

MAKOM

Schriftenreihe des Franz Rosenzweig Minerva-Forschungs-
zentrums für deutsch-jüdische Literatur und Kulturgeschichte
an der Hebräischen Universität Jerusalem

Herausgegeben von
Yfaat Weiss

Band 11

Susanne Zepp (Ed.)

Textual Understanding and Historical Experience

On Peter Szondi

Wilhelm Fink

Gedruckt mit freundlicher Unterstützung des Franz Rosenzweig
Minerva-Forschungszentrums, Jerusalem und des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts für
jüdische Geschichte und Kultur an der Universität Leipzig.

Umschlagabbildung:
Peter Szondi, 1971
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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

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(Wilhelm Fink GmbH & Co. Verlags-KG, Jühenplatz 1, D-33098 Paderborn)

Internet: www.fink.de

Einbandgestaltung: Evelyn Ziegler, München
Printed in Germany
Herstellung: Ferdinand Schöningh GmbH & Co. KG, Paderborn

ISBN 978-3-7705-5653-3

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YFAAT WEISS

Preface

The following book is based on a conference that took place at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in March 2013. It was, perhaps, not the most obvious location for holding a conference on the work of Peter Szondi. The two months that Szondi spent teaching there as a visiting professor in 1968 would not in itself have been sufficient reason for holding a conference in Jerusalem. His visit is documented in only a few pages in the Hebrew University Archive; routine administrative documents—except for one, his curriculum vitae, which contains a single line that catches the eye. In the sentences that precede the course of his elementary and higher education, the visitor notes the following:

Born May 27, 1929 in Budapest.
1929-1944 Budapest
1944 Bergen-Belsen

The life reflected in this document is completely different from the short autobiographical description Szondi composed a little over a decade earlier in an introductory letter to his publisher, Siegfried Unseld, of Suhrkamp Verlag:

Meine Lebensdaten sind: Geboren 1929 in Budapest. Seit 1944 in der Schweiz niedergelassen. Hochschulstudien in Zürich und Paris. Doktorpromotion 1954 (Universität Zürich).

Was it the nature of the document, an academic resume, that called for a smooth life devoid of lacunae, the *lückenloser Lebenslauf* of a conventional academic; or the place, Jerusalem, "Hamakom", with respect to which he felt obliged to mention the other location? I wouldn't know.

More traces of Szondi's visit to Jerusalem can be found at the German Literature Archive in Marbach. Here we find two letters and a postcard sent to Szondi by his Jerusalem host, Lea Goldberg, the head of the Department of Comparative Literature. In her first letter to Szondi, written in German and dated March 12, 1967, Goldberg, a Lithuanian Jew who studied in Germany in the early 1930s, writes: "Es wäre sehr wünschenswert, dass Sie englisch lesen. Das ist die Sprache die die meisten Studenten können." A short time later, in a second let-

DANIEL WEIDNER

Reading the Wound.

Peter Szondi's *Essay on the Tragic* and Walter Benjamin

In the oeuvre of Peter Szondi, the *Essay on the Tragic* holds a special place. Written between 1957 and 1960 as his habilitation and published in 1965, it is probably Szondi's most philosophical text; and it is not without irony that it is called an "essay." Its idiosyncratic form is located somewhere between the *Theory of Modern Drama* and his later, more essayistic texts. It is comprised of a short introduction, a series of philosophical commentaries, and a central piece called "Transition," followed by the analyses of eight dramas. The tragic was an untimely topic at a time when, after decades of a renaissance in the genre, the death of tragedy was being proclaimed. Its reception was reluctant. In contrast to the widespread enthusiasm for the *Theory of Modern Drama*, Szondi's *Essay on the Tragic* was read critically by his academic advisors and received strong critiques from numerous friends, among them Siegfried Unseld, who considered the philosophical commentary too repetitive, the general thesis too abstract, and the literary readings too concrete.¹ The book was finally not published with Suhrkamp, and up to today, did not receive much critical attention.

