Reconciliation and Recalcitrance in the Philosophy of Tragedy after Kant: Schelling, Heidegger, Schürmann

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Abstract: Kant had little to say about tragedy, whether as a literary genre or as a description of the human condition. Yet, it was thanks to his insights into the sublime and the antinomy of freedom and nature that the young Schelling was able to place tragedy at the center of the philosophical enterprise. In this paper, I contend that the post-Kantian philosophy of tragedy begins with Schelling's conception of the tragic as a model for reconciliation and ends with Heidegger's and especially Reiner Schürmann's conception of the tragic as an irreconcilable feature of being.
Keywords: tragedy, reconciliation, double bind, Schelling, Heidegger, Schürmann

> "The hero of tragedy, one who nonetheless calmly bears all the severity and capriciousness of fate heaped upon his head, represents for just this reason that *In-Itself*, that Unconditioned and Absolute itself in his person. [… He] is only the symbol of the infinite, of that which *transcends all suffering*."
> —Schelling[1]

> "*Beyng* itself is 'tragic.'"
> —Heidegger[2]

> "this nomic monster: the originary, and in that sense ultimate, disparity of legislation-transgression. This is the tragic double bind."
> —Schürmann[3]

[1] Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*. Schelling, K. F. A., ed. Stuttgart: Cotta, I/5, p. 467 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1989. *The Philosophy of Art*. Ed. and trans. D. W. Scott. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 89 (modified).
[2] Heidegger, M., 1975–. *Gesamtausgabe*. 102 volumes. Frankfurt: Klostermann, p. 417 / Heidegger, M., 2017. *Ponderings VII–XI: Black Notebooks 1938–1939*. Trans. R. Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 325.
[3] Schürmann, R., 2019. *Tomorrow the Manifold: Essays on Foucault, Anarchy, and the Singular-*

Immanuel Kant had little to say about tragedy, whether as a literary genre or as a description of the human condition. Yet, it was thanks to his insights into the sublime and the antinomy of freedom and nature that the young Schelling was able to place tragedy at the center of the philosophical enterprise. Philosophy after Kant has been, will or nil, a philosophy of tragedy. As Dennis Schmidt has written: "while Schelling makes the rejuvenation of the question of tragedy an explicit matter, it is Kant who makes this return inevitable […]. [T]he predominance, if not the complete domination, of the question posed by the idea of the tragic in the past two centuries is owing to the work of Kant."[4]

By "philosophy of tragedy," I mean several things: (1) the recognition that tragedy is an exemplary site for addressing philosophical problems; (2) the view that philosophy, at various points in or even throughout its entire history, has had a tragic character, in which case we might speak instead of the "tragedy of philosophy"; (3) the question of whether the tragic character of philosophy is ineradicable, and (4), if not, whether this might have something to do with the status that philosophy accords—or fails to accord—to tragedy. Might tragedy, or better, *the tragic*, be the *Sache*, the very matter, of philosophy? Further, what happens to the tragic when philosophy attempts to grasp it? Is it overcome? Or is any pretension of overcoming not itself hubristic, hence a constitutive element of the tragedy of philosophy? But what else can we do? Is it possible to think of being as irreconcilably conflicted, yet without purporting to resolve the conflict in the very thinking of it? These questions, which set the stakes of the philosophy of tragedy after Kant, can be summarized in the following alternative: is the tragic a model for *reconciliation*, or is it rather an irreconcilable feature of being, hence inherently *recalcitrant* to resolution?

Now, I obviously cannot tell the whole story of the philosophy of tragedy after Kant, for that would, if what I said above is true, amount to telling the complete story of philosophy after Kant. Nor, in this paper, can I discuss all or even many of the most prominent protagonists of this tale. Instead, I will concentrate on what I take to be the beginning and end of the post-Kantian philosophy of tragedy, namely, Schelling's *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795) and *Philosophy of Art* (1802–1803), on the one hand, and Heidegger's private manuscripts from Nazi Germany and, even more so, Reiner Schürmann's *Broken Hegemonies* (1997), on the other hand. These

ization to Come. Rauch, M. F. – Schneider, N., eds. Zurich: Diaphanes, p. 125.

[4] Schmidt, D. J., 2001. *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 74.

texts (by the early Schelling, on one side, and by Heidegger and Schürmann, on the other) represent not only the beginning and end of this tradition but also, as I will show, the two prongs of the alternative of reconciliation or recalcitrance.

Before I begin, some terminological distinctions are in order. In what follows, I will refer to the literary genre as *tragic drama*. I will use the word *tragedy* to describe a catastrophic event. And *the tragic* will signify a conflicted state or condition (whether epistemological, ontological, or anthropological). When reconcilable, I will characterize the tragic as *transfiguring*. Both the transitive and intransitive uses of "transfigure" should be heard in participial adjective of phrase "the transfiguring tragic." The tragic solves other problems, thereby transfiguring them (transitive). But it can also transfigure (intransitive) or, as one would more commonly say in English, transfigure itself (reflexive) in the process, indeed to the point of no longer being tragic.[5] "Transfiguring," despite its awkwardness, also has the advantage over synonyms such as "transforming" and "transmuting" in connoting the Transfiguration of Jesus (*Verklärung Christi*). Karl Jaspers has claimed there is no such thing as Christian tragedy, since the "chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without chance of escape."[6] It will be necessary to ask whether the proponents of the conciliatory model of the tragic are ultimately too tied, however knowingly, to the Christian paradigm to do justice to the tragic itself. In their work, the tragic would be but a figure for something else, something more akin to a Divine Comedy.

