

**studi  
germanici**



**3-4**  
English **2013**

# An ontology of history and nihilism. Georg Büchner and the modern constellation of tragedy\*

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Under the heading “Aischylos” *Der Neue Pauly* attests that after a long period of having been forgotten, Aeschylus was rediscovered by modernity, and, in particular, in Germany during the romantic period under the influence of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Gustav Droysen’s new historiographical science, and in France with Victor Hugo.<sup>1</sup> The history of tragedy in the Occident is for the most part Euripidean. Aeschylus’s rediscovery is entwined with the history of the elaboration of the modern idea of tragedy – a “hidden” cultural event of an almost completely German nature –, the reference point of which is the mythic universe of Greek tragedy and, as such, extends through Nietzsche and his “adversary” Wilamowitz all the way up to Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin.<sup>2</sup> Here we shall try to demonstrate in which sense Georg Büchner’s conception of drama corresponds to a completely different revolutionary line that began with Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, whose universe of reference is *not* the tragedy of antiquity, but rather, the concept and the reality of modern history – an *ontological* transformation whose shadow side is composed of historical nihilism. We shall follow a rather complex path, not of literature within history, but of history *within* literature. Firstly, however, a strange paradox must be clarified.

We do not know what the origin of tragedy is. There is, however, a simple answer: it was born of Aeschylus’s genius. With Freud and then Lacan, psychoanalysis too reinforced the connection be-

\*Translation by Alexander Booth.

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. *Der neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike. Das klassische Altertum und seine Rezeptionsgeschichte*, edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmut Schneider (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2003). Victor Hugo, *Eschilo*, edited by Annalisa Paradiso, with a note by Luciano Canfora (Palermo: Sellerio, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> An attempt to reconstruct the subject can be found in Barnaba Maj, *Idea del tragico e coscienza storica nelle “fratture” del Moderno* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2003).



tween tragedy and the universe of *mythos*. Nevertheless, historical evidence says that tragedy was born in Athens in 472 BC with the production of *The Persians*, a *historical drama* that as a whole is a powerful reflection on the war between Xerxes and Greece – the very event that determined the separation of the Occident from the Orient. In the history of the West – the continent that up until Hegel considered itself to be the very place of human history while other continents had no history to speak of –, the French Revolution was no less of an important event. In this regard, Büchner's *Dantons Tod* (1835) fulfills an analogous role: it is not only a historical drama, but a reflection on history and history's significance as well. Aeschylus had been forgotten for a long time. Büchner too, until being rediscovered in 1915, the second year of the First World War.

And this is no coincidence: the war had revealed the annihilating potential of history, the connection Büchner had intuited.

Tragedy as a form of *δρᾶμα*, therefore, arose per se precisely as historical drama that reflected upon a major recent event: Xerxes' invasion of Greece and his ruinous defeat (480-478 BC). What is surprising is that the great Aeschylus's tragedy – the metaphorical and metaphorological level of his poetic language quite possibly still unrivalled – is not a celebration of the Greeks' triumph.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is an incredible representation of the emptiness, desolation, and pain that Xerxes' campaign, and then the news of his defeat, produced in Susa, the capital of the Persian empire: a tragedy of absence, of the pain caused by the void. The same goes for the appearance of Xerxes' father Darius's shade; more than simply an imaginary scene, it seems to be an interior nightmare of Xerxes' conscience. Darius reprimands him for having conceived the idea of subjugating the sea – out-and-out *hybris*. However, his speech, in the end, is a metaphysical meditation on war that broadens the horizon of his widow, Queen Atossa's, laments. There are many points of contact with the reflections contained in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*; in particular, the pain caused by the devastations of war. The histo-

<sup>3</sup> In this sense Clint Eastwood's 2006 diptych *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* is Aeschylean.



riography of its origins was close to the spirit from which tragedy was born. If this connection did not exist, it would be impossible to explain why in his *Poetics* Aristotle made a contrast between tragic poetry and historiography.

The abyssal difference between Aeschylus and Büchner depends on the different *historical time*. After Montaigne and Vico, the existence of a *specific* historical time, with a plurality of strata and dimensions, is almost patently obvious.<sup>4</sup> What this is *in itself*, however, we do not know.<sup>5</sup> All of the most important metaphysical or phenomenological analyses of time – the relevant theories are few: Kant, Hegel, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Ricœur – assume as an unescapable point of departure the Augustinian treatises of Book XI of the *Confessions*, whose exceptionality depends on the fact that, for the first time in the history of Occidental thought, the *interiority of the soul* is posited as a *measurement of time*. This is the unescapable metaphysical nexus.<sup>6</sup> Historical time depends, however, on *objective* factors; or rather, it is an objective reality in itself, anything but transparent on a subjective level. For this reason as well it is easier to know the past than the present: the past undergoes decantation and is narrated in a stylized manner; the present is opaque.<sup>7</sup> Within the wide spectrum that extends from the episteme to the *doxa*, a function of historical consciousness consists in orienting a society in the present with respect to the future, providing it with a narrative *framework* of the past.<sup>8</sup> The question is to what degree this reality interacts with the inner consciousness of time. The idea that historiography depends on temporality goes back to Heidegger, beginning with one of his first pieces on the concept of time in the historiographical sci-

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. *Tempo e temporalità storica*, edited by Barnaba Maj, in “Discipline filosofiche”, XXII (2012), n. 1.

<sup>5</sup> This is acknowledged by Paul Ricœur in the third volume of *Tempo e racconto: Il tempo raccontato*, trans. by Giuseppe Grampa (Milan: Jaca Book, 2007) and Michel de Certeau in *La scrittura della storia*, edited by Silvano Facioni (Milan: Jaca Book, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Saint Augustine, *Il tempo*, edited by Giovanni Catapano (Rome: Città Nuova, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> The theme of opacity is treated in Franz Rosenzweig, *La stella della redenzione*, edited by Gianfranco Bonola (Genoa-Milan: Marietti, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> On this point, cfr. Jörn Rüsen, *Lineamenti di un'istorica*, 3 vol., edited by Barnaba Maj (Florence: Aletheia, 2001).



ences.<sup>9</sup> From the metaphysical point of view, this seems to be correct. However, it does not consider the transformation of the concept of history that, and this is not a tautology, depends upon history itself.<sup>10</sup> From Polybius to Machiavelli, a certain conception of history has been based on a cyclical idea of time. Polybius reflected upon the relentless trajectory of empires, which are all destined to end;<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli on the right combination of political regimes, in a position of trying to preserve them from ruin.<sup>12</sup> If the Greeks, according to an idea of Hannah Arendt's, were unable to reconcile the individual *arrow* of time with the *cycle* of natural time,<sup>13</sup> it came to Christianity to provide a solution to the problem which, introducing a *linear conception* of time, rendered it *historical*, as the poet Octavio Paz recalled in one his memorable discourses.<sup>14</sup>

Augustine knew it well and it is to him that we owe the institution of this fundamental frame in which linear time substitutes cyclical

<sup>9</sup> *Sein und Zeit* (1928), here it refers back to *Der Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaft* (1916).

<sup>10</sup> In *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, edited by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004) – the summation of Koselleck's historical semantics – the heading of *Geschichte* is subdivided into historical epochs. Koselleck wrote *Die Herausbildung des modernen Begriffs (Storia. La formazione del concetto moderno)*, edited by Rossana Lista, Bologna: Clueb, 2009), that, due to its abundance of sources and theoretical excellence, is an astonishing essay challenging every pretense at furnishing a *metaphysical* concept of history that disregards history and historiography; that is, a *discourse of history*. That the argument is aimed at Heidegger is indirect, but evident.

<sup>11</sup> The question of the succession of empires is taken up again in Saint Jerome's theology of history. On the subject of the end, cfr. Santo Mazzarino, *La fine del mondo antico. Le cause della caduta dell'impero romano* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> In the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (edited by Giorgio Inglese, introduction by Gennaro Sasso, Milan: Rizzoli, 2000), Niccolò Machiavelli employs the term *ruina*, which inserts itself into a long metaphorological and iconological tradition that goes from Cicero to Simmel, Benjamin, and Celan. Da Volney to Chateaubriand and Proust. It also includes the problem of the destructive force of revolution.

