Tragic Poetry and the Cultural Foundation of Power: A Re-examination of Franco Moretti's Theory of Tragic

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Abstract: Franco Moretti posited in his 1983 book, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, that we live in a post-tragic and anti-tragic age in which tragic has been replaced by compromise both in fiction and in the modern lyric. The present article tries to re-examine Moretti's conjecture in a historic period which has given up compromise and revived the tragic. In Moretti's terms, tragic's condition of existence involves "a civilization irreparably divided between hostile entries and values". Whenever history allows this radical division between two irreconcilable systems of values, tragic finds a literary form of expression. In this article, tragic's main contemporary elective form in Ukraine is poetry, while fiction seems somewhat slower in keeping pace with the rapid tragic of history. Moreover, the diary as a confessional genre closer to poetry is also a medium more suitable for the contemporary tragic than fiction. Read by tens of thousands, maybe even more, Ukrainian poetry and diaries are the direct proof of a return to a tragic era, confirming Moretti's 1983 diagnosis: tragic works within and against the absolutist ideologies. Tragedy may indeed be "an unrepeatable 'exception' in the history of literary forms"; but the substance of tragic finds its contemporary expressions in this age of anti-compromise in confessional poetry and, to a lesser extent, in other confessive genres (diaries and memoirs). Tragic poetry is a response to the reappearance of the cultural foundation of absolutist power; its confessional nature is an attempt to rehumanize a history unleashed against the human.

Keywords: Franco Moretti, poetry and tragic, post-tragic culture, contemporary poetry in Ukraine, Volodymyr Vakulenko, Andrei Kurkov, Serhii Zhadan

Citation suggestion: Vancu Radu. "Tragic Poetry and the Cultural Foundation of Power: A Re-examination of Franco Moretti's Theory of Tragic." *Transilvania*, no. 05 (2024): 55-63. https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2024.05.06

1.

In his 1983 book, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms*, Moretti issues one of his most seductive ideas (in a work teeming with such propositions and conjectures): our age is simultaneously post-tragic and anti-tragic[1]. Ours is an age of compromise, and compromise is in its nature anti-tragic. Tragedy was possible within and against absolute monarchy (which evidently

1. "Modern literature and aesthetics are born not only 'after' tragedy but also 'against' it. A metamorphosis takes place which goes beyond the realm of aesthetics and extends right across the bourgeois cultural system. Precisely because this system sees conflict as a given fact of existence in society it no longer sets itself the task of depicting iit with 'pity and terror' but of showing that mutually opposing values and interests can always reach, if not a genuine conciliation, at least some kind of coexistence and compromise. In the realm of aesthetics this anti-tragic impulse of our culture appears with particular clarity. Indeed, it appears as the real foundation the secret *raison d'etre* of the aesthetic sphere itself. This is attested by the two works which have contributed like few others to the formation of modern aesthetic thought: the *Critique of Judgment* and *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*". Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 29.

refuses any political and social compromise), whose values it discredited "more radically than any other cultural phenomenon of the same period", "thereby paving the way, with wholly destructive means, for the English revolution of the seventeenth century" (27). When the organicist ideology disappears, so does its tragic negation—which makes tragedy "an unrepeatable 'exception' in the history of literary forms" (29). The post-1789 bourgeois period does not mean anymore "the drastic and acknowledged triumph of one system of values over all the others"; it introduces *compromise* (italicized by Moretti) as "the great theme of 'realist' narrative fiction and perhaps, even more significantly, the main rhetorical criterion of that still more enigmatic phenomenon, the 'modern lyric'"(34). Thus, the real political dimension of tragedy consists in "posing the question of whether a *cultural foundation* of power is still possible, and in answering it in the negative" (64).

Written towards the end of the Cold War, Moretti's superb and already classic study on the nature of tragedy is imbued with the optimistic *Zeitgeist* in which originate some other contemporary major documents of humanities, not only in literary studies—but also in humanistic fields usually more accustomed with human atrocity and therefore more pessimistic, such as history, political science, or ethics. I am thinking first of course to Fukuyama's landmark 1989 essay on the end of history as "the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama, "The End of History?", 1). And also to Isaiah Berlin's 1990 creed regarding the irreversibility of value pluralism as our species' most effective intellectual tool against mass murder; arguably even more optimistic than Fukuyama, Berlin thought that Fukuyama's last men not only universalize a political form of organization (namely democracy), but are even able to create and share a communal illumination: pluralism is thus "the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other" (Berlin, 11).