When irreconcilable, I will characterize the tragic as a *double bind*. Gregory Bateson's definition in "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia" (1956), which the Oxford English Dictionary records as the earliest known usage of the phrase in English, is helpful, although, with Schürmann, I will extend its scope beyond the realm of psychopathology. For there to be a double bind, Bateson maintains that there must be a "primary negative injunction," a "secondary injunction conflicting with the first," and a "tertiary negative injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping from the field."[7] In other words, there must be not only two conflicting laws, but a third law proscribing flight, resolution, or even appeal to higher jurisdiction. The third law says: *tertium non datur*, there is no third option.

[5] The OED (s.v. "transfigure") gives this example from Browning for the rare intransitive use: "He no genius rare Transfiguring in fire, or wave, or air, At will."

[6] Jaspers, K., 1947. *Von der Wahrheit*. Munich: Piper, p. 924 / Jaspers, K., 1952. *Tragedy Is Not Enough*. Trans. H. A. T. Reiche, H. T. Moore, and K. W. Deutsch. Boston: Beacon, p. 38.

[7] Bateson, G., 1987. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, pp. 206 – 207. OED, s.v. "double bind."

I. The Transfiguring Tragic in the Early Schelling

In 1795, the young Schelling began work on a series of philosophical letters that would soon appear in a journal coedited by Fichte and Niethammer. These letters, which challenge both Kantian-Fichtean criticism and Spinozist dogmatism, have been said to "herald," after over two millennia of neglect, "the return of tragic art as an ineluctable question for philosophy."[8] The reason for this return of tragic drama at the end of the eighteenth century was the inadequacy of philosophy, as a rational enterprise, to show the unity of freedom and necessity, of idealism and realism, of subject and object, of critical and dogmatic systems, in the absolute. Of such unity, which can be seen as an attempt to overcome both the third antinomy and the ontological limitation of freedom as a mere postulate of practical reason in Kant, Schelling writes in the ninth letter:

> He who has reflected upon freedom and necessity has found for himself that these two principles must be *united* in the absolute: *freedom*, because the absolute acts by unconditional autonomy, and *necessity*, because it acts, precisely for this reason, only according to the laws of its own being, the inner necessity of its essence. […] Absolute freedom and absolute necessity are identical.[9]

In Schelling's view, ancient Greek tragic drama is capable of doing what philosophy, whether critical or dogmatic, cannot. (In his *Philosophy of Art*, Schelling will explain what is distinctive about this form of tragic drama in contrast to both modern tragic drama and other poetic genres. Drama, of which tragic drama is a species, is a synthesis of freedom and necessity, whereas lyric poetry is merely subjective and represents only freedom and epic poetry is merely objective and represents only necessity. Comedy, the other species of drama, is inadequate because it fails to stage the conflict of freedom and necessity. Modern tragic drama is inadequate because it internalizes fate.[10]) If the ninth of the *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* ends with the suggestion of an unending quest for the absolute, the tenth shows precisely where it is realized, namely, in tragic drama, which Schelling identifies both as "the highest in art" and, particularly in

[8] Schmidt, D. J., 2001. *On Germans and Other Greeks*, ibid., p. 73.

[9] Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/1, pp. 330 – 331 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1980. *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794–1796)*. Trans. F. Marti. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, p. 189 (modified).

[10] For more on these distinctions in Schelling's *Philosophy of Art*, see Young, J., 2013. *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 75 – 80.

the 1802–1803 *Philosophy of Art*, as "sublime" (thereby confirming the Kantian background, if not the solution, to the problem).

First, a quotation from the tenth of the *Letters*:

> Many a time the question has been asked how Greek reason could bear the contradictions of its tragedy. A mortal, destined by fate to become a criminal and himself fighting *against* this fate, is nevertheless appallingly punished for the crime, although it was a work of destiny! The *ground* of this contradiction, that which made the contradiction bearable, lay deeper than one would seek it. It lay in the contest between human freedom and the power of the objective world in which the mortal must succumb *necessarily* if that power is absolutely superior, if it is a *fatum*. […] It was a *grand* thought [*ein* großer *Gedanke*], to suffer punishment willingly even for an *inevitable* crime, so as to prove one's freedom by the very loss of this freedom, and to go down with a declaration of free will.[11]

Schelling is referring to Oedipus here. In contrast to Aristotle, who considered the protagonists of successful tragic drama to be neither wholly virtuous nor wholly vicious but instead to perish due to *hamartia megalē* or "a great error" in judgement (*Poetics* 1453a16), Schelling considers Oedipus (like Christ) to be blameless.[12] Oedipus is freest when he accepts his unmerited and irreversible downfall. He thereby, Schelling believes, allows for an aesthetic intuition of the unity of freedom and necessity in the absolute. In the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), Schelling will explain that this sort of intuition is nothing other than an "intellectual intuition [that has] become objective."[13] Art, in particular ancient Greek tragic drama, thus grants us intuitive knowledge of that which, according to Kant, transcends the bounds of experience and thus of what can be known. Indeed, in the first *Critique*, Kant had declared intellectual intuition (i.e., an apprehension of the noumena unmediated by space and time as forms of sensibility and by the categories of the understanding) to be, as such, impossible for human beings.

