Measuring Tragedy—and Drawing Its Borders

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Abstract: This article introduces the METRA project, in which 22 researchers coordinated by Franco Moretti will analyze the tragic form in a dozen European cultures, using literary geography, comparative poetics and various computational analyses. This special issue of *Transilvania* is a preliminary exploration of the project's theme, aimed at presenting the METRA methodology and discussing the generic, chronological and geographical limits of the tragic form.

Keywords: tragedy, the tragic, European literatures, network semantics, definition

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In an article published on June 24, 2016, a day after the validation of the Brexit vote, a journalist from *The Guardian* referred to the downfall of David Cameron as "a European tragedy."[1] Kettle's phrase was an intertextual allusion drawing on a widespread cultural perception. He was, of course, referring to Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* (1925), but this title itself was appealing precisely because it seemed to contradict the common understanding of the tragedy as a "highly specific affair,"[2] i.e., a quintessential European construct. In fact, from Friedrich Nietzsche to Earl Miner (who opposed the Aristotelian poetics, based on drama—more specifically, on tragedy—to Asian theories, based on the lyric[3]) and beyond, the idea persisted that tragedy—and, even more, "the tragic" and its derivatives, the Dionysian and the Faustian—mark "a long tradition of European civilization."[4] According to Walter Benjamin, tragedy, with its unique capacity to combine horrific stories of murder and torture with some of the most beautiful language ever written, illustrates the inner contradiction of European history, for "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[5]

Tragedy as European form. But which form? And which Europe? Bringing together a team of 23 researchers from Romania, Poland, and Norway, the METRA project (an acronym for *Measuring Tragedy: Geographical Diffusion, Comparative Morphology, and Computational Analysis of European Tragic Form*) sets out to answer these questions by combining cultural geography with comparative poetics and content analysis with network semantics. Specifically, we pursue the study of tragedy in two ancient cultures—Greek and Latin—and in ten modern European cultures, among which five—English, French, German, Spanish, and Italian, with openings toward the American one—belong to the core of the world literary system, and the other five—Norwegian, Swedish, Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian, with openings toward the Russian one—belong to its (semi)peripheries.

1. Martin Kettle, "The Downfall of David Cameron: A European Tragedy," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/24/david-cameron-downfall-european-tragedy, accessed on August 8, 2024.
2. Terry Eagleton, *Tragedy* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2020), 1.
3. Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics. An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 8.
4. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 15.
5. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, Preface by Leon Wieseltier (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 258.

Regarding its theoretical underpinning, METRA relies on three main theses developed by Franco Moretti:

> 1. Tragedy is a symbolic form of radical conflict, specifically of civil war. As the theater only disposes of a small space and a handful of characters, civil war is inevitably transformed and is equated to *the war within the family*: early on, with the family as lineage, and later with the family as couple—with a long transition between the two lasting from the 16th to the 18th century. Ultimately, with the spread of the tragic form to (semi)peripheral European cultures, other communities of class, race, and gender are added to the family, as hypothesized by Andrei Terian. How this dominant role of the family/community shapes our perception of political conflict will be the main historical and interpretive task of the research.
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> 2. Theories that see conflict as the central aspect of tragic form tend to point out how conflict manifests itself in language, thus interpreting tragic dialogue as the perfect embodiment of the form itself. Accepting this as its starting point, our project will show that the relationship between word and deed is far from linear, and results in a whole spectrum of dissonant constructions. In terms of literary theory, the project thus lays the foundations—via a corpus that includes thousands of texts and a methodology consisting of computational and hermeneutic approaches—of *a unified theory of style and plot*, which have so far been the objects of completely independent disciplines.
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> 3. From an epistemological point of view, METRA will construct its argument by focusing not on "typical" tragedies, however they may be defined, but by *working with extreme cases*, often set in opposition to each other (*Antigone* by Sophocles and *Danton's Death* by Georg Büchner, Racine and Shakespeare, etc.). Extreme cases are an indispensable tool of both interpretive and quantitative criticism: being one-dimensional, they are extremely clear, thus allowing us to think about the genre in terms of a field of forces, whereby different historical pressures give rise to a variety of morphological solutions.

Returning to our previous questions ("Which form?" and "Which Europe?"), METRA regards tragedy, on the one hand, as an essentially dramatic form, which can only be thought of within the performing arts. Of course, this does not entail that "the tragic" as existential category cannot exist outside theater; but not *as a form*. On the other hand, our project does not adhere to the Steinerian argument that tragedy "died" in the 18th century.[6] On the contrary, we believe that the birth and development of a "modern tragedy," regardless of how we understand it, enabled the presence of this form not only in core European cultures, but also in certain (semi)peripheries, which underwent a belated development in relation to the former. However, we have not tried to impose this contention upon the contributors to this special issue. Our aim during this initial mapping was to mark the limits of tragedy not by blindly applying a predefined concept but by exploring more nuanced and intricate cases that could pose additional challenges and questions. Incidentally, this is the reason why, although most of the contributors are members of the METRA team, this issue also includes invited contributors who are not involved in the project.