Moretti's axiom that modernity is a post-tragic age of compromise shares with Fukuyama and Berlin the conviction that monist ideologies (absolute monarchy, for Moretti; fascism, for Berlin; communism, for Fukuyama) have irreversibly collapsed and thereby all cultural foundations of an absolute or totalitarian power are impossible to rebuild from now on. Subsequently, tragic as a direct reaction against this monist forms of political power is also impossible from now on, either in fiction or in poetry—and has been replaced by various forms of compromise between political power and humanistic (*y compris* literary) ideologies.

11 September 2001 and, even more radically, 24 February 2022 have revealed the cultural foundations of two forms of political power which refuse Moretti's compromise, Fukuyama's universalization of Western liberal democracy and Berlin's pluralism. The version of history proposed by this events refuses therefore to abandon tragic—to universalize democracy—and to profess pluralism. Moretti's 1983 study indelibly convinced me about the direct causality between socio-politics and rhetoric: tragedy as a literary form is a direct consequence of absolute monarchy's irrepressible drive to achieve a "drastic and acknowledged triumph of [its] system of values over all the others." Moreover, this is a conviction Moretti still shares today, 41 years after his 1983 seminal book: in his article in the present issue of Transilvania, Moretti sees his current pioneering work in network semantics as a proof of "a plot-style continuum" in which I see a direct continuation of his theory regarding the conjunction of socio-politics and rhetoric:

> "the conjunction of edges and speech operated in network semantics points to a possible conjunction of plot and style, or narratology and stylistics – a synthesis literary theory has so far never achieved (and in fact almost never attempted). Beyond plot and style, an even more ambitious project can be glimpsed: treating drama as a small-scale model to study two fundamental features of human societies: plot, to understand how individual exchanges evolve into complex systems made of thousands of interactions; and style, to study how human beings make sense of such actions. What we do, and how we think about it: this is what a plot-style continuum may illuminate."

Thus, the question this article tries to answer regards what happens with the tragic when its conditions of existence seem to have been revived: we witness once again an attempt of a political power to impose a drastic triumph against all other values. Whereas tragedy as a literary expression of the tragic seems to be specifically historicized and therefore impossible to revive, one can expect this age of non-compromise to revive other forms of literary tragic—either in lyric or in prose. If this happens, Moretti's conjecture on the tragic as a radical negation of an anti-pluralistic political power will be once again reconfirmed. One could argue that Moretti's optimist belief in the solidity of that age of

compromise was (just like Berlin's or Fukuyama's) somewhat exaggerated, which would mean that Moretti was wrong to believe we live in a post-tragic era. But his exactness in the definition of tragic's nature and function will nevertheless be reinforced by the contemporary reignition of our tragic history.

2.

After 24 February 2022, history has become horror again. As it has always been—except for these 8 decades of peace in the European Union after World War II. And even this peace was relative, as one should not forget the atrocity of the war in Yugoslavia. Whenever we tend to have a too high opinion on our human species, we should moderate it with the thought that this is the longest period of relative peace we have ever been able to build in our entire history: 8 decades. While the oldest rock art depicting a war is dated about 10,000 years BCE.

12,000 years of war. 80 years of peace. For every year of peace, 150 years of war. This simple arithmetic should have sufficed in making us believe unconditionally in Judith Shklar's "liberalism of fear," which tried to educate us to be afraid of the collapse of liberal institutions and of their replacement with institutions of horror. Shklar was right: we should have been more afraid of our destructive nature. "Liberalism's deepest grounding," she wrote, "is in the conviction of the earliest defenders of toleration, born in horror, that cruelty is an absolute evil, an offense against God and humanity" (Shklar, 23). As such, "to account for the necessity of freedom in general [...] one must put cruelty first and understand the fear of fear and and recognize them everywhere" (Shklar, 37). Sloterdijk was also right to notice, in *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, that, unlike the usual contemporary perception, war has been our natural state as a species, while peace was the exception; rage, which Sloterdijk labels as a "thymotic emotion", has been the dominant elementary force within our emotional ecosystem—therefore, our human species must invent a "code of conduct" against multi-civilizing complexes in a multi-megalomaniac and inter-paranoid world (Sloterdijk, 227–231). (As a parenthetical aside, it is useful to note here that the over-optimistic Fukuyama seems to confirm the over-pessimistic Sloterdijk when the former accepted that "megalothymia" is a necessary pre-condition of all political societies—see Fukuyama, 315). As Amos Oz bitterly noticed in an interview given to Magda Grădinaru in December 2016, we have ceased to be terrified by the legacy of Hitler and Stalin; thence the impulse to retest again their totalitarian anti-democratic ideologies:

> "I'm going to give you an answer that may shock you. 70-80 years ago, the world received a very nice gift from Hitler and Stalin. It was not their intention to give us this gift, but they gave it to us anyway: they left such a strong shock in the world's consciousness that for more than half a century many people were very ashamed to be called racists, to openly manifest their chauvinism, to be bloodthirsty revolutionaries. And that only because of that shock caused by Hitler and Stalin. But it seems that the validity period of the gift has passed. It is no longer relevant for the new generations which do not have the memory of that shock. And people again become vulnerable to hitherto repressed instincts: nationalist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic instincts, even those against women. We are simply witnessing the return of those things. So far we have only had a break, a respite interval caused by that shock that Stalin and Hitler gave us."

The barbaric war launched by Russia in Ukraine is exactly this: an attempt to deny everything liberal democracies have managed to build after World War 2—and to revert to the anti-democratic order where states are run not by civilians we elect to protect us from war, but by militarists destroying any institution and any human opposing their ideology of war. In Freudian terms, Russia's barbaric war is a return of our repressed militaristic anti-democratic ego. The ego responsible for our 12,000 years of uninterrupted war. While Vladimir Putin is the perfect image of this militaristic ego, as Hitler and Stalin have also been in their time, Ukraine stands as a metonymy for our other ego: the one who has managed to build, using the fragile institutions of liberal democracy, the most solid and continuous period of peace and prosperity known in our human history.

In barbaric times, perhaps the only advantage we have is that narratives simplify: we know exactly where barbarity stands—just as we know exactly where humanity stands. In the latest version of this narrative, to side with Russia means to be on the side of our barbaric militaristic ego, which represents indeed the dominant political past of our species; to be with Ukraine is to hope that our pacifistic, pro-democratic, and pro-human ego still represents the future of our species.

To stand with Ukraine is literally to believe our human species has a future. Not only as a species—but as a humane one.

3.

"The horror, the horror." Joseph Conrad's words from *Heart of Darkness* come into my mind every time I read the news, therefore daily. And in those days when I first read about the horrors of Bucha, the shattering story of Miklós Radnóti came into my mind: as he was of Jewish descent, the great Hungarian poet was murdered in November 1944 and thrown into a common grave. In June 1946, his wife Fanni Gyarmati found him there, exhumed him and found in his pocket a notebook with poems: half of them love letters for her, the other half poems describing everyday life in that inferno. Fanni's love has made literature return from the grave; it has made literature literally stronger than death.

Radnóti's literature was proof that barbarity will never have the final word. Given enough love, our words will always return from the grave in order to stand witness that our pro-human ego is stronger than the anti-human one. And thus, to give meaning to all art's attempts to stand witness that this luminous ego exists. That we are not only the species which creates common graves—but also the species which creates beauty and kindness.

Radnóti's story also came into my mind when I found out about the assassination of the Ukrainian writer Volodimir Vakulenko by the Russian troops sometime between March and May 2022, in a village near Izium. Vakulenko told his father he was keeping a diary of those infernal times—which he will bury in the garden if he feels his life is in danger. After Vakulenko was murdered and the village was recaptured by the Ukrainian forces, Vakulenko's father and the writer Victoria Amelina, a recipient of the Joseph Conrad Literary Award and finalist of the European Prize for Literature, dug the garden, found the diary and published it. It is exactly the same story: literature returning from the grave—and not allowing barbarity to have the final word. Beauty standing witness that, given enough love, our species still stands a chance.

As Michael Naydan shows in an article for *World Literature Today*, "at the time of his arrest by Russian forces in September 2022, Vakulenko was not serving as a volunteer and was unarmed. He was a civilian just taking care of his autistic son, whom he had been home-schooling because of the boy's disability. He was killed execution-style with two shots from a Russian Makarov pistol."