It is not easy to sum up Szondi's argument. Moreover, the text exhibits a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, Szondi criticizes the essentialist view of the "tragic;" on the other, he does not want to give up the category altogether and thus shifts his attention from "tragedy" or "the tragic" as a substantive (Tragik) towards the adjective (das Tragische). His methodological claim is also ambivalent. He asks for structural elements that are common to different ideas of the tragic, as if he wants to formulate a general concept, but also wants to "redeem" the idea of the tragic, which implies quite a different epistemology, e.g. as the relation of the particular to the general is concerned. Finally, whether or not the text achieves his declared intention is questionable since it ends less in a clear thesis than in the very dissolution of its object.

¹ Cf. Unseld to Peter Szondi, September 8, 1960. Peter Szondi, *Briefe* (ed. by Christoph König and Thomas Sparr Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), 105-107.

The *Essay on the Tragic* is odd and ambivalent in different respects. However, it might be this ambivalence in form, argument, and method, that makes the text particularly interesting and, indeed, symptomatic of Szondi's work. To understand it we have to refrain from readings that extract this or that thesis from the text. Instead, we have to focus on the construction, i.e. the way the text introduces arguments and theses and then dismisses them. If there is an "essayistic" moment in the text, it resides in its experimental character. As Christoph König remarks: "In the *Essay on the Tragic*, Szondi does less apply a theory than reflect on its potential."² His reflections in the text are to a large part determined by another argument and another text, Walter Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*. It is this presence, not always explicit and sometimes concealed, sometimes suppressed, that opens Szondi's esoteric and detached *Essay* to the dimension of historical experience — namely, the crimes and horrors of National Socialism. This experience of catastrophe and mourning affects both the object of Szondi's study, the tragic, and its method, the interpretation of works of art in ways that prefigure his later works.

The Problem

Why does Szondi choose the tragic as the subject of his essay? Different interests seem to overlap here, the most obvious being the poetological dimension of tragedy as a genre. After his dissertation, Szondi developed a growing interest in speculative poetics, namely in the transformation of genres around 1800 in which the debate on tragedy played a key role. Szondi uses this poetics, which shifts the categories of drama and epos toward the more general "dramatic" and "epic," to reestablish and replace the older, more essentialist phenomenological categories he had used in *The Theory of Modern Drama*. Thus, the *Essay on the Tragic* can be read as continuation of this project, albeit in a different direction. If the earlier text analyzes the crisis of the dramatic in modern drama, the *Essay* tries to understand the form of the dramatic in itself, i.e. historically.³

2 Christoph König, in collaboration with Andreas Isenschmid, *Engführungen. Peter Szondi und die Literatur* (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2005), 47.

3 Somewhat similarly, the category of tragedy played a central role in the historical aesthetics of the early Georg Lukács, cf. Jürgen Thaler, *Dramatische Seelen. Tragödientheorien im frühen zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2003).

But Szondi's interest reaches beyond the poetological dimension to an epistemological one that concerns the role of theory in criticism and the relationship between philosophy and philology. In its earlier phase, in the discussion around 1800, the tragic had been a central figure between philosophy and poetics. In confronting the question how individual freedom can be conceived beyond mere formalism, German Idealism had developed the ideas of tragic failure (Schelling), of sacrifice (Hölderlin) and of dialectics (Hegel). In the first part of his essay, Szondi aims to decipher this primal dialectics, and thus his own method. "It is significant that the origin of the Hegelian dialectic is a history of the origin of Dialectics as such."⁴

It is important to note that Szondi downplays two moments that are essential to the idea of the tragic in German Idealism. He hardly mentions the moment of synthesis, which is essential for Hegel, who stresses that the mere conflict of opposites is far from tragic but merely sad (as in Schiller's *Wallenstein*), and only the overcoming of it renders it tragic. Szondi also rarely refers to the *Christian* connotations of guilt, atonement and sacrifice in Schelling, Hegel, and Hölderlin. This is all the more remarkable given his focus on Hegel's early *The Spirit of Christianity*, where the opposition between the tragic fate of Christ and the merely sad story of the Jews plays a constitutive role. Only later, when dealing with Kierkegaard, does Szondi stress the meaning of the religious perspective. Kierkegaard "separates the redemptive element from the tragic and in this respect is also the religious precursor of a nonreligious thought. He thereby prepares an analysis that is free from all metaphysical meaning."⁵ Kierkegaard's critique of the tragic thus prefigures the reading Szondi aims at, even if his critique is still fueled by Christian ideas of irony, humor, and the comic.