<sup>13</sup> The essay on the origin of history is contained in *Tra passato e futuro*, edited by Alessandro Dal Lago (Milan: Garzanti, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Octavio Paz, *Che cos'è la modernità?*, in "Il Sole-24 Ore", Jan. 10, 1999; cfr. *Alla ricerca del presente: scritti e interviste*, edited by Manuela Palermi and Annamaria Pontoglio (Rome: DataneWS, 2006).



time and thanks to which Christianity was able to impress its seal on consciousness and on the profound structure of Occidental historical temporality. So much depends on the notion of *kerygma* or proclamation. The death of Christ is an event that confers *significance* to human history.<sup>15</sup> This occurs *in* history but over-determines it, imposing a *historical* quality upon human time – individual as well as collective –, which in this way acquires a new sense. This transformation is much more decisive inasmuch as Christianity must deal with the disappointing delay of the new parousia. The deferral gives additional weight to the historical dimension of human time.<sup>16</sup> In Augustine, therefore, historical time is ambivalent, as Henri-Irénée Marrou showed in the 1950 conference on *L'ambivalence du temps de l'histoire chez saint Augustin*.<sup>17</sup> Both temporalities – that of the terrestrial city and of the celestial city – act here and now upon human history. Their vertex is a theological idea of history, as the same Marrou demonstrated.<sup>18</sup> This idea provides a profound narrative frame and a teleological sense that does not depend on time but into which time is to be incorporated. Developed by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei*, this conception was a fundamental framework in the Occident for more than thirteen centuries. The crisis, therefore, that it experienced in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is an authentic *Epochenschwelle*.<sup>19</sup> From this springs the origin of the formation of the modern concept of history analyzed by Reinhart Koselleck, which

<sup>15</sup> The concept is essential to the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner. The debate upon the significance and the sense of human history is infinite. In this regard, Karl Löwith's work remains illuminating: *Significato e fine della storia: i presupposti teologici della filosofia della storia*, trans. by Flora Tedeschi Negri (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2010). This essay from 1949 is among the principle polemical objectives of Hans Blumenberg's theory on the origins of modernity and secularization.

<sup>16</sup> In critical literature, the two directions of Augustinian reflection on time often remain unrelated.

<sup>17</sup> *L'ambivalenza del tempo della storia in Sant'Agostino*, edited by Monica Fiorini (Bologna: Clueb, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> *Teologia della storia*, edited by Gianluigi Pasquale (Milan: Jaca Book, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the comparison between Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (1681) and Voltaire's *l'Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756) is illuminating.



one can synthesize with a Hegelian formula: from substance history transforms itself into a subject. It is no longer the frame for many histories in the plural, but a single subject in itself and for itself, that is to say, conscious of itself. This is an *ontological* transformation: the idea changes because reality changes.<sup>20</sup> A history conscious of itself is, moreover, a history made by humankind, no longer by God. *Die Machbarkeit der Geschichte* is the formula with which to say: the age of revolutions. And here is the abyssal difference: radicalizing the line that goes back to theatre and the ideas on drama of Lenz,<sup>21</sup> Georg Büchner's drama corresponds precisely to the ideal and historical constellation of this ontological transformation. The center of this drama is the very being of history itself as well as its new time, its theological presuppositions, its reflections on individual existence. This astonishing capacity to understand the new nature of history explains why Büchner is a posthumous author, as the political radicalism of his creatural sense – his “theological atheism” – explains why he is such an enduring one.

The objectivity of historical time is demonstrated by experience. The same Augustinian work was born of the sense of despair surrounding the possible *end of time* – a historical apocalypse – generated by the news of the sack of Rome on the part of Alaric's Visigoths in 410 AD. At the third try, Rome was invaded and plundered. An inconceivable act? On the contrary, it was the echo of a never-forgotten nightmare. The pages of Titus Livius demonstrate that the invasion of the Gauls, with their attempt to occupy the Campidoglio, had remained the “hidden nightmare” of the historical memory of Rome. The media structure is completely different but the mold of the “horror of September 11” in New York is the same: the violation of a territory that until that point had remained inviolable, like the Red Army in Berlin on the roof of the Reichstag. The fact that

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Marcuse also wrote about this in *L'ontologia di Hegel e la fondazione della teoria della storicità*, trans. by Eraldo Arnaud, edited by Mario Dal Pra (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1969).

<sup>21</sup> In particular in the 1774 treatise: cfr. *Anmerkungen übers Theater. Shakespeare-Arbeiten und Shakespeare-Übersetzungen*, edited by Hans-Günther Schwarz (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995).



the events that “make history” – today in the media sense as well according to François Dosse<sup>22</sup> – often takes us “unawares” (as Joseph A. Brodsky noted)<sup>23</sup> adds to the mystery. Modern warfare has accentuated the absence of an epistemological center capable of controlling all developments. Tolstoy understood this phenomenon in *War and Peace* (1865-1869) as had Stendhal even earlier in the surprising pages on the Battle of Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1838). A notable case was the confusion produced by September 8, 1943, in Italy. This is why Renzo De Felice considered Luigi Comencini’s film *Tutti a casa* (1960) to be historically perfect with its striking initial scene of the Italian lieutenant calling his commander to refer to a “crazy thing”: the Germans had allied themselves with the Americans! Even in a time that is completely dominated by history like that of war, unpredictable and to a large degree incomprehensible changes can occur. These examples can cause one to think that *historical time* operates like an irruption, almost like an unexpected earthquake. This would lead one to discuss the notion of a historical event, something that is impossible to do here. It is sufficient to say that an authentic event is that which divides time into a “before” and an “after”. Unpredictability depends of course on the fact that historical time has multiple dimensions. Fernand Braudel’s theory of three times should not be demolished for its argument against an events-based history (*histoire événementielle*),<sup>24</sup> but, on the contrary, amplified by considering another dimension: the *contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous* (*das Ungleichzeitige*). We owe the intuiting of this dimension to Herder’s philosophical reflection on history, who himself was terrified by it.<sup>25</sup> And for good reason, as this dimension is the true origin of conflicts and historical violence. On an ethnographi-

<sup>22</sup> Françoise Dosse, *Renaissance de l'événement. Un défi pour l'historien: entre Sphinx et Phénix* (Paris: PUF, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Joseph A. Brodsky, *Profilo di Clio*, edited by Arturo Cattaneo (Milan: Adelphi, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Fernand Braudel, *Scritti sulla storia*, trans. by Alfredo Salsano, introduction by Alberto Tenenti (Milan: Mondadori, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ancora una filosofia della storia per l'educazione dell'umanità: contributo a molti contributi del secolo*, edited by Franco Venturi (Turin: Einaudi, 1981); *Idee per la filosofia della storia dell'umanità*, edited by Valerio Verra (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1992).



cal and anthropological plane, an analogous insight can be ascribed to Herodotus, and thus to the genetic code of Occidental historiography. Connecting it to the reality of history would have been possible by reflecting on the wars between the Persians and the Greeks. However, it is the modern concept of history that renders this connection necessary. It is enough to think of the parabola from the insight originating with Herder to Ernst Bloch's systemization in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* in 1935, that is, in the age *entre deux guerres*.<sup>26</sup>

The awareness of this transformation is reflected in a transparent fashion in the history of dramatic forms and the formation of a modern idea of tragedy in Germany. In this regard, a comparison between the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Trauerspiel* and Büchner's *Dantons Tod* (1835) is most interesting. Already in the *Trauerspiel*, in fact, themes of contemporary history break through in their respective ways. The primary precedent is perhaps *Ermordete Majestät oder Carolus Stuardus König von Groß Britanien, Trauer-Spil*, the historical drama written by Andreas Gryphius in 1657 and completely reworked in 1663.<sup>27</sup> This play achieved wide critical and theoretical acclaim thanks to Walter Benjamin's "essay" *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* completed in 1925 and published in 1928.<sup>28</sup> The serious historical material concerned the capital execution of the King of England, Scotland and Ireland, Charles I Stuart, who had reigned between 1625 and 1649 – an event that became rather popular because of *Vingt ans après* (1845), the second novel in Alexandre Dumas's "Musketeers Cycle".<sup>29</sup> Reflecting upon Gryphius's drama, Benjamin observed that in the crisis of the seventeenth century, the figure of the sovereign and therefore the concept of sovereignty appear as *keys* to the enigma of history. The decapitation of King Charles I, which took place

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Eredità del nostro tempo*, edited by Laura Boella (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Andreas Gryphius, *Ermordete Majestät oder Carolus Stuardus König von Groß Britanien, Trauer-Spil* (Breslau: Johann Erich Hahn, 1663); cfr. *Carolus Stuardus*, edited by Hugh Powell (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1963).