[11] Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/1, pp. 336 – 337 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1980. *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, ibid., pp. 192–93 (modified).

[12] See the later discussion in Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/5, p. 695 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1989. *The Philosophy of Art*. Ed. and trans. D. W. Scott. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 252.

[13] Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/3, p. 627 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1978. *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*. Trans. P. Heath. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, p. 231. "Intellectual" is Schelling's later correction of "transcendental."

Schelling's recourse to intellectual intuition is not, as I suggested earlier, the only aspect of his understanding of tragic drama that is at once indebted to and seeks to go beyond Kant. In the *Philosophy of Art*, Schelling develops his interpretation of Oedipus, this time connecting it more explicitly to the sublime as articulated in Kant's third *Critique*:

> *Misfortune* obtains only as long as the will of necessity is not yet decided and apparent. As soon as the protagonist himself achieves clarity, and his fate lies open before him, there is no more doubt for him, or at least there should not be. And precisely at the moment of *greatest* suffering [*im Moment des* höchsten *Leidens*] he enters into the greatest liberation and greatest dispassion [*Leidenslosigkeit*]. From that moment on, the insurmountable power of fate, which earlier appeared in absolute dimensions [*absolut-groß*], now appears merely relatively great, for it is overcome by the will and becomes the symbol of the absolutely great, namely, of the sublime attitude and disposition [*Gesinnung*]. […] [T]hat this guiltless guilty person accepts punishment voluntarily—this is the *sublime* in tragedy [*das* Erhabene *in der Tragödie*]; thereby alone does freedom transfigure itself [*verklärt sich*] into the highest identity with necessity.[14]

Several things should be noted here. First, Schelling's phrase *absolut-groß* is taken directly from the third *Critique*, where Kant uses it to describe the sublime as immeasurable and incomparable: "If […] we call something not only great, but simply, absolutely great, great in every respect (beyond all comparison), i.e., sublime [*schlechthin, absolut, in aller Absicht (über alle Vergleichung) groß, d. i. erhaben*], then one immediately sees that we do not allow a suitable standard for it to be sought outside of it, but merely within it."[15]

Second, Schelling initially appears to follow Kant in associating the sublime with Oedipus's disposition. In Kant's view, the sublime does not, properly speaking, refer to an object, despite the frequency with which one may, via "subreption," judge a natural phenomenon, e.g., an erupting volcano or a sea storm, to be sublime.[16] Rather, the experience of such

[14] Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/5, pp. 698 – 699 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1989, *The Philosophy of Art*, ibid., pp. 254–55. Schelling does reference the sublime once in the tenth *Letter*: "The invisible power is too sublime [*zu erhaben*] to be bribed by adulation; their [the ancient Greeks'] heroes are too noble to be saved by cowardice. There is nothing left but to fight and fail." Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/1, pp. 337 – 338 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1980. *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, ibid., p. 193.

[15] Kant, I., 2009. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Klemme, H. F., ed. Hamburg: Meiner / Kant, I., 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Guyer, P., ed. Trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 5:250.

[16] Ibid., 5:257.

things points instead to the sublimity (*Erhabenheit*, from the German *erheben*, "to elevate") of the "disposition of the mind in estimating [them]," that is, to the elevation (*Erhebung*) of the mind over nature.[17] However, Schelling goes on to locate the sublime in the tragic drama *itself*, thereby de-subjectivizing it.

Third, this shift from the subject to the object is also a shift from nature (as experienced by the subject) to art, which was at best secondary for Kant, if it could even be called sublime.

Finally, and now turning to my main concern in this paper, Schelling's conception of tragic drama here is fundamentally *conciliatory*, which could also be said of Kant's project, despite the merely regulative use of reason.[18] Recalling his *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, Schelling writes that the synthesis of freedom and necessity in the hero's acceptance of his fate is "the innermost spirit of Greek tragedy," "the only genuinely *tragic* element [*das einzig wahrhaft* Tragische] in tragedy," and "the basis for the reconciliation [*Versöhnung*] and harmony [*Harmonie*] residing in them [i.e., Greek tragic dramas], the reason they do not leave us devastated but rather leave us healed and, as Aristotle says, cleansed [*uns nicht zerrissen, sondern geheilt, und … gereinigt zurücklassen*]."[19] It should come as little surprise that Schelling goes on to discuss Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, where the Erinyes are pacified and Orestes is acquitted. Further, Schelling's use of the verb *verklären* ("transfigure") in the earlier quotation from the *Philosophy of Art* ("thereby alone does freedom transfigure itself into the highest identity with necessity") suggests less the self-blinding of Oedipus at Thebes than his apotheosis at Colonus. And what, for Schelling, the blind, elderly Oedipus sees is not the tragic nature of being but rather reconciliation, harmony, "perfect indifference [*vollkommene Indifferenz*]," and

[17] For the paronomasia in Kant, see ibid., 5:262.