More important than these omissions is the fact that Szondi never argues on the philosophical level proper, but comments on philosophies of the tragic critically from the outset. He focuses on their development, rather than unfolding their respective ideas. Emil Staiger, whose *Der Geist der Liebe und das Schicksal* (1935) Szondi cites, stressed that Schelling, Hegel, and Hölderlin had solved the problem of the tragic all too easily by a "coup de main" in theory, only to undergo it existentially. For Staiger, it was only the late poetry of Hölderlin that

4 Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, (transl. by Paul Fleming, Stanford: University Press, 2002), 164.

5 *Ibid.*, 35.

“faces tragic fate eye to eye.”⁶ Even if Szondi does not adopt the psychological existentialism of Staiger, his readings are informed by a narrative that is generally more important than specific contexts. This narrative has a tragic note in itself, and is a narrative of decline. After German Idealism, the tragic is doomed to fall, too. In Schopenhauer, it is conceived as self destruction and self negation; and in Hebbel as a conflict between the individual and history. It is Georg Simmel who reveals the pure formalism of tragic dialectics in his dictum that “The destructive powers directed towards a being arise from the deepest strata of this very being.”⁷ This concept is indeed “related to nothing but the tragic itself”⁸ and, thus conceived in its purity, is “disrobed of its last conceptual vestments”⁹ and seen as itself. However, this closure leads to a central paradox. “The closer thought comes to the general concept, the less the substantial that the source of thoughts uplift, adheres to it. Reaching the height of insight into the structure of the tragic, thought collapses, powerless.”¹⁰ Thus, the philosophy of the tragic underwent a decline that Szondi compares with the fall of Icarus; not a proper tragic fall, but a powerless collapse ending, not in death, but a strange afterlife.

This afterlife is an important theme of Szondi's *Essay on the Tragic*. Historically, the idea of the tragic does not disappear after Simmel and Scheler. It culminates in the inter-war years when the language of the tragic, of historical “destiny” and of the “Faustian” became a central ideological category not only for addressing the paradoxes of modernity, as in Simmel, but for the German condition. After 1914, the opposition of the tragic German culture to rational western European civilization is a standing topos that is widely used in the propaganda of National Socialism and beyond. In the aftermath of 1945, German history is again and again construed as some kind of “tragic” fate, as an expression of a secular nihilism the Germans fell victim to.¹¹ To quote but one example: Benno von Wiese's *German Tragedy from Less-*

6 Emil Staiger, *Der Geist der Liebe und das Schicksal. Schelling, Hegel und Hölderlin* (Frauenfeld: Huber 1935), 110.

7 Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, 44.

8 *Ibid.*, 46.

9 *Ibid.*, 48.

10 *Ibid.*, 49.

11 Cf. Dietrich Mack, *Ansichten zum Tragischen und zur Tragödie: Ein Kompendium der deutschen Theorie im 20. Jahrhundert* (München: Fink, 1970); Kurt Lenk, “Das tragische Bewusstsein in der deutschen Soziologie,” in: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 16/2 (1964), 257-87.

ing to Hebbel, first published in 1948, concludes with the claim that the German tragic tradition always comprises constructive forces that counter modern nihilism. “Even during the most radical threat many originary, religious forces have been conserved and saved by the German tragedy.”¹² Wiese's audience would have known very well what he meant by “the most radical threat;” they would have even been proud to hold fast to high tragic culture as a secure refuge in “dark times.”

Szondi knew this euphemistic rhetoric very well, as his radio address on Eugen Gerstenmaier shows. It is one of the few political texts in which he outrightly addresses the politics of memory after National Socialism. According to Szondi, it is obscuring to call murder in the name of the German Reich a “catastrophe,” the responsibility of which “falls to” the Germans.¹³ Obviously, this rhetoric of the tragic has a political dimension beside the poetological and the epistemological one. Calling recent history “tragic” and using concepts related to the tragic such as “fate,” and “catastrophe” (let alone “guilt” or “sacrifice”), always has moral and political implications that, after the rupture in civilization brought about by the radical crimes of National Socialism, are all too urgent; and the language of the tragic becomes a means of self-defense and a denial of responsibility.