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Il dramma barocco tedesco*, edited by Giulio Schiavoni (Turin: Einaudi, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Alexandre Dumas, *Venti anni dopo* (Milan: Bietti, 1963).



in London on January 30, 1649, constituted the culmination of the Revolution and the English civil war in which, together with the monarchic and parliamentary powers, there were also motives of a religious nature. This historical event is connected to the vast process of transition that sees the imminent dimension of politics slowly occupy the space of a time that belongs to religious discourse.<sup>30</sup>

That the historical dimension of this event was to be lucidly understood by a poet, theologian, and jurist from the edges of Silesia should come as no surprise. Gryphius's historical sensibility was sharp due to having personally assisted in the horrors of the wars of religion that had taken place in his region. Carl Schmitt writes that the events of the Terror "divided" Europe into rival ideological fronts with respect to the French Revolution.<sup>31</sup> But the decapitation in 1649 *already* constituted a precedent in that sense. One can imagine what a *choc* the news caused in a Europe already torn apart by religious wars that rebel forces fighting against the absolutist and religious claims of the sovereign of one of the oldest national monarchies from the Middle Ages had caught, deposed, and tried him for high treason and had him decapitated. The same firmness and dignity with which the king, after having rejected every form of compromise offered by parliament, confronted the gallows – "I go from a corruptible, to an incorruptible Crown; where no disturbance can be, no disturbance in the World" – contributed to the fabrication of an aura of *sacrifice* and *martyrdom*, which is the leitmotiv not only in Gryphius's

<sup>30</sup> On the debate of the origins of modernity and secularization, which in Germany saw Karl Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer go against the theory formulated by Hans Blumenberg in *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966, new ed. 2010), the historian of mysticism, Michel de Certeau, gave a critical contribution without ever intervening directly beginning with his masterpiece *La Possession de Loudun* (Paris: Julliard, 1970); cfr. *La possession di Loudun*, edited by Rossana Lista (Bologna: Clueb, 2012). This rigorous study is also a *dramma della parola* that dramatizes the fight for power between an emerging political discourse and traditional religious discourse. This event is the subject of Ken Russell's film *The Devils* (1971), itself inspired by Aldous Huxley's 1952 novel *The Devils of Loudun*.

<sup>31</sup> Carl Schmitt expressed this thesis in 1919: *Il romanticismo politico*, edited by Carlo Galli (Milan: Giuffrè, 1981). The first split is in 1790, the year of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by Edmund Burke.



*Trauerspiel* but also of his iconographic legacy which, connecting the event back to Christian iconology, contributes to its collocation in the threshold between mortality and immortality, justification and redemption.<sup>32</sup> The essential premise is the king's *innocence*. The corollary is that his crown has become the *crown of martyrdom*, seeing as it was placed upon his head by the will of God. This is political and historical theology of a conservative stamp.<sup>33</sup>

The presupposition of innocence is contrary to the essence of tragedy. From Goethe to Benjamin the idea of the tragic hero, including the reason for his silence – that Benjamin takes up again from Franz Rosenzweig or perhaps from the depiction of Aeschylus in *The Frogs* (405 BCE) by Aristophanes (the comedy on tragic art and its role in the city)<sup>34</sup> –, remains rooted in the Aristotelian conception of the mysterious intermediary line between guilt and non-guilt. Nevertheless, the intention of reconfirming the connection between innocence wounded and redemption (*Erlösung*) in Gryphius's *Trauerspiel* betrays the Baroque's despair toward the idea of redemption itself. In his “erroneous” but ingenious 1827 note *Nachlese zu Aristoteles “Poetik”*, Goethe defines the *catarsi tragica* by returning not only to the Lutheran term of *Versöhnung* – crucial to the tradition/interpretation of the *Römerbrief* –, but also to the rather more “medical” expression of *aussöhnende Abrundung* (*Aussöhnung* being equivalent to *placatio*). The paradigm is represented by the Sophoclean parable of Oedipus, which Goethe interprets in the key to the

<sup>32</sup> On the role of the printed images, cfr. Hans Belting, *Il culto delle immagini: storia dell'icona dall'età imperiale al tardo Medioevo*, trans. by Barnaba Maj (Rome: Carocci, 2004). The frontispiece of Gryphius's 1657 and 1663 editions shows a skeleton at work on an engraving, in the background a black and torn sky. Among the inspirational sources of the *Trauerspiel* there is the *Imago Regis Caroli* (1648), which shows the king in a position of prayer, in his hands the crown, the direct emanation from the grace of God, therefore blessed and eternal.

<sup>33</sup> It is no accident that among the fundamental texts Benjamin confronts there is Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre der Souveränität* (Berlin: Dunckler & Humblot, 1922).

<sup>34</sup> From Aristophanes, Nietzsche had taken the argument against the presumed Euripidean degeneration of tragic art, overlooking the, at base, political-religious reflection on its function in the life of the city.



trilogy. Old, by that point tired, led by his daughter Antigone's hand, the blind Oedipus finally reaches Colonus. There he finds *peace: noch aussöhnende ausgesöhnt (wird)*, Goethe writes. He will find a tomb and this tomb will be turned by the gods into a place of worship.<sup>35</sup> An echo of this idea of the role of tragedy is found in the pages of Dostoyevsky when he relates how Russian farmers would bow when a column of condemned men on their way to deportation in Siberia passed.<sup>36</sup> At root, there is the problem of evil. In the farmers' gesture, in fact, there is the implicit recognition that *evil exists* and that those condemned men had taken the weight upon themselves, in that way taking the evil out of their souls and rendering it less burdensome.

Goethe, for whom reference to Greek tragedy is unavoidable, is right in considering the Sophoclean *figure* of Oedipus paradigmatic because within it the constitutive elements of the ancient concept of tragedy recur: ὕβρις and ἀμαρτία (the crossing of borders and guilt), μηχανή and ἄτη (plot/texture and blinding/misfortune). All of which takes place against a backdrop of a common ἔθος (*gemeinschaftlich*), whose absence within modernity was, according to Kierkegaard, one of the reasons for the difference between ancient and modern tragedy.<sup>37</sup> The traditional Christian idea of sacrifice and the consequent perspective of redemption are inherently foreign to tragedy, as will be the Marxist perspective of the political-social redemption of humanity.<sup>38</sup> Under a completely different constellation, René Girard's anthropological interpretation of Christian sacrifice

<sup>35</sup> On the importance of places of worship, cfr. the "map" furnished by the last work of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1984).

<sup>36</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Memorie di una casa di morti*, edited by Fausto Malcovati, trans. by Maria Rosaria Fasanelli (Florence: Giunti, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> *Il riflesso del tragico antico nel moderno*, in *Aut Aut*: Søren Kierkegaard, *Opere*, edited by Cornelio Fabro (Florence: Sansoni, 1972), pp. 22-37.