[18] As K. Kerimov writes in his critique of Andrew Cooper's book *The Tragedy of Philosophy*: "Tragedy must in Kant's account give way to moral and epistemic optimism. […] Kant's response to tragedy is an overcoming of it, one that is accomplished with reference to the principle of purposiveness and, more importantly, the moral argument for God's existence. Consider Kant's response to Moses Mendelssohn's pessimism about progress in human history, which is one of the very few places that Kant uses the term 'Trauerspiel' in his corpus. Kant writes: 'To watch this tragedy [*Trauerspiel*] [i.e., of human history] for a while might be moving and instructive, but the curtain must eventually fall. For in the long run it turns into a farce; and even if the actors do not tire of it, because they are fools, the spectator does.' Does not [contra Cooper] Kant appear as a deeply and explicitly anti-tragic thinker judging by this passage?" Kerimov, K., 2019. [Review of] Andrew Cooper, *The Tragedy of Philosophy: Kant's* Critique of Judgment *and the Project of Aesthetics*. *Philosophy Today* 63(2), pp. 540 – 541.

[19] Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/5: 697 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1989. *The Philosophy of Art*, ibid., 254 (modified).

the very "equilibrium [*Gleichgewicht*]" that, Schelling claims, "is the ultimate concern [*die Hauptsache*] of tragedy."[20] Here *höchste Leidenslosigkeit* reigns, the "highest dispassion" or, more literally, the "highest lack of suffering."[21] When, on an unnamed mountaintop, Christ anticipates his great suffering at Golgotha, he too gives a sign of its transfiguration: "There in their presence he was transfigured [μετεμορφώθη, *ward verklärt*]: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light" (Matthew 17:2). The tragic in the early Schelling is basically Christian—hence, one could argue, untragic.

To be sure, my focus on the transfiguring tragic in early Schelling is not meant to stand in for Schelling as a whole, although I might note that Schelling's stress on God's containment of the unruly ground within himself and on Christian eschatology in, for example, the *Freedom Essay* has a similarly conciliatory outcome, even if he gives more weight there to disorder and disease at the outset.[22] One can certainly find traces of what David Krell has called a "tragic absolute" throughout Schelling's tormented corpus.[23] But it is remarkable that the inception of the "philosophy of the tragic," which Peter Szondi locates in Schelling's *Letters* (in contrast to a "poetics of tragedy" beginning with Aristotle), is not about the tragic *nature* of being or of the human being. It is not about a tragic double bind. Rather, Schelling "subscribes," in Szondi's words, "to the idealistic faith that believes it has the tragic under its power and that acknowledges it only because it has discovered a meaning in it: the assertion of freedom. Accordingly, [Schelling] sees the tragic process in *Oedipus Rex* as significant not in itself, but only in view of its telos. […] [T]he possibility of a purely tragic process was alien to him."[24]

[20] Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/5: 699 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1989. *The Philosophy of Art*, ibid., 251, 255. Such reconciliation seems hardly "agonal" or "monstrous," as Das nevertheless contends in *The Political Theology of Schelling*, chapter 6.

[21] See the block quotation above. See also Schelling, F. W. J., 1856–1861. *Sämmtliche Werke*, ibid., I/5: 467 / Schelling, F. W. J., 1989. *The Philosophy of Art*, ibid., 89, partially quoted already in the first epigraph: "The courageous person engaged in a struggle with misfortune, a struggle in which he neither wins a physical victory nor capitulates morally, is only the symbol of the infinite, of that which *transcends all suffering* [über alles Leiden *ist*]. Only within the maximum of suffering can that principle be revealed in which there is *no* suffering, just as everywhere things are revealed only in their opposites."

[22] See Moore, I. A., 2024. The Divine Stakes of Human Freedom: Jonas in Dialogue with Schelling. *Kabiri: The Official Journal of the North American Schelling Society* 4, pp. 113 – 129.

[23] See Krell, D. F., 2005. *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, especially chapter 6.

[24] Szondi, P., 1978. *Schriften I*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 151, 159 / Szondi, P., 2002. *An Essay on the Tragic*. Trans. P. Fleming. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 1, 8 – 9.

II. The Tragic Double Bind and Its Transfiguration in Heidegger

I will now leap ahead to the end of the transfiguring tragic in the twentieth century. One could, no doubt, find contributions to this end in intermediate figures such as Hölderlin and Nietzsche. Space constrains me to leap over them, however, and go right to Heidegger.

Heidegger has a fair amount to say about tragic drama as a form of poetry in which being is founded or instituted, that is, as a way in which a world is opened up and sustained for a people or epoch. He also considers the fate of Western metaphysics as a kind of tragedy.[25] Here, however, I will concentrate on the few occasions that concern less tragic drama than the tragic as a condition of being. These remarks (and indeed his serious engagement with tragic drama more broadly) are almost entirely confined to the years of Nazi Germany. Much could be said about this, but I will leave aside the fraught relation between Heidegger's biography and his thinking. My contention is that, although Heidegger lays the groundwork for, and begins to develop, the tragic double bind, in the end he shrinks back from it.

First, some evidence in Heidegger in favor of the tragic double bind. Although he does not explicitly associate it with the language of the tragic, an important passage in support of the tragic double bind in Heidegger, one that will be crucial for Schürmann in *Broken Hegemonies*, can be found in §146 of Heidegger's *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (1936–1938). This section deals with *Seyn* or "beyng" and *Nichtseyn* or "not-beyng." (Both of these words are written with an archaic "y" instead of an "i" in order to mark their difference from "metaphysics" in Heidegger's pejorative understanding of the word, that is, their difference from the approach to being that understands it as an entity or in terms of entities. Heidegger sometimes uses the term "beingness" to refer to the mistaken way in which being itself is understood in this approach.) Heidegger writes:

> Because the "not" [*das Nicht*] belongs to the essence of beyng […], beyng likewise belongs to the "not." In other words, what has genuinely the quality of the "not" [*das eigentlich Nichtige*] is the negative [*das Nichthafte*] and is in no way whatever mere "nothingness" [*das bloße "Nichts"*] as the latter is grasped through the representational denial of something. […] Out of the uniqueness of beyng there follows the uniqueness of the "not" that belongs to it and thus the uniqueness of

[25] See, for example, Heidegger, M., 1975–. *Gesamtausgabe*, ibid., GA 95: 236 / Heidegger, M., 2017. *Ponderings VII–XI*, ibid., pp. 182 – 183.