One year afterwards, in July 2023, Victoria Amelina was killed by a Russian bomb while she was in a pizza house in Kramatorsk with fellow writers and journalists. She was 37 years old. Her extraordinary work is, again, the proof that barbarity will never have the final word. In a article of hers published by *The Guardian* 5 days after her assassination, Amelina quoted a message published by the director of the Hungarian news agency in November 1956, during the brutal Russian attack against the Hungarian revolt: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe." Amelina notices that Kundera started his 1984 essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe* with the Hungarian journalist's message, and then concludes:

> "As one of the leading figures of the 1968 Prague Spring, Kundera understood what the brave Hungarian had meant by dying for Europe. As a Ukrainian writer in Kyiv in 2022, I can't stop thinking about Kundera, writing in exile after the Prague Spring failed. We, Central Europeans, are ready to fight for Europe, even if at times our love may be unrequited. / However, when Russia started the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Europe did take in fleeing Ukrainians and accepted us unconditionally. / Europe didn't come to Hungary's rescue. Nor did it come to the Czechs' rescue, or the Ukrainians' in 2014. If being a Central European means being betrayed by Europe, Ukraine is certainly a member of the club."

In January 2024, the Ukrainian poet Maksym Kryvtsov was killed two days after he posted on Facebook his last poem, in which he presciently wrote about his own death. He was 34. His extraordinary poems are, again, the proof that our humanity has a future.

4.

In the early months of 1940, less than half a year after the beginning of World War II, when another fundamental narrative of humanity versus barbarity was taking place, Walter Benjamin wrote: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, 390). For me, one of the fundamental consequences of Benjamin's *dictum* regards our functions as artists: it is maybe our fundamental task to not allow the documents of barbarism to define us—and to turn them into documents of civilization. To stand witness for our humanity. To show that we and our fellow humans can even be killed—but our humanity cannot be destroyed.

It's a difficult task. And a risky one, for too many reasons. But there are luminous examples in how it can be achieved. I think, for example, of Benjamin Britten using eight of Wilfred Owen's extraordinary

poems about war in his no less extraordinary *War Requiem* (1962); Owen was killed in action at the end of World War I, exactly one week before the armistice. He was 25—and, according to Harold Bloom, one of the greatest poets of English language in the 20th century. Almost half a century afterwards, Benjamin Britten used Owen's art in order to sustain his own, while composing the *War Requiem* for the victims of the two world wars. Jeremy Eichler observes that, "for the composer in 1962, after two world wars and all they had revealed, the traditional Mass for the dead could no longer be authentically rendered in its original form, which is to say, as theology divorced from history. By disrupting and puncturing the Mass, Owen's poems render it as a series of fragments. The blood-soaked history of the twentieth century, this music tells us, has left established religion itself as a kind of ruin" (Eichler 227). Owen's death, as well as the deaths of other tens of millions, were documents of barbarism; Owen's poems, as well as Britten's music, are documents of civilization, proving that barbarity will never have the final word. That it is Owen and Britten, and not Hitler or Stalin or Putin, that define our humanity; even though the latter can create wars and mass murder which kill tens of millions of human beings, they cannot destroy humanity as we know it can and must be. Our art is our proof that the victims are the definition of humanity—and not their suppressors.

Another luminous example is that of Paul Celan. This great poet, whose existence intersects Ukraine, Romania, France, and Germany, used his words in order to transform a document of barbarism (namely the assassination of his parents in the Romanian Holocaust) into one of civilization. As he wrote in a letter from November '47 to the Swiss critic Max Rychner, he chose to write in German (after having written about 18 poems in Romanian) because, while being the language of his mother's assassins, it was also the language he spoke with his mother. He used thus his words in order to recreate a verbal space where his communion with his mother was still possible; it was, in the most literal meaning, poetry written against death. And as witness for those killed by the Nazi ideology of extermination. In his Bremen prize acceptance speech, Celan explicitly wrote that, after passing "through the thousand darknesses of the murderous speeches", language survived when human beings were murdered—and it was enriched ("angereichert") with their humanity. Poetry is the witness of these assassinated human beings, Celan says; it is the proof that they were killed, but they can never be destroyed. One critic once noticed that all Celan's poems are an immediate intertext with the Holocaust; I agree—with the *coda* that, as such, they refuse to give the Holocaust the final word. His poems are what the victims declare after "the thousand darknesses of the murderous speeches" have long ended their effects.