In the *Essay on the Tragic*, this political dimension is not mentioned but, rather, concealed. In passing, Szondi states: “Until this day, the concept of the tragic has remained fundamentally a German one.”¹⁴ Here, he carefully turns the tables: It is not German “fate” that is tragic, but the concept of the tragic is a German one. Moreover, even the conceptual history of the tragic is presented less as a tragic Götterdämmerung than as a weak collapse into powerlessness, into a mere rhetoric of defense and denial. This political dimension does not only imply that one must speak differently of history and “catastrophe” after the horrors of German history. It implies that the idea of the “tragic” has to be severed from the context of German history if one wants to use it at all. It is probable that Szondi's conception of the tragic as a “dialectic” which no longer refers to categories of “guilt” or “sacrifice” is an attempt to avoid this danger. However, even the pure form of the tragic has to be “redeemed” from this uncanny implication, in the Benjamin-

12 Benno von Wiese, *Die deutsche Tragödie von Lessing bis Hebbel* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1948), 652.

13 Cf. Peter Szondi, *Briefe*, 239.

14 Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, 2.

ian sense of a “redeeming critique.” In reading Szondi’s *Essay on the Tragic*, we must take into account its “historical index” as a post-catastrophic text.

Walter Benjamin

As Andreas Isenschmidt has pointed out, Szondi’s relationship to Walter Benjamin goes beyond intellectual influence and has an existential dimension.¹⁵ Szondi read important texts of Benjamin very early, among them the *Theses on the Concept of History* and *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*, which plays a central but also ambivalent role in the *Essay on the Tragic*. More explicit is the inaugural lecture he gave on Proust and Benjamin, which was intended to promote Benjamin, who was still rather unknown, and which Szondi later characterized as “a confession of faith in some respects.”¹⁶

In the lecture entitled “Hope in the Past,” Szondi contrasts Proust’s *Recherche* with Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood* as two different articulations of memory and as two different ideas of art. Whereas Proust harks for the echo of the past in a presence, Benjamin’s memories are pervaded by the foreshadowing of a future which is already past. For Proust, memory, in the final instance, seeks to overcome time, looking for a pure presence to be embodied in the book: “In Proust the quest for the past as the time lost has the intention to lose time altogether.”¹⁷ For Benjamin, by contrast, the past is not completed, but open and promising, the child being a seer of things to come. “He does not want to conceive things in the ahistorical essence but strives after historical experience and knowledge.”¹⁸

Szondi not only stresses the different temporal structure and the different use of metaphors in Proust and Benjamin, but also the latter’s striving for *historical* experience. It is not only private experience, but political reality that is envisioned in Benjamin’s text; a “disaster” (*Untergang*) which the text foresees, the coming of National Socialism,

15 Cf. Andreas Isenschmidt, “‘In mancher Hinsicht ein Glaubensbekenntnis.’ Peter Szondis Benjamin-Rezeption,” in: *Schrift—Bilder—Denken. Walter Benjamin und die Künste* (ed. by Detlev Schörtlker, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2004) 82-93.

16 Szondi, *Briefe*, 120.

17 Peter Szondi, “Hoffnung im Vergangenen. Über Walter Benjamin,” in: Szondi, *Schriften II* (ed. by Jean Bollack et al., (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1978), 278-194, here 282.

18 *Ibid.*, 289.