> the other. / The one *and* the other compel for themselves [*erzwingen selbst sich*] the either–or as first. / But this apparently most general and emptiest distinction [namely, "*either* something *or* nothing"] has to be recognized as one that is such only for the interpretation of beingness [and not for non-metaphysical beyng].[26]

The belonging together (but not identity) of beyng and not-beyng here can be understood as a variation on other conflictual twofolds in Heidegger, such as the strife of world and earth in, for example, the work of art, of unconcealment and concealment in *a-lētheia*, and of appropriation (*Ereignung*) and expropriation (*Enteignung*) in the event (*Ereignis*). In the *Beiträge*, Heidegger is trying to think of the truth of beyng as *constitutively* conflictual, as *zerklüftet* or "fissured" *at the very origin* (and not, say, as the result of a *lapsus* or *kenōsis*). As he puts it in the final section of the manuscript (later rearranged for publication), connecting it to the task of the human to inhabit this fissure: "What compels […] is only that about the event which cannot be calculated or fabricated—in other words, only the truth of beyng. Blessed is whoever may belong to the wretchedness of its fissure [*Selig, wer der Unseligkeit seiner Zerklüftung zugehören darf*]."[27] One way of understanding "the other beginning" in Heidegger is precisely in terms of this strange beatitude: the other beginning occurs when one no longer dreams of wholeness and simplicity, when one plants oneself not on solid ground but in the gap of an abyss, when one, as Heidegger notes of the *incipit tragoedia* of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, says "'yes' to the extreme 'no.'"[28]

Yet there is another current running through Heidegger's discourse, one that pushes him away from the tragic toward harmony, gentleness, repose, serenity, and conciliation. This is not to say that the twofold character of beyng disappears. But it is purified of conflict. I do not find it

[26] Ibid., GA 65: 267–68 / Heidegger, M., 2012. *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*. Trans. R. Rojcewicz and D. Vallega-Neu. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 210. Schürmann nevertheless leaves out the object in his translation of the penultimate sentence: "The one *and* the other are binding." Schürmann, R., 2019. *Tomorrow the Manifold*, ibid., p. 134.

[27] Heidegger, M., 1975–. *Gesamtausgabe*, ibid., GA 65: 416 / Heidegger, M., 2012. *Contributions to Philosophy*, ibid., p. 329. Schürmann renders *Das Zwingende […] des Ereignis* as "the event alone is binding" (Schürmann, R., 2019. *Tomorrow the Manifold*, ibid., p. 149). He contends that Heidegger is here "speaking of the tragic event in its disparate pull of appropriation-expropriation" (ibid.), and that "these words from the last section of the *Contributions* […] sum up the tragic condition […] which Heidegger paid so dearly to discover" (Schürmann, R., 2017. *Des hégémonies brisées*. 2nd ed. Zurich: Diaphanes, p. 672 / Schürmann, R., 2003. *Broken Hegemonies*. Trans. R. Lilly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 583).

[28] Heidegger, M., 1975–. *Gesamtausgabe*, ibid., GA 6.1: 251 / Heidegger, M., 1991. *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two; The Will to Power as Art, The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*. Trans. D. F. Krell. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2:32.

a coincidence that the German words for tragedy and the tragic almost entirely disappear from Heidegger's writings after the war. (The one exception I can think of associates "the essence of tragedy [= the tragic]" with a *Verwinden* or "surmounting" of "disorder."[29]) Yet it should be noted that Heidegger was already hesitant about the terminology of tragic in the 1930s. Moreover, his frequent association of the tragic not just with downfall, but with a subsequent, superior beginning calls into question its insuperability.

To show this, four passages will have to suffice. The first can be found in one of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* from 1938–1939. Initially, he asks whether the contemporaneous lack of interest in "realms of decision" means "that being has withdrawn from beings, whereby a *katastrophē* into its (beyng's) abyss has become unimaginable." "Catastrophe" here is taken literally and positively, as a "turning downward," not as a calamity. It is what enables a proper relation to beyng. Heidegger can accordingly call beyng tragic ("*Beyng* itself is 'tragic'"), but only in the sense that "it begins out of the downgoing qua abyss [*Untergang als Ab-grund*] and tolerates such beginnings only as that which does justice to its truth."[30]

The second passage comes from Heidegger's manuscript *Besinnung*, composed in the same years as the aforementioned *Black Notebook*. It links this downgoing more explicitly to the history of metaphysics "from [Ancient Greek] *phusis* to the 'eternal return' [in Nietzsche]," a history in which, incidentally, he also includes "'tragic poetic works' [*'tragischen Dichtungen*'] hitherto" as "perhaps mere forecourts, because in accordance with their belongingness to the metaphysics of the Occident, these poetic works poetize beings, and only indirectly do they poetize beyng." Heidegger begins by defining "'the tragic'" (again in scare quotes). It resembles the previous definition; only, now the "beginning" becomes more of an Aristotelian *telos*. That is to say, the beginning is at once the basis and goal of the movement of history: "If we see the essence of the 'tragic' as consisting in the beginning being the ground of the downgoing, and the downgoing being not an 'end' but rather the rounding of the beginning, then the tragic belongs to the essence of being." However, since this structure of beginning–downgoing–beginning is intelligible without recourse to the language of the tragic, Heidegger suggests dropping the term.[31]