<sup>38</sup> George Steiner insisted on this point, *Morte della tragedia*, trans. by Giuliana Scudder (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), also when speaking about Bertolt Brecht's concept of drama. The diagram proposed by Northrop Frye is simple and clear: the arc of action grows until the acme, the turning point or *catastrofe*, and then lessens. If it grows again, there is *no* tragedy.



moves in the same direction.<sup>39</sup> The difference between the *Trauerspiel* and ancient tragedy is perhaps even more profound than Benjamin himself says. Nevertheless, the newness introduced by Gryphius's *Trauerspiel* survives, even with respect to historical Shakespearean drama: almost live as it were, which is to say, at only a few years' distance, it elaborates an event of *contemporary history*. This allows one to understand just how much the path from Benjamin's *Ursprung*, with its subterranean historical parallel between the *Trauerspiel* and Expressionist drama – a parallel that involves the two historical epochs –, differs from that blazed by Nietzsche.

In the early seventies, Nietzsche wrote *Die Geburt der Tragödie, Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*, and the second old-fashioned *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*. The three texts establish three perspectives of research that should converge. But this does not happen because Nietzsche does not see the relationship between history (and historiography), tragedy, and the idea of the tragic. The first text remained unfinished. Through a brilliant invention of dialectic mythology, the second aims at a total *aesthetization* of tragedy, in this way removing the ethical-political function both Hegel and Kierkegaard considered crucial. The third outlines three of the human spirit's attitudes in the study of history – it is significant that he uses the obsolete term *Historie*, and not *Geschichte* – and gives rise to a rather arbitrary form of historical constructivism. In a certain sense, Michel de Certeau's observation goes deeper: at its origin, philosophy had demarcated its own territory, ignoring the problems of evil and of pain, which were consigned to historiography and literature.<sup>40</sup> Luigi Pareyson, on the other hand, insisted upon the original connection between evil, the idea of tragedy, and tragedy.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> René Girard, *La violenza e il sacro*, trans. by Ottavio Fatica and Eva Czerkl (Milan: Adelphi, 2008); *Il capo espiatorio*, trans. by Christine Leverd and F. Bovoli (Milan: Adelphi, 2008); *Delle cose nascoste fin dalla fondazione del mondo*, trans. by Rolando Damiani (Milan: Adelphi, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Certeau deduces that literature exists precisely to reveal the defects or evils of a society; because of its nature it has a *negative and critical function*.

<sup>41</sup> Cfr. Luigi Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà: il male e la sofferenza* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000).



All of this can be combined in a question that, according to the present state of the human sciences, is considered “scandalous”: is a *tragic conception* of history possible? The tragic vision in Hegel is connected to the ethical dimension of conflicts within life and human history. The oscillation is evident in the case of the analyses of *Antigone*. Yet, his conception of history dismisses the tragic element. Schopenhauer connects the tragic element to the same metaphysical root of human life but dismisses history.<sup>42</sup> The current theory of historiography does not pose the question either. In the rare cases in which it does, the response is negative: the tragic idea of history does not belong to historiography. Thus, it forgets what Certeau says: there is no historiography without a philosophy of history. But one cannot think of history without confronting the problem of evil, of pain, of suffering: at the heart of history there is *der handelnde und leidende Mensch*, as Jakob Burckhardt said.<sup>43</sup> The *impasse* is revealed, for example, by the incapacity of *giving a name* to the *Schoab* – among one of the most examined of historical facts and at the same time an absolute example of *hybris* or dis-measure. In this way, an absolute tragedy on the historical plane would not be susceptible to a tragic form.<sup>44</sup> In examining the question of German guilt (*Schuldfrage*), in

<sup>42</sup> The reason for which Hans Mayer, *Georg Büchner und seine Zeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972) refuses to connect Büchner to Schopenhauer is the same as that which led Francesco De Sanctis in his time to connect Leopardi to Schopenhauer.

<sup>43</sup> Jakob Burckhardt, *Considerazioni sulla storia universale*, edited by Maria Teresa Mandalari, with a text by Joachim Fest (Milan: SE, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Among his reference works, Ricœur indicates *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, edited by Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), a series of contributions of the theory of historiography on the (un) representability of the *Schoab*, which can be evoked without ever naming it, as is the case in the work of Paul Celan, but not of Nelly Sachs. An atrocious paradox, however, remains: maybe Jean Racine’s *Bérénice* is a case of *absolute tragedy*. Racine himself says in the *Préface* that there is no mourning, death or blood within it. Only pure renunciation. This is confirmed by Goethe, according to whom the fundamental cause of every tragedy was leave-taking (*Abschied nehmen*). Inversely, the *Schoab* is an absolute tragedy in reality, a black hole in human history, but *historiography* cannot find the categories nor drama a form for representing it. At base, there is a mechanism of removal because the *Schoab* calls *Christian consciousness* into question – it is a *Murder in the Cathedral* turned on its head to the nth power. Let us clarify with an example. In *Uomini comuni: polizia*



1946 Jaspers stopped at the third level – the metaphysical – and neglected the fourth: the theological.<sup>45</sup> One wonders whether he had not already forgotten ancient tragedy and its *grammar of motifs*.<sup>46</sup> The *Schoah* was a *theological crime*, a violation of the Covenant between human beings and God. And this is the fundamental theme of Sophocles' *Antigone*. The *Schoah* produced a wound that can never be healed. And this is the fundamental theme of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. The *Schoah* produced immeasurable pain. And this is the fundamental theme of all of Aeschylus's oeuvre. The *Schoah* produced evil, ruin, and death. And this is the fundamental theme of Euripides' tragedies tied to the destruction of Troy.

In the romantic age, European culture posited an alternative *mythos* or *storia*; or rather, Racine or Shakespeare, a dilemma that in Germany also involved the dominant figure of Schiller. And nevertheless, the precedent of Gryphius's Baroque drama remains important because it reflects upon an event of contemporary history and does so by involving the *theological presuppositions* of history. Its conservative form is the symptom of the awareness of a historical crisis. In more general terms, it demonstrates that a close examination of history means ultimately dealing with theological *crucis*. The modern rediscovery of Aeschylus returns to the same spiritual crisis, and it is therefore no coincidence that the push came precisely from

*tedesca e soluzione finale in Polonia*, trans. by Laura Salvai (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), Christopher R. Browning documents everything surrounding the men who made up the battalion sent from Hamburg into Poland to carry out the operation *Judenrein* – everything *with the exception* of their religious conscience. This lacuna even recurs in the great *Storia della Schoah*, edited by Marina Cattaruzza *et al.*, 6 volumes (Turin: Utet, 2005-2006). Dan Diner's introductory essay speaks of a *Zivilisationsbruch* or rather "fracturing of civilization" but considers it a catastrophe of reason, while the *Schoah* is, first and foremost, a *catastrophe of religious conscience*. As we shall see, the genius of Büchner's *Dantons Tod* also consists in the fact of connecting Robespierre and Danton's choices to the different forms of religious conscience, like the poetic force of the character of Lucile derives from her simple and spontaneous creatural religion of living, undoubtedly shared by the author.

<sup>45</sup> Karl Jaspers, *La questione della colpa: sulla responsabilità della Germania*, trans. by Andrea Pinotti (Milan: R. Cortina, 1996).

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. Silvio Vietta, *Europäische Kulturgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2005), pp. 117-160.



the new *Geschichtswissenschaft*. The key text is probably Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers* where historiography is brought back to poetry, at least at the level of *Geschichtsschreibung*.<sup>47</sup> And among Greek writers of tragedy, the "archaic" Aeschylus is without a doubt the most theological. It is at this subterranean level of the formation of a new historical conscience that the meeting point of these two roads appears: between the reflection of ancient tragedy within the modern – to employ Kierkegaard's formula – and the line which, directly through Shakespeare, points decisively to the world of the new historical reality. The second line is that of the *Sturm und Drang* and of Lenz in particular. Georg Büchner brings it to completion. The radicalism with which his drama opposes Schillerean drama's idealization of history, just as it does the idealistic conception of reality and history, goes hand in hand with the absence of any reference whatsoever – literary, dramaturgical, poetological, ideal, even only technical – to the universe of myth and Greek tragedy. This absence remains incredible if one thinks of the rediscovery of Aeschylus, the role of Greek tragedy in the thought of Hegel, the significance of the admittedly controversial version of Sophocles (1804) by Hölderlin, a writer whose conception of the tragic was totally immersed in the world of Greek tragedy, just as his dramaturgical attempts were consecrated to a figure of Greek thought.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, it is rather too obvious to recall that at the heart of the later dispute which arose surrounding the drama of his contemporary, Richard Wagner (born, like Büchner, in 1813), there is indeed the rebirth of ancient tragedy and its relationship (unknown to us) to music.

