the more advanced individuals fired by a desire to attain new ideals. The tragic hero blazes the trail towards the future overstepping the existing limitations; he is always ahead of his time and is therefore destined to carry the heaviest load. *Tragedy presents a concept of life*

which reveals its social meaning. The essence and purpose of human existence is not to be found either in total egoism or total altruism. The individual should develop not at the expense of society but for the good of society and humanity as a whole. On the other hand, Society should progress fighting for man's interests and not despite man and at his expenses. This is the highest aesthetic ideal, the way to find a human solution of the problems of man and mankind, and the most general conclusion attained by world tragic art.

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