[29] Ibid., GA 5: 357–58 / Heidegger, M., 1984. *Early Greek Thinking*. Trans. D. F. Krell and F. A. Capuzzi. New York: Harper and Row, p. 44.
[30] Ibid., GA 95: 417 / Heidegger, M., 2017. *Ponderings VII–XI: Black Notebooks 1938–1939*, ibid., p. 325 (modified).
[31] Ibid., GA 66: 223–24 / Heidegger, M., 2006. *Mindfulness*. Trans. P. Emad and T. Kalary. New

The third passage comes from a different *Black Notebook*, composed sometime between 1939–1941. The topic is again how to understand downgoing, but here Heidegger rejects the tragic. He also uses two terms for the beginning that point in the direction of the pacification of conflict and in the direction of a different notion of the other beginning than the one I alluded to earlier. These two terms are *still*, "silent/still/tranquil," and *einfach*, "simple":

> Two essentially different kinds of "*downgoing*" are now not only possible, but necessary: downgoing in the sense of nonconformity with the "time" of the consummation of modernity, a lagging behind on account of a refusal to participate in machination, and, on the other hand, downgoing as disappearance into the concealedness of another beginning. The latter downgoing bears all the traits of the first one and yet is in advance and constantly different—by no means a "heroic" and "tragic" downgoing, but instead only the most silent and simplest one on the basis of the affiliation to being in the midst of the abandonment by being of the beings disporting themselves only in machination, and by no means a downgoing laden with regret and sorrow [*Trauer*].[32]

Finally, in a lecture course from Summer Semester 1943, Heidegger goes so far as to associate the tragic with the will to will, which marks the culmination of metaphysical machination: "The increasingly shrill cry for 'perceptibility' passes from the comic directly into becoming a sign of the tragic—that is, the sign of a will which, while it wills itself, in fact only wills against itself and counteracts itself and thereby even perceives itself as 'logical.'"[33]

Heidegger, in short, moves from a tragic double bind, though the transfiguring tragic, to the abandonment of the tragic as a—let alone *the*—matter for thought.

III. The Tragic Double Bind in Schürmann

In 2011, French philosopher Mehdi Belhaj Kacem called Reiner Schürmann's posthumously published *Broken Hegemonies* "the greatest philosophy book of the last 25 or 30 years," adding that its author was "the greatest

York: Continuum, pp. 197–98 (modified).

[32] Ibid., GA 96: 180 / Heidegger, M., 2017. *Ponderings XII–XV: Black Notebooks 1939–1941*. Trans. R. Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 142.

[33] Ibid., GA 55: 138–39 / Heidegger, M., 2018. *Heraclitus: The Inception of Occidental Thinking and Logic: Heraclitus' Doctrine of the Logos*. Trans. J. G. Assaiante and S. M. Ewegen. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 104.

Heideggerian of the 20th century. His thinking is the most negative, the darkest in the history of philosophy, which is why he is no longer read, and why he must, in my opinion, be read."[34] What is so dark about this book is its unflinching stress on the insuperably tragic condition of both being and the human being, which Schürmann understands in terms of a double bind between, at the level of being, appropriation and expropriation and between, at the level of the human being, natality and mortality. The ultimate task of *Broken Hegemonies* is to rehabilitate this tragic double bind through, among other things, a critical analysis of the "hegemonic fantasms" under which the West has lived since antiquity. Hegemonic fantasms are, in each case, ultimate, simple norms for all legitimate thought, discourse, and action. They are hegemonic because totalizing, and fantasmatic because deluded about their scope. Schürmann describes the task of *Broken Hegemonies* as follows:

> With the exterminations [in the death camps] still alive in our memories and planetary asphyxiations already in our throats, the ease with which a whole age nonetheless continues to graze, as if nothing had happened, is enough to leave one perplexed. To think is to linger on the conditions in which one is living, to linger at the site we inhabit. Thus to think is a privilege of that epoch which is ours, provided that the essential fragility of the sovereign referents becomes evident to it. This assigns to philosophy, or to whatever takes its place, the task of showing the tragic condition beneath all principle-based [*principielle*] constructions [i.e., beneath what Schürmann will soon call "hegemonic fantasms"].[35]

Here, I will not focus on Schürmann's effort to find a tragic double bind at work in the various hegemonic fantasms throughout history and in the writings of those who contributed to their rise and fall. I do, however, want to note that, despite numerous problems with Heidegger's *Beiträge zur Philososphie: Vom Ereignis*, and despite the near absence of the language of "tragedy" and "the tragic" in it,[36] Schürmann finds in Heidegger's so-called second magnum opus the closest attestation of the tragic double bind as Schürmann understands it: "In this work, Heidegger pursues the

[34] Kacem, M. B., Zahm, O., 2011. Interview. *Purple* S/S 15. [Accessed: 2024-08-10]. Available at: https://purple.fr/magazine/ss-2011-issue-15/mehdi-belhaj-kacem-4/.
[35] Schürmann, R., 2017. *Des Hégémonies brisées*, ibid., pp. 9, 13 / Schürmann, R., 2003. *Broken Hegemonies*, ibid., pp. 3, 6 (modified).
[36] The word *tragisch* does not appear, and the two references to *Tragödie* are elliptical. See Heidegger, M., 1975–. *Gesamtausgabe*, ibid., GA 65: 360, 374 / Heidegger, M., 2012. *Contributions to Philosophy*, ibid., pp. 284, 296.

question of being qua being and answers it (although not in exactly these words) by interpreting being itself as the one originary double bind."[37] Yet Schürmann does not register the late Heidegger's retreat from the tragic, believing instead that Heidegger, like Oedipus at Colonus, had learned his lesson.