Already at the biographical level, we know with certainty that, during his high-school years in Darmstadt, Büchner was interested in Homer, *not* in the Greek tragic writers. The philosophical choice

<sup>47</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Il compito dello storico*, edited by Fulvio Tessitore (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1980).

<sup>48</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sul tragico*, edited by Remo Bodei, trans. by Gigliola Pasquinelli and Remo Bodei (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994); *La morte di Empedocle*, trans. by Ervino Pocar, preface by Beda Alemann, introduction by Giuseppe Bevilacqua (Milan: Garzanti, 2005).



of Spinoza as well as the refutation of idealism whether philosophical (Kant, Hegel, and Schelling, with a partial exception for the political aspects in Fichte's thought) or dramatic (the "Schillerean" model) soon settled with his precocious political radicalism,<sup>49</sup> a symptom of which is the fact that in all of Roman history he was most attracted by Cato the Younger.<sup>50</sup> At only seventeen years of age, Büchner was profoundly indignant about the bloody repression – followed by arrests, trials, and prison sentences – of a demonstration of hungry farmers who were protesting the unbearable weight of taxes. The army of the small Archduke of Hessen intervened brutally, causing what is known in the accounts of the time as the *Blutbad von Södel*. This is *the crossing point*, the decisive moment in the formation of his poetic and dramatic world. Büchner's original choice or *Keimentschluß* is *rein politisch* but is instructed by a profound creatural sense (*Kreaturgefühl*). Thanks to Lenz, it is in a certain sense post-Shakespearean. In spite of a few cues contained in his letters or important places in his works in which he discusses art and poetry – as in *Dantons Tod* and in *Lenz* –, as opposed to Lenz, Büchner did not leave any poetological or programmatic texts comparable to those of Humboldt or Stendhal, Goethe or Manzoni.<sup>51</sup> We are precisely in another constellation, even if it is possible to pinpoint some affinity to Manzoni. The ideal "triangulation" that arises is not without interest. The correspondence with Schiller, the writings on the difference between *epos* and tragedy, the Shakespearean essays, and

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. Henri Poschmann, *Georg Büchner: Dichtung der Revolution und Revolution der Dichtung* (Berlin-Weimar: Aufbau, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> Georg Büchner, *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe und Dokumente in zwei Bänden*, edited by Henri Poschmann with the collaboration of Rosemarie Poschmann (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992; paperback edition 2006: vol. 1, *Dichtungen*; vol. 2, *Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente*). The component *Kato von Utika* is contained in the section *Schulreden und Aufsätze*: vol. 1, pp. 30-38.

<sup>51</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Scritti sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, edited by Stefano Zecchi (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1992); Stendhal, *Racine e Shakespeare (1822) e altri scritti sull'illusione, con il Dialogo sulle unità drammatiche di luogo e di tempo di Ermes Visconti*, edited by Luca Mori (Pisa: ETS, 2012); Alessandro Manzoni, *Lettera al Signor Chauvet sull'unità di tempo e di luogo nella tragedia*, edited by Barnaba Maj, trans. by Sabrina Fattori (Bologna: Clueb, 2011).



the sparse fragments all demonstrate that Goethe had an extremely acute sense of the tragic. That the sentiment ever truly belonged to him, however, remains in doubt (the subtitle of *Faust* is a conspicuous sign). He never wrote a “Shakespearean” drama, while a new version of the myth related to the sacrifice of Iphigenia does stick out. He himself recognizes the influence of Manzoni’s plays and dramatic ideas – something that Peter Szondi makes note of but does not follow up<sup>52</sup> – but does not follow the example. On the contrary, it is symptomatic that, in his conversations with Eckermann, even when discussing Manzoni’s novels with admiration, he criticizes the chapters (31-32) on the plague in Milan as *non* poetic. He says: here Manzoni forgets that he is a poet and becomes a historian.<sup>53</sup> A great historian, we could add today, if after almost a century later – exposing the most incredible example of the lacunae of traditional historiography in the silence surrounding the topic of the plague in Europe – the epistemological revolution of the school of *Annales* indirectly revealed the range of Manzonian choice.<sup>54</sup> This rather unjust criticism, in any event, reveals a certain reluctance on Goethe’s part as to the interweaving of history and poetry. The plays, the *Lettre à Monsieur Chauvet sur l’unité de temps et de lieu dans la tragédie*, the *Storia della Colonna infame*, the novel attest that Manzoni proceeded in this direction in an unambiguous way. The premise is that *interpreting* historical reality is in a certain sense more difficult than working with the imagination – Benjamin will say that interpreting texts requires a philological sense, while interpreting reality a theological one. Made as much of action as of suffering and pain, historical material is elaborated by historiography and by dramatic form on different planes. Departing from this point, in the *Lettre* Manzoni elaborates his the-

<sup>52</sup> Peter Szondi, *Saggio sul tragico*, edited by Federico Vercellone, introduction by Sergio Givone (Turin: Einaudi, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversazioni con Goethe negli ultimi anni della sua vita*, edited by Enrico Ganni, trans. by Ada Vigliani, preface by Hans-Ulrich Treicher (Turin: Einaudi, 2008). In a review of *The Betrothed Lovers. A Milanese Story of the Seventeenth Century* that appeared in the “Southern Literary Messenger” in May 1835, Edgar Allan Poe noted the expressive and poetic power of the same passages of Manzoni’s on the plague.

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. Peter Burke, *Una rivoluzione storiografica: la scuola delle Annales, 1929-1989*, trans. by Giovanni Ferrari degli Uberti (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2007).



ory of the three levels of truth – factual, poetic, and ideal – about history. More precise than that of Humboldt, this theory makes a step forward with respect to the Aristotelian contrast between dramatic poetry and historiography. Unfortunately, it has remained unknown to the critical debate on the relationship between history and literature, historiography and narrative, historiography and literary fiction. Which is not surprising if Ricœur's *Temps et récit*, the summation of this debate, reassumes the Aristotelian theory of tragedy in the formula of the *mise en intrigue* as if it were treating pure diegesis instead of the diegetic function in tragedy.<sup>55</sup> Since that form grows in function from an idea, the consequence is that the same idea of tragedy becomes removed from theory. Manzoni abandoned the form of the drama and chose that of the novel precisely because he considered the latter more adequate to the poetic elaboration of historical material. The connection remains strong and it is here that the most important affinity to Büchner is to be found. In a moment, we shall see why Büchner's drama, however, goes beyond.

