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Stephen D. Dowden and Thomas P. Quinn, eds. Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art and Thought. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014.

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Abstract

Review of Stephen D. Dowden and Thomas P. Quinn, eds. *Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art and Thought*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014.

Keywords

Review, Stephen D. Dowden, Thomas P. Quinn, *Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature Art and Thought*, Caroline A. Kita

Stephen D. Dowden and Thomas P. Quinn, eds. *Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art and Thought*. Rochester: Camden House, 2014. 370 pp.

Tragedy and its encounter with modernity has inspired a number of scholarly inquiries in the last decade, from Rita Felski's edited volume, *Rethinking Tragedy* (Johns Hopkins UP 2008) to Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard's *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity* (Oxford 2015). With its focus on the German cultural tradition from the Enlightenment to the present, Stephen D. Dowden and Thomas P. Quinn's recent edited volume, *Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art, and Thought*, provides a thought-provoking contribution to this conversation. Envisioned as a cross-disciplinary endeavor, this collection includes essays from scholars of literature, philosophy, political theory, musicology, and history. The volume, which emerged from a symposium at the Goethe-Institut Boston in March 2014, reexamines modern theories of tragedy in the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt, among others.

Dowden and Quinn's volume is not intended as an introduction to modern tragedy, but rather as a series of rigorous case studies of the works of central figures who have defined the tragic in German culture. Each of the fifteen essays builds upon the claim that tragedy in modernity presupposes rupture and discontinuity. It no longer confronts the audience with a "closed action" as Aristotle once posited, but rather poses questions that are left open ended, forcing the audience to relinquish their role as a detached observer to become critically engaged participants. These essays thus address in different ways how the problem of tragedy in modernity becomes a framework for addressing larger crises facing the modern subject: her relationship to time and the unfulfilled promises of progress, her sense of disconnection from the other, and ultimately, her inability to mourn.

Despite his contested relationship to writing tragedy, Goethe serves as a catalyst for a number of discussions of the tragic in this volume. Joseph Lawrence, for example, identifies Part II of *Faust* (not Gretchen's death in Part I) as the quintessential modern tragedy. Faust's quest for knowledge, Lawrence claims, mirrors our own willingness to abandon the wisdom of the past. We are unable to recognize Faust's story as tragic because we are implicated in the very same dilemma. Thomas Quinn examines how Goethe's plays of language in his novel, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*), i.e. the elective affinities of such words as *versagen* 'to refuse' with *Entsagung* 'renunciation,' reflect a "flirtation" with the idea of the tragic and its tensions between choice and chance, freedom and necessity. *Elective Affinities* also features prominently in Benjamin's theory of the tragic, according to James McFarland. The concept of *das Ausdruckslose* 'the expressionless' that Benjamin identifies in Goethe's novel provides a link between the philosopher's metaphysics of language (the idea of the "pure word") and his

theory of the tragic. *Verstummen*, or obstinate silence (186), fundamentally shapes Benjamin's reading of the hero's sacrificial death as defiance—a demand for justice that attains its tragic character in the very belatedness of its representation.

The connection of tragedy to the limits of language reappears in later essays in the volume, which reflect on the challenge to define tragedy in German culture after the Shoah. Do the unspeakable events of war and mass genocide transcend the reach of the tragic? Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei offers a compelling response in her analysis of paintings by Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer. According to Gosetti-Ferencei, the tradition of tragedy that comes to us via Immanuel Kant, Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger most closely approximates a heroic tragic; a reading of tragedy as sublime spectacle, a merging of pain and joy that appears to justify destructive power. However, in the face of mass death and destruction, the call of the heroic tragic for the “necessity” of violence rings hollow. Gosetti-Ferencei proposes an alternative framework, a “critical tragic of incalculable loss” (256). Reading Kiefer's paintings through the lens of Paul Celan's poetry, Gosetti-Ferencei offers a powerful reading of indirectness and abstraction as a response to history and tragedy. While she admits that Kiefer's allegorical language of both victim and perpetrator risks endorsing silence and denial, Gosetti-Ferencei ultimately asserts that the artist's “ethics of the unsayable” (283), his critical confrontation with the unspeakable violence of the past, may provide a new paradigm for understanding the tragic in a world after Auschwitz.

The reach of Dowden and Quinn's volume is culturally broader than its title reveals—German conceptions of the tragic also serve as points of departure to examine Bob Dylan's ballad “Blind Willie McTell” and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. These references serve as a reminder of the ability of these theories of the tragic to transcend their own cultural moment. Indeed, the definitions of the tragic proposed in these texts appear more relevant today than ever. When understood as the “impossibility of dialogue” (McFarland 172), the “pursuit of a particular form of justice that engenders conflict with other valid claims” (Roche 288), and above all as “fiasco” (Hoppe 329) and the “confrontation with the absurd” (Hahn 313), the tragic seems to resonate profoundly in the midst of our contemporary political moment. What lessons, then, can still be learned from tragedy? As Dowden notes in his introduction, tragedy is a “species not of forgetting, but of critical, future-oriented remembering” (2). Tragedy may not offer solutions, but it does reflect the continued effort to come to terms with the nature of human frailty and hubris. *Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art, and Thought* reminds us that while the utopian communal transformation promised by earlier iterations of tragic art may be forever lost, the challenging provocations of

modern theories of the tragic may still open up new perspectives and possibly even offer us a glimpse of the ever-elusive redemption we seek.

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