To appreciate Schürmann's understanding of the tragic double bind (which he also calls "the legislative tragic") and how we might learn to live in the face of it, I will focus instead on two models Schürmann develops in the general introduction to his magnum opus. The first comes from the tragic dramas of ancient Athens, the second from a far less likely context, namely, debates in physics over the being of certain substances (electromagnetic energy, quantum-scale objects).

Although, for Schürmann, Oedipus exemplifies the hero of "tragic logic," whose "empty and black globes see the double bind admitting of no reconciliation, superelevation or synthesis,"[38] Agamemnon is the most important figure in helping us to appreciate tragic denial, by which I mean both denial of the tragic and the tragic implications of this denial or what I had earlier referred to simply as tragedy. For, the disparity of the double bind that Agamemnon faces is more pronounced than those faced by the other heroes of tragic drama.

Agamemnon was the leader of the Achaeans in the Trojan War. After the Trojan prince Paris abducted Helen, i.e., the wife of Agamemnon's brother Menelaus, the brothers gathered a vast army to get her back (to say nothing of other motives such as territorial expansion, the plundering of wealth, curiosity in the case of Odysseus, etc.). Before sailing across the Aegean Sea to what is now Western Turkey, the army assembled in the Greek port-town of Aulis in ancient Boeotia. Artemis, goddess of childbirth and the hunt, delayed the voyage by sending unfavorable winds, either because of the deaths that would follow and of all those who would thus be unborn (as recounted in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, lines 134–38) or because Agamemnon had killed a sacred stag in her sacred grove and boasted about it (as told in Sophocles's *Elektra*, lines 558–72). Calchas, the *stratomantis* or seer for the army, prophesied that a sacrifice would have to be made in turn, namely, that of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia. The Greek leader was therefore left with a clear choice: act either for the sake of

[37] Schürmann, R., 1994. A Brutal Awakening to the Tragic Condition of Being: On Heidegger's *Beiträge zur Philosophie*. Trans. K. Blamey. In: Harries, K. – Jamme, C., eds. *Martin Heidegger: Art, Politics, and Technology*. New York: Holmes & Meier, p. 90.
[38] Ibid.

what was believed to be the largest army ever assembled, that is, for what one might call the Greek universal, backed as it was by Zeus himself, or for the sake of his sole daughter Iphigenia, that is, for the singular.

At first, in a passage cited by Schürmann as an epigraph to the section of the general introduction on "The Birth of the Law from the Denial of the Tragic," Agamemnon recognizes the bind he is in: "Cruel is my lot," he exclaims, "if I rebel; but it is just as cruel if I must sacrifice my child, the jewel of my house, and, at the altar, soil my fatherly hands with the bloody flood gushing from a slaughtered virgin. Is there a course that does not spell misery?"[39] Note, first, the equality of options here: one is *just as bad* as the other. Thus calculation, the weighing of alternatives, the search for models to imitate, are all moot. At this point, Agamemnon's question can only be taken as rhetorical. Either course spells misery.

Comfort, at least, might be had in the search for causes and the assignation of responsibility. Perhaps, if we are to take Sophocles's version of the story seriously, Agamemnon shouldn't have shot the stag. Perhaps Helen should have stayed home. Perhaps Paris should have refused to decide which goddess was the fairest. Perhaps Eris shouldn't have thrown the apple of discord. Perhaps the Olympians should have invited her to the party. Perhaps Tantalus shouldn't have tried to feed his son to them to test their omniscience. Wouldn't that have saved his distant descendent Agamemnon? The search for causes is the philosopher's way out. It has, Schürmann maintains, long been a copout. It is noteworthy that Agamemnon does not go there. It would do nothing to change his situation.

But where he goes only makes it worse. Agamemnon proceeds by asking another question, again rhetorical, but this time, only one side in the dispute is named: "How can I fail in my duty to the alliance and thus become a deserter of the fleet?"[40] The answer is, *you cannot*. For no question about failing his daughter follows. Rather, her claim is forgotten, and Agamemnon deems himself right to kill her, *without qualification*: "If this sacrifice, this virginal blood, shackles the winds, one can with ardor, proud ardor, desire it without fault."[41] Here, Agamemnon blinds himself to the tragic double bind, thereby giving rise to numerous catastrophic events (= tragedies), including his own death at the hands of his wife ten years later. The lesson Schürmann wants us to take from this is not that

[39] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, lines 205–211, as cited in Schürmann, R., 2017. *Des Hégémonies brisées*, ibid., p. 38 / Schürmann, R., 2003. *Broken Hegemonies*, ibid., p. 26.
[40] Aeschylus, 1950. *Agamemnon*. Fraenkel, E., ed. Volume 1. Oxford: Clarendon, lines 212–13.
[41] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, lines 214–18, as cited in Schürmann, R., 2017. *Des Hégémonies brisées*, ibid., p. 39 / Schürmann, R., 2003. *Broken Hegemonies*, ibid., p. 27.

we can avoid the tragic double bind but that tragedy results precisely from attempting to do so**,** whether, with Agamemnon, one adheres only to the universal or, with nominalists, transgressivists, and a host of postmodernists, one adheres only to the singular.