The entire romantic age wrestled with the search for its *own dramatic form*. Without managing to do so, as the case of the Victor Hugo, from whom Büchner translated *Lucrece Borgia* and *Marie Tudor*, demonstrates. In *Death of Tragedy* (1961), Steiner maintains that Romanticism failed because it transferred tragic conflict from the plane of reality to that of ideas. If this critical hypothesis is correct, one must ask if it does not depend on the fact that, insisting on *historical continuity*, Romanticism precluded itself from a path of dialectic mediation with the new reality of history produced by the revolutionary fracture of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In that sense, Romanticism is the *spiritual symptom* of the laceration of European consciousness between historical continuity and discontinuity. In an age in which history becomes self-conscious and pushes on toward the dimension of the future, of ascension, and of expectation, romantic mythology revolves around the image of the *Fall*.<sup>56</sup> The

<sup>55</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Tempo e racconto*, trans. by Giuseppe Grampa (Milan: Jaca Book, 2008), vol. 1, pp. 57-89.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. Northrop Frye-Jay Macpherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths: the Mythological Framework of Western Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). Northrop



parabola of Friedrich Schlegel who, in the end, arrives at the Viennese Court to write a philosophy of Christian-Romantic history is its paradigmatic course.<sup>57</sup> This unresolved dialectic tension certainly contributed to the literary, philosophical, and historiographical elaboration of the idea of tragedy, which takes place in German culture between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Greek tragedy treats mythic material as historical material. In Aristotle, the *epos* and the *drama* are offshoots of *mythos*. Departing from the definition furnished by Wilamowitz that connects tragedy to the saga, Benjamin clarifies the point by pointing out that tragedy is a *tendentious* elaboration of the material offered by epic narrative.<sup>58</sup> In other words, tragedy is (also) the irruption of ethical consciousness, a stage of the reflection on the significance of events. But this presupposes a stabile ethos, in the exact same way as the axiom of Thucydidean historiography is the immutability of human nature. The romantic idea of tragedy is only an *ideal reflection* of the new reality of the human being as a historical being – the *homo historicus* capable of planning and making history itself.<sup>59</sup> As such, humans are unable to disregard the universe of myth, the frame of ancient tragedy, and thus of providing a drama suitable to the *reality* of the new historical age. Putting the new time

Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays*, edited by Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville-London: University of Virginia Press, 1991); *Mito, metafora, simbolo*, trans. by Carla Pezzini Pievano and Francesca Valente Gorjup (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1989); *A Study of English Romanticism* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1983); *Favole d'identità: studi di mitologia poetica*, trans. by Ciro Monti (Turin: Einaudi, 1980); *Romanticism Reconsidered: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York: Columbia UP, 1963).

<sup>57</sup> Friedrich von Schlegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte in achtzehn Vorlesungen gehalten zu Wien im Jahre 1828* (Vienna: C. Schaumburg, 1829). The work is part of the trilogy written in Schlegel's final years and is dedicated to history, life, and language; above all, to the human word that, because of sin, had lost contact with the eternal Word. The task of human history is to restore this contact in order to rediscover the wholeness and harmony of life.

<sup>58</sup> The text referred to is Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, *Einleitung in die griechische Tragödie* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1907).

<sup>59</sup> Cfr. Pierre Nora - François Dosse, *Homo historicus* (Paris: Perrin, 2011). The expression was also used by Leszek Kolakowski and François Furet to designate the historical age dominated by the ontological idea of history, thus by the entire historicity of humankind.



of history at the center, the tragedy of the nexus between the necessary discontinuity and continuity of history, the new condition of the human being in a universe torn by violence – in other words, renewing *in toto* the universe of modern tragedy and thus establishing a radical break with Romanticism, Georg Büchner delivered the drama to the height of the new epoch and its profoundest tendencies.<sup>60</sup> In summation, he understood the connection between the ontological transformation of history and its shadow side: historical nihilism, the annihilating potential of history that appears with the Terror and arrives at the *Sboab*.

Büchner's drama is born of the fracture produced by the French Revolution and situates itself precisely in the age of post-Napoleonic restoration. It is thanks to this lucid awareness of its own historical time (*Zeitbestimmung*) that it breaks decisively with the romantic conception of historical dialectic and surpasses the binaries of myth/history, ancient tragedy/idea of the tragic. The fracture is irreversible and gave birth to a new dimension of historicity – history is the new power that took the place of *necessity* and *destiny*. The Revolution was a long historical process, with different phases. To choose the moment of the trial and Danton's sentencing to death means confronting a turning point and a crucial node because that which is under discussion at that moment is precisely the question of the new time of history – who its owner is, because it necessarily generates violence, the legitimacy of a systemic sentencing-to-death in the name of this new time. Here his great differences to Manzoni are also visible. Far ahead of his time, Büchner achieves a radical *politicization of aesthetics*. Benjamin, who returns to this formula, unfortunately did not know how to see it. Büchnerian drama refuses both the dramatic idealization of history of romantic inspiration as well as its anti-romantic idealistic rationalization (Hegel). At its center there is the question of revolution, and with it, the change of perspective from which to consider evil and human pain.

<sup>60</sup> Cfr. John Guthrie, *Lenz und Büchner: Studies in Dramatic Form* (Bern-New York: Lang, 1984).



In the critical literature on Büchner, which from uncertain beginnings about a century ago has grown to almost exaggerated proportions, it is not surprising to find a line prevailing which tends to bring to light a possible contradiction between the revolutionary manifesto of July 1834 *Der Hessische Landbote* – of which we do not possess the original text but that which has been edited and mitigated by the pastor Friedrich Ludwig Weidig<sup>61</sup> – and *Dantons Tod* (1835). The hypothesis is that the drama represents, if not an undeniable retraction, a challenge to the idea of revolution. The prevalent explanation is biographical. The pained appeal to the farmers contained in the manifesto went nowhere. Someone within the small revolutionary organization had betrayed it, gradually revealing the names of the “conspirators”. The police were trailing Büchner and issued a warrant for his arrest. He fled. First to Strasbourg, then to Zurich. The drama would for this reason be the result of delusion and a process of reconsideration. This biographical-psychological model of explanation, however, is more than suspect. In any case, it is based upon an error of interpretation. The key is in the text of *Der Hessische Landbote*. Let us summarize its argumentative structure. The premise is that the social and political situation of Hessen is *scandalous*, thus the Bible itself has been inverted: the court, the apparatus of the state, and the landowners all enjoy a privileged position with respect to the farmers who, in their opinion, lay about the fields like manure. The depiction is conducted with a systematic analysis of the situation of expenses and fiscal pressure: a poetry of numbers! The analysis reaches its high point when it treats the subject of military expenditure, which the farmers pay for men who then turn into their very patricides and fratricides.

Für jene 900,000 Gulden müssen eure Söhne den Tyrannen schwören und Wache halten an ihren Palästen. Mit ihren Trommeln übertäuben sie eure Seufzer, mit ihren Kolben zerschmettern sie euch den Schädel, wenn ihr zu denken wagt, daß ihr freie Menschen

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. Gerhard Schaub, *Georg Büchner - Friedrich Ludwig Weidig: Der Hessische Landbote. Texte, Materialien, Kommentar* (Munich-Vienna: Carl Hanser, 1976).



seid. Sie sind die gesetzlichen Mörder, welche die gesetzlichen Räuber schützen, denkt an Södel! Eure Brüder, eure Kinder waren dort Brüder-und Vatermörder.<sup>62</sup>

The thesis is that the *time* has come to start a revolution that will overturn this situation. One can and must: the marvelous, extremely efficacious historical synthesis of the French Revolution is incorporated here to this end. This revolution corresponds to God's plan, because a power that carries within itself the mark of the beast (*Apocalisse*) is against God's will – a clearly anti-Lutheran note. To accept this situation would mean to become guilty of the sin of *idolatry*. As prophetic literature says, in particular the passage from Ezekial that talks of the breath of God that recomposes and resurrects the bones in the field of corpses, the Revolution will be able to give again life to the afflicted and raw *body* of the brutally exploited peasants, to the body of all of Germany. From the beginning, Büchner speaks in the name of corporeality.

This is the language of revolutionary political theology that goes back to the tradition of Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants' War. The political idea that informs it is simple: humankind's greatest sin toward God and toward other humans is *Aristokratismus*. You are born rich, you have access to culture, you have an important position in society, you obey the rules that the class to which you belong has established, you define them as *moral rules*; so, on this basis, that is, the privileges which derive from your birth, you believe yourself to be superior to whoever is born poor, does not have access to culture, does not have an important social position, and does not react according to the morals of the "superior" class? False. The vein of feeling is the same in all people, Lenz says at the center of the Conversation on Art.