Therefore, our special issue includes 9 contributions signed by 11 authors, covering a wide range of literary genres (theater, film, short story, novel, political and philosophical texts), periods (from Antiquity to the Russo-Ukrainian War), and cultures (Greek, English, French, German, American, Russian, Norwegian, etc., with a predictable focus on Romanian culture). The contributions address various aspects pertaining to the project and tragedy in general. Moretti's article ("Network Semantics. A Beginning") bridges the latter two of the three aforementioned theses with "network semantics," a concept that he developed in the early 2010s and continued to refine ever since. As a possible result, by studying "extreme cases," we can hope for "a possible conjunction of plot and style," that is, "a synthesis literary theory so far never achieved"—and, through this, even "a small-scale model to study … fundamental features of human societies." Andrei Terian's text has a theoretical scope as well, as it advances a new definition of tragedy, even if his examples focus primarily on Romanian literature, where this form has presumably never existed or was completely devoid of relevance. Arguing both

6. See George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press), 1996.

against definitions that regard tragedy as a more radical rendition of drama, as well as against those that disregard its theatrical dimension and see in it only its philosophical core ("the tragic"), Terian argues, on the one hand, that tragedy as genre cannot be conceived outside of the dramatic form, and, on the other hand, that it is not the intensity, but the irreversible nature of the suffering (manifest through death or mutilation) that characterizes the fate of the tragic hero.

The following three contributions in our special issue explore the shifts and delimitations of modern tragedy, with a focus on 19th century phenomena. Thus, Snejana Ung's article pleads for the existence of tragedy in Romanian literature prior to World War I. Fueled by three successive waves of translations, which Ung categorizes as "latecomers," "cognates," and "diversifiers," this genre is often disguised in early modern Romanian literature as historical drama built on an "inter-imperial" plot. In the same vein, Ovio Olaru undertakes a comparative analysis of the works of Norway and Romania's two "national playwrights"—Henrik Ibsen and Ioan Luca Caragiale. According to Olaru, even if they have profoundly different views on these phenomena, the two authors have at least three essential common denominators: the idea of revolution as a rupture of the existing social order, the interest in the "legalization" of the world through various forms of bureaucracy and describing the bourgeoisie as an up-and-coming social class. The issue of tragic content is also the subject of Ștefan Baghiu and Anca Simina Martin's article, which discusses the relationship between the vampire trope and the tragic form, from the classic writings of John Polidori and Bram Stoker to Anne Rice's novels. The explanation for the low chemistry between tragedies and vampires resides in the fact that "vampires represent a world of post-tragic plots," in which "tragedy is impossible since they live too long after the tragic event had already occurred."

The transformations of tragedy in contemporary society returns and calls for a reflection on its generic forms in the essays authored by Radu Vancu and Mihai Iovănel. Based on Moretti's thesis regarding the incompatibility between tragedy and modern liberalism, Vancu states that certain historical events, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, have rekindled the possibility of tragedy in the contemporary world through the circulation of totalitarian ideologies. However, tragedy is no longer contained in the conventional dramatic form but seems to prefer confessional genres such as poetry and the diary. This, in its turn, does not necessarily mean that theater has become obsolete as a way of expressing contemporary tragedy. On the contrary, as shown by Iovănel in his contribution, playwrights still regarded Hamlet as a source of inspiration and a way to address contemporary issues not only in the communist period, but in post-communism as well. For example, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Boris Akunin's rewritings after Shakespeare betray—despite the progressive stances shared by both authors—the anguish of transitioning from one socio-economic system to another, manifest in the belief that "the power provided by the possession of capital dictates the laws of human configuration."

The tragic as the result of a clash between two opposing mindsets or systems of beliefs constitutes the common theme of the last two articles featured in this issue. Teodora Dumitru draws on a short story by Gib I. Mihăescu to study how the vulgar perception of a medical phenomenon (malaria) leads not only to the psychotic behavior of one of the characters but—by clustering similar canonical Romanian writings—to a true allegory of a national tragedy. A similar divide is analyzed by Cosmin Borza and Claudiu Turcuș in their article, where, in shifting the focus away from the opposition between science and pseudo-science, they show the discrepancy between idealized images and "real" experiences of Romanian emigrants from the 1990s and how they were reflected in prose and cinema. Even if this discrepancy is not necessarily tragic, but rather tragicomic, it clearly exemplifies the diversity of the forms of tragedy in contemporary times.

The METRA project is hosted by Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS) from January 1, 2024, to June 30, 2026. Among the results it aims to achieve is the compilation and open access publication of the first Romanian corpus of dramatic works, which we hope will be integrated as a distinct section in the European DraCor platform (https://dracor.org). Additionally, our project pursues the organization of an international conference, the publication of at least one single-author monograph, the editing of a collective volume, as well as the publication of at least 20 scientific articles. Besides these academic deliverables, METRA will also disseminate its findings through a series of lectures and presentations dedicated to the wider public, such as those already held by Moretti in January 2024 at ULBS' Faculty of Letters and Arts, or by Terian at the International Platform of Doctoral Research in the Fields of Performing Arts and Cultural Management with the occasion of the Sibiu International Theater Festival in June 2024. All project results will be mentioned on the METRA website, https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/metra/.

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