What Schürmann offers is not a way out, but various ways in which to see the split at the heart of reality. Schürmann's reading of *Agamemnon* is one such way. Another is his use of Heinrich Hertz's work on electromagnetic energy to explain how he understands the difference between a contradiction (French *contradiction*, German *Widerspruch*) and a differend (French *différend*, German *Widerstreit*).

Hertz had experimentally proven James Maxwell's equations of electromagnetism, thereby demonstrating, for example, that magnets affect iron-containing objects in their vicinity not instantaneously but only at the speed of light. What, however, was the precise nature of the forces that Hertz's apparatuses were able to capture? Were they, as physicists still wonder with respect to quantum-scale objects today, waves or particles? Rather than tormenting himself with the search for a solution at the ontological level, Hertz was eventually content to work with both models, which proved equally useful: "A magnetic field with a given force X results from waves traveling at frequency Y"; "a magnetic field with a given force X results from corpuscles displaced at velocity Z."[42] The contradiction was not resolved for him; it was merely "eliminated" as a problem plaguing the mind. Take this quotation from Hertz, which Wittgenstein had considered using as the epigraph to the *Philosophical Investigations*: "Even after these painful contradictions have been eliminated, the question of being will not have been answered; but the mind, no longer tormented, ceases to ask this question it considers unjustified."[43]

Some conflicts can in fact be resolved by the clarification of language use (or by new evidence, such as that in support of the undulatory character of electromagnetic energy). Schürmann, following Hertz and Wittgenstein, calls these resolvable conflicts "contradictions." Other conflicts cannot be so resolved. Schürmann calls these conflicts "differends," extending their usage beyond physics (for which they may not be appropriate anyway; after all, the case is not closed on wave–particle duality in quantum mechanics today) and beyond questions of communication (for which Jean-François Lyotard used the term) into metaphysics.

[42] Schürmann, R., 2017. *Des Hégémonies brisées*, ibid., p. 42 / Schürmann, R., 2003. *Broken Hegemonies*, ibid., p. 29.
[43] Cited in Schürmann, ibid., p. 38 / p. 26.

Although he discusses many differends throughout *Broken Hegemonies*, perhaps the most relevant and wide-reaching is the differend between the universal and the singular, which Schürmann contrasts with the universal/particular pair. During the reign of "hegemonic fantasms," all individuals are deemed to fall under the sway of a maximal universal. They are "particulars" *of* it. What is not supposed to, and yet invariably does, fall outside that universal is a "singular" in Schürmann's terminology:

> A fantasm is hegemonic when an entire culture relies on it [*s'y fie*] as if it provided that in the name of which to speak and act. Such a chief-represented (*hêgemôn*) works upon the unspeakable singular when it calls it a part of a whole; hegemonies transform the singular into a particular. They serve to say what is, to classify and inscribe, to distribute proper and common nouns. [...] Life is paid for by denying the singular; or in the vocabulary of apriorism: by subsuming it under the figure of the particular. Now, what then would become of principles if the singular obliterated by the subsumptive fantasms were to be reaccredited? Would not an inextricable double bind [*double prescription*] follow?[44]

Note that the reaccreditation of the singular does not deny the claim of the universal and affirm an extreme form of nominalism in its stead; it denies the claim of the universal to be all-encompassing. Although, as I said, he offers no way out—indeed, the presumption of escape is one of the problems—Schürmann does believe that this conflict can be coped with (which is not to say it can be resolved) by learning how *not* to deny "[t]ragic truth, the truth of the *differend*."[45]

We thus arrive at the antipodes of the early Schelling's post-Kantian reconfiguration of the tragic as conciliatory, harmonious, and free of suffering. For Schürmann and, to some extent, Heidegger, the tragic is, rather, irredeemably recalcitrant, disharmonious, and something we must suffer whether we like it or not. Schürmann nevertheless asks us to face and learn from it, not to overcome it, but to live in accord with it. He even wonders, at the end of *Broken Hegemonies*, whether we might be able to love the ultimate double binds of appropriation and expropriation, natality and mortality, universalization and singularization:

> It is […] possible to enlarge one's way of thinking beyond the fantasied common […], possible to think for itself the double bind that we know. With eyes

[44] Ibid., p. 15 / p. 7.
[45] Ibid., p. 40 / p. 28.

> opened by the hubristic sufferings that our age has inflicted on itself—as Oedipus at Colonus wants [*veut*] his eyes open and who thought of [*se veut*] his eyes as open—is it possible to love the ultimates in differend?[46]

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[46] Ibid., p. 724 / p. 631. For helpful comments on an earlier draft, the author would like to thank Henrique Carvalho Pereira, Francesco Guercio, David Farrell Krell, and Nicolas Schneider. Portions of this paper were presented at Charles University and Brown University. My thanks also to the participants for the fruitful discussions.

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