Man versuche es einmal und senke sich in das Leben des Geringsten und gebe es wieder, in den Zuckungen, den Andeutungen, dem ganzen feinen, kaum bemerkten Mienenspiel; er hatte dergleichen

<sup>62</sup> Georg Büchner, *Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente*, cit., p. 57.



versucht im »Hofmeister« und den »Soldaten«. Es sind die prosaischsten Menschen unter der Sonne; aber die Gefühlsader ist in fast allen Menschen gleich, nur ist die Hülle mehr oder weniger dicht, durch die sie brechen muß.<sup>63</sup>

The passage, spoken by Lenz for a reason, demonstrates that creatural/corporeal feeling is at the base of political feeling and vice versa. This fusion is also the center of Büchner's aesthetic. No one knew how to put it better than Celan when in *Der Meridian*, the discourse held on occasion of his being awarded the *Büchner-Preis* in 1960, he defined Büchner as the poet of the creatural, inscribing the task of poetry under "*der Gesichtswinkel der Kreatürlichkeit*".<sup>64</sup>

The centrality of the *Hessische Landbote* is confirmed by the *Lustspiel Leonce und Lena*. Born by chance – a competition sponsored by the publishing house of Cotta –, in a joking and grotesque manner this *Lustspiel* turns the themes of the political manifesto upside down. It is sufficient to consider the structure of the action and the play of characters. The King of the Kingdom of Popo is a perfect idiot; he has arranged the marriage of his son Leonce to Princess Lena of the Kingdom of Pipi in spite of the fact the two have never met. The marriage is the condition for the passage of power to the hereditary prince. Leonce is familiar with only one emotion: boredom. The character of Valerio then appears from out of nowhere, and takes on the characteristics of the *fool*. The two take to the road. They meet Lena, she too on the run from the marriage and the Kingdom of Pipi, together with her governess. Reciprocally unaware of the other's identity, Leonce and Lena meet and fall in love. The four arrive in the Kingdom of Popo on the day that had been fixed for their majestic marriage; the King, however, is so distraught at the two's disappearance that he wants to celebrate *in effigy*, as sometimes occurs in certain cases of hangings. The four are themselves in disguise and Valerio confuses everyone with his discourses. With their true iden-

<sup>63</sup> Georg Büchner, *Dichtungen*, cit., p. 234.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien*, edited by Bernhard Böschstein and Heino Schmult with the collaboration of Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkop (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999).



tities revealed, everything is recomposed. Leonce is the new King and as State Minister Valerio announces a kingdom in which anyone who procures corn or sweats because of work will be severely punished. Emphasizing the continuity between these two so seemingly diverse texts is important because *Dantons Tod* stands exactly between them.

Max Reinhardt's staging of the play in Berlin at Christmas 1915 brought it to the attention of the world. It directly involved the audience, highlighting the contrast between Robespierre and Danton. A directorial choice that Andrzej Wajda had to have been aware of in his 1983 film *Danton*, an intentional distortion of the pièce *Sprawa Dantona*, written in 1929 by the Polish writer Stanisława Przybyszewska, an inveterate *Robespierriista*.<sup>65</sup> The key scene, in fact, is the dinner meeting between Robespierre (who does not eat) and Danton – the thin/dry/austere/cold vs. the florid/humid/excessive/hot, virtue vs. vice.<sup>66</sup> Vice literally takes virtue by the neck, in reality carrying out what it claims to do with people: raising them to such heights that in the end they are no longer able to breathe and die of asphyxiation. Already in *Marat-Sade* Peter Weiss had gone back to another form of dualism: sex vs. revolution.<sup>67</sup> The Catholic Wajda is nevertheless rather less theological than the atheist Büchner. Doubtless the meeting and dialogue between Robespierre and Danton weighs upon the dramatic structure of *Dantons Tod*. Yet, it is not at all a scene *clou* for the simple reason that that are no scenes

<sup>65</sup> Stanisława Przybyszewska, *L'affaire Danton*, edited by Pietro Marchesani (Geneva: Costa & Nolan, 1983).

<sup>66</sup> The contrast is accentuated by the choice of the actors: the corpulent and full-blooded Gérard Depardieu (Danton) against the dry and almost bloodless Wojciech Pszoniak (Robespierre). The theme is not without developments: cfr. Jonathan Littell, *Le sec et l'humide: une brève incursion en territoire fasciste*, postscript by Klaus Theweleit (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

<sup>67</sup> Peter Weiss, *Marat-Sade: la persecuzione e l'assassinio di Jean-Paul Marat rappresentati dai ricoverati del manicomio di Charenton sotto la guida del marchese di Sade* (Parma: La Nazionale, 2004). From Weiss to Pasolini the sense of a theological challenge within Sade's stagings – a staunch opponent of the death penalty – has not really been understood. Büchner insists on the “scandal” of sin, Sade experiments with its abolition. The theme could lead to a line Sade-Büchner-Dostoyevsky.



*clou*. The demonstration is simple: for example, Robespierre's frightening public speech on the necessary connection between virtue and terror – virtue without terror is impotent, terror without virtue is insubstantial – corresponds to the intimate tale the *grisette* Marion uses to tell Danton his life destiny, one so dependent on corporeality. And more still: the love between Desmoulins and Lucile obliquely dominates the final part of the play. The final scene closes with Lucile's desperate desolation and absurd cry beneath the by then empty gallows, which causes her arrest – *es lebe der König!* And then, why does Danton have to die? The answer reappears multiple times: the temperature of the guillotine must always be high. There is a moment of stasis. Jacobean power is unable to guarantee the bread (*Brot*) that the populace needs and must therefore offer a symbolic equivalent: the blood (*Blut*) of a heavy head (Danton), which is able to cause the temperature to rise. Danton's explicit, openly admitted debauchery lends itself well to this symbolic exchange. In a metaphorological sense, the motive behind the scale and of the exchange itself goes back to Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 437-438: "And the gold-changer, Ares, who changeth quick / for dead, / Who poiseth his scale in the striving of the / spears".<sup>68</sup> Büchner's modification is illuminating.

The background is theological. Robespierre is a bloodthirsty messiah who is contrasted to Christ. Danton, instead, quotes the Gospel passage that says woe betide he who would introduce iniquity, rather similar words to those used by Büchner in the famous *Fatalismusbrief* written to his fiancée. The play is not constructed for one to take sides, especially the part of Saint-Just, whose appearances are always *black*. He appears in the night to Robespierre and drives him to compose his death-list. He appears to be enthralled by Danton's personality – a symptom of obscure attraction – and is thus disposed to relying upon a wretched trick to end the trial that Danton is winning. He gives a terrifying speech in which he states that the revolution can act with the same indifference for human life as natural catas-

<sup>68</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. by Gilbert Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 16.



trophes. A key-speech identifying Jacobean terror – the new *time of history* – with the indifferent course of nature.<sup>69</sup>

Ich frage nun: soll die moralische Natur in ihren Revolutionen mehr Rücksicht nehmen, als die physische? Soll eine Idee nicht eben so gut wie ein Gesetz der Physik vernichten dürfen, was sich ihr widersetzt? Soll überhaupt ein Ereignis, was die ganze Gestaltung der moralischen Natur d. h. der Menschheit umändert, nicht durch Blut gehen dürfen? Der Weltgeist bedient sich in der geistigen Sphäre unserer Arme eben so, wie er in der physischen Vulkane oder Wasserfluten gebraucht. Was liegt daran ob sie nun an einer Seuche oder an der Revolution sterben?<sup>70</sup>

Blood, the scandal of evil and of pain: this is the triad of the drama. Woe betide he who would introduce the iniquity of evil, Danton says, painfully aware of possibly being the one himself – the hero of 1792 – to have triggered the process of the Terror that now wants him to be its sacrificial victim. Celan wrote that Danton was a character that one understands from his death. As opposed to Robespierre, who is convinced of the equivalence between terror and virtue, Danton aims at breaking the cycle of bloodshed. The Revolution almost ends with the metonymic identification of itself in the route of the wagon that transports the condemned to the Place de la Révolution and the guillotine – the play's silent character.<sup>71</sup> In the dialogue between the two, Robespierre vehemently denies Danton's doubt that both the guilty and the innocent were being killed indiscriminately. He equates the Revolution to the route of the wagon, woe betide he who does not run alongside or simply stands to the side. He will be run over and thrown away. In his *Fatalismusbrief*, Büchner writes of having studied the Revolution in depth and of

<sup>69</sup> Which brings to mind Proust's thesis according to which the root of cruelty is indifference.