which for Benjamin is foreshadowed in the uncanny moments of childhood experiences he remembers. This quasi-prophetic gaze into the past from the viewpoint of the present is essential for Benjamin’s idea of history. It is a gaze that is desperate and yet holds true to the germ of hope in the past. This historical-political, “material” dimension of Benjamin’s thought will determine the manner in which Szondi strives for “historical experience” in reading works of art. True reading alone will do justice to the work. It is a perspective “that conceives history in the work of art, instead of conceiving the work of art in history.”¹⁹ This does not consist in an objective standard, a theory, or a model, but results from a specific stance towards the object, as Benjamin’s double gaze was. One might call it “subjective” since it refers to the reading subject. Szondi asks if one does not miss the proper object “if one abstracts from one’s own experience due to misunderstood scientific standards. True objectivity is bound to subjectivity. As Benjamin has once stated, the basic idea for his book on *The Origin of the German Mourning play*, a work on baroque allegory, emerged while watching a King in a puppet play whose crown had shifted out of place”²⁰ This shift towards the subjective actually prefigures a method that will become decisive in Szondi’s later essayistic writing. Remarkably Szondi makes this shift, the claim for referring to subjective experience, by referring to someone else — to Benjamin, who acts as a representation of the “subjective” moment and gives this subjective moment a political orientation. Thus, Szondi’s description of Benjamin’s poetics is partly a self-portrait. His opening with a lengthy quotation from *Berlin Childhood*, in which Benjamin elaborates on the art of going astray in one’s hometown (that is, about the very process of Benjamin’s autobiographical recollection) corresponds to Szondi’s confession to Scholem that he has “unlearned to be at home.”²¹ Benjamin’s art of going astray also has a political implication, since it is an art that enables the critic to read the world and to decipher its historical content. This art becomes the true goal of Szondi’s writing, as well as an intellectual obligation. At the same time, however, he is deeply am-

19 Peter Szondi, “Über philologische Erkenntnis,” in: Szondi, *Schriften I* (ed. by Jean Bollack et al., (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1978) 263-88, 275.

20 Szondi, “Hoffnung im Vergangenen,” *ibid.*, 290. By stressing the “relation between an autobiographical poetry and artificial work as the Trauerspielbuch” Szondi implicitly connects his more autobiographical inaugural lecture with the more academic *Essay on the Tragic*.

21 Szondi, *Briefe*, 303. Cf. here also: Andreas Isenschmidt, “Self displaced Person. Peter Szondis problematisches Judentum,” in: *Akzente* 56/2 (2009), 130-47.

bivalent. His cautious distance lets him refrain from adopting the messianic gesture of Benjamin. The different historical experience after 1945 makes it questionable if there is really hope in the past and—most importantly—this ambivalence expresses a basic theoretical tension in his literary hermeneutics between the work of art, its subjective experience, and its historical dimension. This tension is the core of the *Essay on the Tragic*.

The Transition

If the tragic has “fallen” in both conceptual and political terms, how can we continue to speak about it? The collapse would suggest a very basic outcome — that the tragic as a category does not exist. According to Szondi, this is exactly the position Benjamin holds, a position which however is refuted in the “Transition” section of the *Essay on the Tragic*. According to Szondi, Benjamin does not conceive the tragic formally, by means of poetics, but by the philosophy of history and as a phenomenon of Greek antiquity which only functions as a counter image to the Baroque mourning play. Despite this reservation, however, Szondi refers to Benjamin’s ideas on tragedy at great length. He concedes that Benjamin conceived dialectical structures of the tragic on different levels, and points out that his ideas are “not evident in Benjamin’s text primarily because the mourning play is his object of inquiry”²².

Benjamin’s presence in the “Transition” is thus rather negative. Even if he had been about to develop the historical approach that Szondi aims at, he missed it by a seemingly arbitrary choice of subject. Strangely, Szondi does not mention that Benjamin’s idea of the “mourning play” is not simply another “object of inquiry,” but is conceived of as a *counter-model* and a critique of the idea of tragedy. Benjamin’s concept of allegory undercuts the idea of a symbolic totality of the tragic drama, his concept of an endless, specular play breaks with the idea of a caesura associated with tragedy. Moreover, these fundamental traits are actually directed against the idea of an autonomous work of art which consists of a self enclosed totality. As allegorical texts, the mourning plays Benjamin reads never achieve any form of totality, but remain piecemeal, as if fragmented — and fragmentation, or critical “mortifi-

²² Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, 53.

cation” is, according to Benjamin, a fundamental form of modernity as well as of critique.

Does Szondi hesitate to adopt this destructive move in Benjamin’s aesthetics? Does he misread Benjamin in order to retain the program of a literary hermeneutic as *Kunstwissenschaft*, as a science of the arts? To undertake his reading of tragedy, Szondi would have to avoid those categories of Benjamin’s that undermine the tragic as a category; namely, the categories of allegory, mourning, and melancholy. However, it is precisely these categories that will resurface and deeply influence his analysis.