I can also mention here Carolyn Forché's extraordinary anthology from 1993, *Against Forgetting. Twentieth-century Poetry of Witness*; Forché has gathered here, with the wonderful insight and exigence of the great poet she herself is, about 150 poets from the 20th century writing in times of war, genocide, totalitarianisms, extermination camps, etc. Some of them have survived, some other not; their poems are always documents for the survival of humanity even in the most inhuman conditions. "Poetry as witness," as both Celan and Forché label it; first of all, as a witness that our humanity is real—and not a mere utopia.

Or I could mention another extraordinary anthology, *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond*, compiled in 2008 by Tina Chang, Nathalie Handal, Ravi Shankar, and introduced by the same Carolyn Forché; it comprises about 400 poets, some of them sending their poems from prisons or from war zones. Barbarity cannot destroy us: this is what all these poems say, each in their language and tradition. Humanity literally exists—and its art literally has the power to transform all documents of barbarism in documents of civilizations.

This is the world we have to build with our words: a world in which they are used not to design ideologies of extermination. A world in which, quite on the contrary, words are witness against barbarity. Witness that people can be murdered—but not destroyed. Witness in the service of fellow humans, and not of ideologies. Because we now know: where words fail, history fails. And it becomes horror again. We have to build a Europe and a world where words do not fail the human. Not again. Or else everything literature ever stood for, everything arts ever stood for—was simply a lie.

The only humanity which is not a dead civilization is this one: a humanity whose words do not fail the human.

5.

In the same essay on history written less than half a year after the beginning of World War 2, Walter Benjamin notices that the amazement that barbarity is still possible in the 20th century works in favor of Fascism. What must be attained, Benjamin writes, is the notion that barbarity is always possible—and therefore we have "*to bring about a real state of emergency*" (Benjamin's italics). We should always act (not only we, artists: we, human beings) as if humanity is in a real state of emergency.

And do everything in our power, disregarding how minuscule the said power is, to preserve whatever humanity is left to us.

Benjamin's plea for this perpetual state of emergency in favor of the human came into my mind when I read Amos Oz's plea for the "Order of the Teaspoon"; it was first written as a proposal in *How to cure a Fanatic*, in 2004. Two years afterwards, in 17 August 2006, in Stockholm, it became a real order. When you read it, you feel that it directly answers Benjamin's thought about the perpetual state of emergency of the human. Almost 70 years after Benjamin wrote his plea, Amos Oz continued it with the creation of the Order of the Teaspoon. I do believe that Camus was right to say that truth is all that continues; there is much truth in this Benjamin-Oz continuity. You can find the founding document of the Order of the Teaspoon below:

> "I believe that if one person is watching a huge calamity, let's say a conflagration, a fire, there are always three principal options.
> 1. Run away, as far away and as fast as you can and let those who cannot run burn.
> 2. Write a very angry letter to the editor of your paper demanding that the responsible people be removed from office with disgrace. Or, for that matter, launch a demonstration.
> 3. Bring a bucket of water and throw it on the fire, and if you don't have a bucket, bring a glass, and if you don't have a glass, use a teaspoon, everyone has a teaspoon. And yes, I know a teaspoon is little and the fire is huge but there are millions of us and each one of us has a teaspoon. Now I would like to establish the Order of the Teaspoon. People who share my attitude, not the run-away attitude, or the letter attitude, but the teaspoon attitude—I would like them to walk around wearing a little teaspoon on the lapel of their jackets, so that we know that we are in the same movement, in the same brotherhood, in the same order, *The Order of the Teaspoon*."

I have met people wearing the small teaspoons at their lapels, showing thus that they belonged to a human community which no historic catastrophe could shatter. There is a continuity (and therefore a truth) of human values which no barbarism could destroy. And there is no barbaric fire which our tiny humanistic teaspoons cannot extinguish. Art is a good collection of such used teaspoons; they are already old, but they have served their duty well—and will continue to serve it.

Now, in 2024, Amos Oz's idea is exactly 20 years old; and the actual Order will turn 18 in August. If you happen to not be a part of the Order yet, maybe it is a good idea to join it when it enters its mature age.

6.

Before ending this notes on a humanity whose words do not fail the human, let me say a few words about the contemporary rage against Russian culture—which resembles the rage against German culture after World War II.