<sup>70</sup> Georg Büchner, *Dichtungen*, cit., p. 54 (*Dantons Tod* II, 7).

<sup>71</sup> In Peter Stein's staging of *Agamemnon* (1980), the silent character is the other wall of the Atreus's palace. A wall, the square with the guillotine: the different backgrounds illuminate the difference that exists between ancient tragedy and modern drama.



feeling crushed by the horrendous fatalism of history, which had taken on that impersonal power of rendering the individual nothing more than a bit of foam on a wave. In spite of this famous text, Büchner was ignored by the ever-greater amount of works on nihilism, a theme that seems meaningless if it overlooks the idea of annihilation – the *vernichten* evoked by Saint-Just. Büchner's name does not even appear in a treatise of such richness like the entry *Nilismus* of the *Historische Grundbegriffe*.<sup>72</sup>

To understand this point, it is necessary to reflect upon Dostoyevsky, whose parable *The Grand Inquisitor* is, Pareyson says,<sup>73</sup> the most nihilistic text ever written. And rightfully so, as in it the central event is the *return of Christ* – or rather, the second coming: the missing event that had rendered the deferral of the Christian message necessary within the time of history and the creation of a structure that had permeated history itself, but for this reason precisely was forced to establish compromises with its reality. And, in fact, the reappearance is an interference and Christ is rejected. Dostoyevsky, a radical seeker of God,<sup>74</sup> thus calls into question the very foundation of human history – an unsurprising fact in light of the historical notes to *A Writer's Diary*.<sup>75</sup> *The Grand Inquisitor* is a work of pure nihilism, yet written by a *non-nihilist*. The nihilist Nietzsche was aware of this, and saw his initial attraction for Dostoyevsky transform into repulsion. In the debate on nihilism, the confrontation Dostoyevsky-Nietzsche is a watershed. The line that runs from Nietzsche to Heidegger has largely prevailed. This question is of crucial importance because it is closely interwoven with the clear move of the *terrain of history* that the *Sinnfrage* of human existence knew from Wilhelm Dilthey until Ernst Troeltsch and beyond. In the Nietzschean-

<sup>72</sup> Manfred Riedel, *Nilismus*, in *Historische Grundbegriffe*, cit., vol. 4 (1978), pp. 379-410.

<sup>73</sup> Feodor Dostoyevsky, *La leggenda del Grande Inquisitore* (Padua: Edizioni Messaggero, 1986); Luigi Pareyson, *Dostoevskij: filosofia, romanzo ed esperienza religiosa* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993).

<sup>74</sup> George Steiner, *Tolstoj o Dostoevskij*, trans. by Cristina Moroni (Milan: Garzanti, 2005).

<sup>75</sup> Feodor Dostoyevsky, *Diario di uno scrittore*, trans. by Ettore Lo Gatto, introduction by Armando Torno (Milan: Bompiani, 2010).



Heideggerian line, the theme is over-determined by the bringing back of history to metaphysics; thus, nihilism would derive from an original oblivion. History as such is dissolved and its annihilating potential degraded to a secondary epiphenomenon. This is visible even in the discussion of *Über die Linie*, which drags a key figure of historical (and militant) nihilism like Jünger<sup>76</sup> in this direction.

The reduction of nihilism to the original oblivion of being removes the ontological difference produced by the formation of the modern concept of history and its connection to *nihilism*. Büchner was the first to understand this connection and the exceptionality of his position in the constellation of modern tragedy is due to this; it is rendered even more unique by the fact that, as opposed to Dostoyevsky, Büchner is a revolutionary for whom revolution is a must, first of all theologically, in order to abolish the scandal of evil as *social injustice* – the scandal that turns the Bible upside down, which is to say, the Kingdom of God *on the earth*. But revolution does not mean making blood flow, let alone transforming blood into an objective in itself; for it is an illusion to believe that the abolition of evil, inasmuch as it is unjust, would signify its disappearance. Perhaps one can try, Thomas Payne says (*Dantons Tod* III, 1). One cannot abolish *pain*. Reason tries, feelings refuse. And this explains Büchner's choice of other subjects, which are dominated by an abyssal sense of solitude and pain that either implicates society indirectly (*Lenz*) or directly (*Woyzeck*). The story and the tragedy of *Woyzeck* is therefore connected to historical drama by the common thread of an acute creaturely sense, of a perception of cruelty which, through evil and pain, ties the existential dimension of life to the reality of history and vice versa. A poetic line we find again in Kafka and Celan.<sup>77</sup> In light of all

<sup>76</sup> Cfr. Ernst Jünger - Martin Heidegger, *Oltre la linea*, edited by Franco Volpi (Milan: Adelphi, 1989). The “parabola” of historical nihilism in Jünger – from the novel of the First World War *In Stabgezwirnen* (1920) to *Strahlungen* (1949), the diary of the Second World War (1941-1945) – is of exceptional interest also because, in the end, something of an extraordinarily human nature bursts in, something that cracks the epos of modern war: the pain over the death of his son fighting in Italy.

<sup>77</sup> Beginning with Surrealism, Edoardo Sanguineti speaks of a poetic line of cruelty in his essay *Per una letteratura della crudeltà*, later incorporated in *Ideologia e linguaggio*



this, it is clearer why Büchner was a 20<sup>th</sup> century writer – and a completely posthumous one. Both Ernst Bloch and, above all, Walter Benjamin grasped the reasons for the subterranean bond between German Baroque tragedy and avant-garde Expressionist drama. Under differing historical constellations, the two forms were expressions of a laceration of the heavens (“einen Riß in der Schöpfung von oben bis unten”: *Dantons Tod*, III, 1). Büchner returns precisely at that historical moment. Already Gerhard Hauptmann had spoken of the chthonic powers at work in his plays. An avant-garde is such if it has the capacity of sensing history’s subterranean signals, this subatomic structure of experience, as Isaiah Berlin defined it. The First World War was modifying profoundly the spiritual geography of Europe. Expressionism rediscovered Büchner.

Bertolt Brecht’s star rose eight years later and overshadowed Büchner’s drama for quite some time. There differences between the two are many. Büchner, in any case, seems to have a more complex idea of historical reality and therefore of revolution, which he does not consider a palingenesis capable of abolishing, together with injustice, evil and pain. He does not use history allegorically but elaborates authentic historic and historiographical materials;<sup>78</sup> from the history of the French Revolution to the record of Pastor Oberlin on Lenz’s visit to the village of Waldbach, to a case from the history of criminal psychiatry, furnished with medical findings. To summarize, Büchner had understood that in the modern world, history was the new dimension of being, an emancipatory force but one that was also capable of determining and destroying the destiny of human existence. It had taken the place of *mythos*, but had thereby produced an *epos* itself the generator of myths of a cruel and nihilistic appearance. Thus, the ancient theme of pain is the way to de-mythologize the epic of history, demonstrating the frail borderline – the

(Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965, new edition edited by Erminio Riso, 2001). It was up to Antonin Artaud’s notorious theory of the theatre to give literary citizenship to the term “cruelty”.

<sup>78</sup> A method Karl Kraus used as well, *Gli ultimi giorni dell’umanità: tragedia in cinque atti con prelude ed epilogo*, trans. by Ernesto Braun and Mario Carpitella, with an essay by Roberto Calasso (Milan: Adelphi, 2007).



human abyss —, without losing sight of its search for a *nomos* within the new *historical time*. Which is pure tragedy within a new constellation.