Szondi ends his argument with Benjamin by affirming the dialectical as the fundamental principle of the tragic. “There is no such thing as *the* tragic, at least not as an essence. Rather, the tragic is a mode, a particular manner of destruction that is threatening or already completed: the dialectical manner. There is only *one* tragic downfall: the one that results from the unity of opposites, from the sudden Change into one’s own opposite, from self-division.”²³ This repeats the formal idea of the tragic dialectic into which the philosophical discourse has collapsed. However, now there is a second condition. “But it is also the case that only the demise of something that should not meet its demise, whose removal does not allow the wound to heal, is tragic. The tragic contradiction may not be sublated in a superordinate sphere, whether immanent or transcendent. If this is the case, then either the object of destruction was something trivial [...] or the tragic is already vanquished in humor, covered up in irony, or surmounted in faith.”²⁴

This second condition is somewhat surprising. We have not heard of it thus far. It is not only highly conventional and present in Aristotle, but also relates to the course of the argument. If philosophy was never able to conceptualize the tragic without emptying it, it was also unable to transcend it dialectically. Thus, the tragic is a limit-concept of philosophy and organizes the transition of trajectory from philosophy to philology—to the readings that will follow.

The transition is marked by the image of the “wound that does not heal.” In the context of the *Essay* it points to the Aeschylus quote which opens the second part and, more importantly, to Szondi’s reading of Kierkegaard in the first part. Reflecting on the paradoxes of morality in *Either Or*, Kierkegaard imagined a modern Antigone who has become melancholic over the fate of her father Oedipus and is unable to be

²³ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

cured. Kierkegaard illustrates it with the story of the Greek hero Epaminondas who, struck by an arrow, knows that he cannot tear it out of the wound without dying: "Kierkegaard interprets both Antigone's and his own melancholy in this image, whose dialectical meaning is that precisely through the emancipation from what brings death, death is brought about."²⁵ Antigone is a representation of desperation, of holding to oneself and refusing help, and is figured by the wound that does not heal. In the context of Szondi's oeuvre, this figuration also foreshadows his readings of Friedrich Hölderlin's *As on a Holiday*.²⁶ For Szondi it is the variant line "if my heart bleeds from a self-inflicted wound" ("wenn von selbstgeschlagener Wunde das Herz mir bluter") that provokes a dissolution of the poetic structure in Hölderlin's hymn, a dissolution that undermines the glorification of poetry as the proclamation of a quasi-metaphysical truth that Martin Heidegger, for example, stressed in his readings. Hölderlin also expresses desperation and a moment of personal suffering which will lead him to write another poem, *Hälfte des Lebens*, that breaks with the hymnic and adopts the elegiac tone.

The wound has a different connotation than the tragic fall. It does not produce closure and finitude. It does not mark a distinction or a caesura but, rather, prevents any stable form. Aesthetically, it opens the closed form of the "work" of art, as Hölderlin's variant line opened up the poetic unity of the text. As a figure of memory, the wound does not fix the past as a monumental totality, but rather acts as a crypt, a place in which a personal or political "secret" is laid to rest, an experience that one cannot openly speak about that causes melancholic mourning. This wound, which opens in the attempt to "understand" the tragic, also determines Szondi's reading of the dramas in the second part of the *Essay on the Tragic*.

The Readings

A superficial interpretation of Szondi's *Essay on the Tragic* would frame it as a paragon of critique that falls between philosophy and philology in which the latter prevails. After speculation has collapsed, reading remains; and what cannot be solved in theoretical terms must be solved by critical practice. This, however, would miss the very strangeness of

²⁵ Ibid., 36.

²⁶ Cf. Peter Szondi, "Hölderlin Studien," in: Szondi, *Schriften I*, 260-412.

Szondi's analysis. For if the tragic is affected by that inner wound, it is not just theory that is affected but also the analysis, which shifts the focus of the *Essay* towards the elements of allegory, melancholy, and disaster, that are more prominent in the Benjaminian model of the mourning play than in Szondi's concept of drama.