The file "Russian culture versus Russian barbarism" reproduces the file "German culture versus German barbarism", which dominated in the 1950s European discussions about the function of art. Then and now, the question was the same: since culture does not prevent barbarism, what good is culture? Since German music and German philosophy and a German literature, all superlative, could not make the German people humane enough not to produce Nazism, what good is each of them? What good is a culture which does not make us more human? The revolt contained in this question is what made Adorno bitterly conclude in 1951 that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And it is the same revolt that made George Steiner claim, in an article published as late as 1960, *The Hollow Miracle. Notes on German Language*, that "German language was not innocent of the horrors of Nazism," and Hitler found in it the "latent hysteria" he needed in order to craft his ideology of extermination.

There is a similar contemporary rage against Russian culture. Just as Adorno denied the moral right of poetry after Auschwitz, for any Ukrainian the moral right of Russian literature ceases after the Bucha and Mariupol massacres. Just as for Steiner German language was Hitler's accomplice, Russian literature seems in the eyes of any Ukrainian Putin's accomplice. And one can indeed easily detect diachronically, across the entire history of Russian literature, a strong pan-Russian, anti-European, anti-democratic vein. Coming from Dostoevsky, passing through innumerable writers of all sizes, and reaching contemporaries like Zakhar Prilepin, this anti-European and anti-democratic vein can justifiably be seen (due to its continuity, persistence, massiveness, and intensity) as the very backbone of all Russian literature. It makes immediately understandable the visceral rejection of Russian literature by Ukrainians—just as, in its time, it was immediately understandable the rejection *in corpore* of German

culture after Nazism.

As both Adorno and Steiner were influential and authoritative, their opinion quickly became the general opinion. Those who were hurt by it and felt it was unfair were, not surprisingly, poets themselves. Paul Celan felt hurt; he had already written an impressive body of his Holocaust poems in 1951, when Adorno has issued his statement (*Todesfuge* was written in 1945; its first Romanian version, *Tangoul morții*, was published in 1947; the German original was published in 1948; Felstiner dubs it "the *Guernica* of postwar European literature", "a historical agent, accumulating its own biography"—Felstiner, 26). As we have seen before, his poetry written in German created a verbal community with his mother—and now he felt that Adorno's moral interdiction on poetry was depriving him of the last possibility to reconnect with the dear persons Nazism has brutally taken from him. Czesław Miłosz was also hurt; he had written some extraordinary poems about the Polish Holocaust, such as *Campo dei Fiori*, written in the Easter days of 1943.

It took almost two decades for Adorno to admit he was not entirely right. In his last book, *Negative Dialectics* (1966), he acknowledges that, after reading Celan, he understood poetry is our inalienable right to scream under torture: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" (Adorno, 362). Therefore, to write poetry witnessing in favor of the victim in the language of assassins is to defeat assassins.

It would be an injustice (and maybe even a barbarism) not to see that Russian literature also displays a pro-European, humanist, freedom-loving tradition. Arguably thinner than the anti-democratic one, it is in no way negligible, as it spans two centuries and some major authors—starting with Chekhov and Turgenev, continuing with Akhmatova and Mandelstam and Pasternak and Tsvetaeva, and reaching today to Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Mikhail Shishkin. They all explicitly felt part of the European culture; some of them even identified more as European than as Russians. Turgenev, for example, in his final quarrel with Dostoevsky, when the author of *The Possessed* accused him of betraying Russia with his philo-Europeanism, replied bluntly: "I consider myself a German, not a Russian, and I'm proud of it!" (The scene is reproduced at length in Orlando Figes's *The Europeans*, 311-12). Chekhov is one of the major humanist artists worldwide. Mandelstam and Akhmatova are among the most freedom-loving poets of the entire 20th century; they were mercilessly crushed by the communist regime exactly because of that. This is a humanist Russian culture which Europe (*y compris* Ukraine, it goes without saying) will also want to recover, there are in it amounts of truth and beauty not to be found anywhere else—and which will decisively nurture our European hearts and brains.

It took Adorno almost 20 years to understand that he had to tone down his harsh statement. That there is an art which serves and justifies the barbarity of the tyrants—and there is another art which gives the victims their voice. The voice necessary to scream under torture. The voice necessary to bear witness. It is only this last voice which is indeed the voice of art. And it is precisely this voice which stands proof that no barbarism can definitively destroy the human.

7.