Szondi introduces his readings as a reversal, which somewhat redeems the fallen philosophy of the tragic. "Because the concept of the tragic disastrously rises out of the concrete situation of philosophical Problems into the height of abstraction, it must sink down into the most concrete element of tragedies if it is to be saved. This most concrete element is the plot."²⁷ In fact, Szondi's analyses are mainly concerned with plot, and they seem to be so in quite a conservative way, since Szondi claims his intention is to see "the most inconspicuous elements plot elements [...] in their relation to the tragic construction," so that the work might then be seen "as a seamless whole."²⁸ This argument not only leaves us with the question of plot as the most concrete part of a drama (is this not theatrical performance?), it hardly describes what Szondi actually does in his readings. He neither demonstrates nor presupposes the wholeness of the plays, but focuses on the ironies that are manifested on different level — the irony of the oracle in Oedipus and Calderon, the irony of proof in Othello, the irony of idealism in Demetrius. These ironies might entail a certain "dialectics," but they hardly render the texts any "wholeness." By contrast, dramatic irony leads to a certain ambiguity that dissolves the tragic form. This may be seen most clearly in relation to the other genre Szondi deliberately wanted to avoid: the mourning play.

Remarkably, quite a few of the plays Szondi reads are both Christian and Baroque. Calderon's *Life is a Dream*, according to Szondi a "Christian Oedipus-Play,"²⁹ is founded on the irony of the oracle, too — but only up to the fourth act. The concluding act actually transgresses tragedy into salvation. Thus, *Life is a Dream* is tragedy, but with a Christian ending—and far from being a "seamless whole." Similarly, Szondi labels Othello a Baroque drama by the irony of the intriguer, an essentially Benjaminian idea. Most interesting in this respect, however, is his reading of Andreas Gryphius's *Leo Armenius*, since it is here that he actually shares the ground with Benjamin's *Origin of the German*

²⁷ Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, 56.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 64.

Mourning Play. The difference between both readings is all too obvious.

Benjamin stressed that Gryphius's first drama is not tragic drama but a Baroque mourning play. Present-day research might even argue that *Leo Armenius* is still a martyr play whereas Gryphius's later dramas come closer to tragedy.³⁰ Remarkably, Szondi argues exactly the other way around. According to him, *Leo* is conceived as "purely tragical" whereas Gryphius will turn to the mourning play only later, more precisely, *Leo Armenius* actually distorts the model of the martyr play into a tragic experience. "Instead of turning the believer into a martyr whose faith relieves his tragic fate, the Christian religion becomes his tragic lot."³¹ In bringing together the tragic with Christian faith, which is probably its strongest antidote, *Leo Armenius* is a decisive point in Szondi's essay.

Szondi highlights the ironies in Gryphius's play on different levels. The ambiguity of different signs and oracles is ironic. Ironic and potentially tragic is the use of language. "The tragic process suffered by a man whose own words can turn against him."³² Also ironic is the fact that the emperor Leo defers the execution of the traitor Michael Balbus to avoid the profanation of the Christmas feast—allowing Balbus to escape and murder the king during Christmas Mass. This reversal of piety into blasphemy is powerfully staged. At the end of the fourth act, the murderers dress themselves as priests and conceal their daggers in candles which are, according to Szondi, "emblems of the tragic in which the darkness of death comes from the light of faith."³³ Even the fact that Leo dies under a cross does not "transfigure" his death, according to Szondi, "but rather conceptually intensifies"³⁴ it by the contrast between salvation and blasphemy.

Leo Armenius is, for Szondi, the very tragedy of Christian faith. The faith that is supposed to overcome the tragic, as it does in *Life is a Dream*, undergoes a tragic process that turns it to the opposite. Szondi quotes a key passage from Gryphius: "We rise after the fall, and he who rises high, finds what will throw him down," and Szondi concludes that Gryphius "deepens the Baroque motif of transience into its own

30 On the different interpretations of Leo Armenius cf. Nicola Kaminski, *Andreas Gryphius* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), 73-81.

31 Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, 74.

32 *Ibid.*, 75.

33 *Ibid.*, 76.