If Germany re-became one of the major European hearts, this was possible because it admitted his tragic barbaric error and had the political and social will to develop a guilty conscience. It was, and still is, an educational program of unprecedented amplitude. After 1945, Germany had a future because of this moral admission of its guilty past. If Russia wants to have a future after losing the war with Ukraine, it will have to undergo a similar moral process of admitting and repenting its tragic barbaric error. Unfortunately for Russia, I do not see any political and social will on its side to develop this moral reaction. Bluntly said, because of its impotence to deal with its guilty past, Russia will have no future.

As for Ukraine, we all see and admire its extraordinary spirit born from a moral reaction in front of barbarism. President Zelenski's extraordinary words, "I need ammunition, not a ride," uttered in front of highly probable death, were the beginning of this massive moral reaction which catalyzed the formidable Ukrainian present and future. Which means that Russian barbarism has not managed to destroy Ukraine. Russian barbarism has destroyed Russia more than anything else. As for Ukrainian writers, they have done exactly what real artists do when history becomes horror: they have given voice to those who needed it in order to scream against barbarism. They have used their words as witness against atrocity. They have not allowed barbarity to have the final word.

So that Vakulenko and Amelina and Kryvtsov will define us as human species—and not Putin and his barbaric acolytes. If we want a future for our art, and for our humanity, we should take their example—

and write from this perpetual state of emergency for the human. And serve literature as members of the Order of the Teaspoon. And build a humanity whose words will not fail the human anymore. If we do so, literature will reach us even if it has to pass through common graves. As it has already done. But hopefully it will never have to do it again.

It all depends on us. And our teaspoons.

8.

Moretti was therefore right: whenever compromise ceases, tragic reappears. Tragic's condition of existence involves "a civilization irreparably divided between hostile entries and values" (Moretti, 34). Whenever history allows this radical division between two irreconcilable systems of values, tragic finds a literary form of expression. As we have seen in this article, its main contemporary elective form in Ukraine is poetry—I have mentioned Maksim Kryvtsov, but I could have easily added dozens of other names which are widely read in Ukraine because they are perceived as most relevant both as reaction against and description of the historical evil: among them, Iya Kiva, Yuliya Musakovska, Serhii Zhadan, Yevgeniy Breyger (the latter, writing in German about the war in Ukraine, being the most multi-prized poet of his generation in Germany). Fiction seems somewhat slower in keeping pace with the rapid tragic of history: Andrei Kurkov and Serhii Zhadan, the leaders of their respective generations of novelists, have not produced yet novels about the historical horror, preferring the essay as a reactive tool against it. Volodymyr Rafeyenko did publish an impressive novel in 2023, *The Length of Days. An Urban Ballad*, with an afterword by Marci Shore—but it is a more a reprocessing of a diaristical material than fiction *per se*. Of course, there is also the banal reason that a novel takes longer to write than an essay or a series of poems; and it could also be because, as Baghiu & Martin convincingly assert in their article in Transilvania's current issue, "if tragedy is claustrophobic, the novel is an extroverted celebration of expansion" —and both "celebration" and "expansion" are quite problematic concepts in the context of the war in Ukraine. Moreover, the diary as a confessional genre closer to poetry is also a medium more suitable for the contemporary tragic than fiction: Vakulenko's diary hid under a cherry tree and returned from the grave has functioned, as Finbar O'Reilly has recently shown in *The New York Times*, as "the buried book that helped Ukraine's literary revival". Read by tens of thousands, maybe even more, Ukrainian poetry and diaries are the direct proof of a return to a tragic era, confirming Moretti's 1983 diagnosis: tragic works within and against the absolutist ideologies. Tragedy may indeed be "an unrepeatable 'exception' in the history of literary forms" (Moretti, 29)), and Andrei Terian compellingly shows in his article in the current issue how tragic substance subsists in modernity outside tragedy; thus but the substance of tragic finds its contemporary expressions in this age of anti-compromise in confessional poetry and, to a lesser extent, in other confessive genres (diaries and memoirs). Tragic poetry is a response to the reappearance of the cultural foundation of an absolutist power; its confessional nature is an attempt to rehumanize a history unleashed against the human.

Acknowledgement: This work was funded by the EU's NextGenerationEU instrument through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania—Pillar III-C9-I8, managed by the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, within the project entitled *Measuring Tragedy: Geographical Diffusion, Comparative Morphology, and Computational Analysis of European Tragic Form (METRA)*, contract no. 760249/28.12.2023, code CF 163/31.07.2023.

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