34 *Ibid.*, 74.

tragic foundation. Rising and falling are not understood merely in their rapid oscillation, but also as their dialectical identity."³⁵

The "deepening of transience" is indeed an essential part of Gryphius's Lutheran spirituality, which conceives salvation by crucifixion and, vice versa, death by life. Moreover, the emblematic scene of the daggers in the candles is even more dialectical and ambiguous than Szondi points out. He neglects to mention that it is actually an allegorical interlude, a "Reyen," and we do not know if it belongs to the action or comments on it, and thus do not know if it is concealed murderers pretending to be priests, or true priests commenting on the action.³⁶ Moreover, the way they comment makes the scene even more ambivalent. They sing a Christmas carol on the night of salvation, when bright splendor emerged from darkness. Thus, the "Reyen" makes the opposite argument that Szondi raises. Not only rise and fall, but darkness and light are identical; in other words, if the candles are daggers, the daggers are also candles. Thus, the scene is essentially allegorical. We not only see the reversal of things, but the reversal of our own sight, which teaches us the limitedness of our perception and the ambiguity of a world which is always a play of masks—not just in the theater proper. Similarly, Gryphius's "We rise after the fall" is not only an ironic statement about the ironies of life, but is also properly ambiguous, since the "fall" not only refers to the tragic catastrophe, but also to the Fall of Man.

It is this ambiguity that renders the entire play allegorical and undermines every attempt at closure. As Szondi stresses, the play does not even center upon one single death, but upon the empress becoming insane and speaking "words of madness that resemble a parody of what Gryphius denied her, the martyr's triumphant vision."³⁷ Finally, ironically, even her words will become true since Balbus will in future be slaughtered by a traitor after the play has ended, as Gryphius annotations clarify. Neither the tragic reversal nor the death of the king can change the course of things, which will remain a history of disaster.

35 *Ibid.*, 77.

36 On the general emblematic structure of the Reyen cf. Gerhard Kaiser: "Leo Armenius, Oder Fürsten-Mord," in: *Die Dramen des Andreas Gryphius. Eine Sammlung von Einzelinterpretationen* (ed. by Gerhard Kaiser, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1968), 45-70; Daniel Weidner, "Schau in dem Tempel an / Den ganz zerstückten Leib, der auf dem Kreuze lieget." Theatrale und Sakramentale Präsenz in Andreas Gryphius' *Leo Armenius*," in: *Daphnis* 39 (2010), 287-312.

37 Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, 77.

Reading Theory

Szondi's engagement with the tragic began in a short text on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which he elaborates about the knowledge that the tragic hero acquires close to death. In the *Essay on the Tragic*, it is no longer death that determines the tragic, but the wound that does not heal and thus defies closure. This is nowhere more obvious than in the reading of Büchner with which Szondi ends the *Essay*. Büchner's *Danton's Death* is about the tragedy of revolution, but also about the tragedy of death—meaning, tragedy beyond death. Danton does not flee from external powers but from himself, from ennui, from “life that is no longer livable.”³⁸ He does not long for death as the ultimate condition of truth but wants to die in order to forget. However, he is precluded even from individual death by his melancholy and the fact that the horrors of the revolution—and the acts of murder for which he is responsible—have devaluated the idea of death. “Danton is characterized less by the fact that he must die and more by the fact that he cannot die, for he is already dead. There is no way out of a life that experiences itself as being dead.”³⁹ If one is already dead, one cannot use death as a means to reveal the truth of life. According to Szondi, death which has been an “implicit formal element of tragedy” has become problematic, and tragedy has turned into mourning play.

The readings of the dramatic texts end on a note similar to the one the theoretical section of the *Essay* ends on: in a fall, a collapse. It is the end not only of the tragic as a concept, but also of tragedy as the structure of a plot. Thus, the essay has dissolved its object twice, has untied its complexities and revealed the basic dialectical structure of the tragic. As structure, however, it does not remain stable but constantly vanishes. If we understand the *Essay* literally as a “Versuch,” as an experiment, the experiment seems to have failed. But it is this failure that not only leads Szondi to develop other, more directly essayistic forms of writing, but gives the *Essay on the Tragic* its peculiar form and content. The text makes a double movement. It organizes the appearance and disappearance of its object. In this movement, both personal and historical experiences are inscribed. For us, the task is neither simply to extract models or categories to be used for analysis, nor to historicize or explain its peculiarities and oddities by its historical context. Rather, reading, as a quest for knowledge which includes historical experience

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

must seek ways to access the historical content encrypted in constellations of disaster.