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## Coriolanus' Oedipal curse and the question of tragic redemption

Among Shakespeare's tragedies, *Coriolanus* is not usually numbered among his best. However, in this essay I shall argue for its soaring philosophical import. It is not my intention to make a case for its literary superiority to, e.g., Hamlet, Macbeth, or King Lear, although I believe that it has merit that is uniquely its own. Rather, I propose (1) to demonstrate convincingly an inner kinship between the historical moment of tragedy in Greece and Oedipus the King, (2) to contrast the two heroes in terms of their equally strong but subtly different exercises of nobility, and (3) to say why Caius Marcius Coriolanus presents an even greater challenge to the spectator/reader than the benighted Oedipus, whether one measures according to the Aristotelian purgation of pity and horror, or according to the Nietzschean amor fati. Then in conclusion (4) I shall address a perplexing current phenomenon. The morality of us twenty first century humans is governed largely by inwardness, and our literature and poetry explores the private, psychic landscape most of all. Our nobility belongs to the character of our inner life. Why, then, do tragic heroes whose nobility consists of manifest magnificence, public displays of courage, honour and generosity, continue to provoke our wonder? In other words, why tragedy still now? And finally, what light might Coriolanus and its eponymous hero uniquely shed on the nature of our contemporary lives.

I

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche treats Oedipus, "the most painful figure of the Greek stage," as a model of the noble human being. The immense suffering Oedipus blamelessly undergoes, causes, and for which he takes responsibility, is eventually redeemed both in its outcome and in himself, as depicted in Oedipus at Colonus. Nietzsche's praise for Sophocles' aesthetic gift as displayed in Oedipus the King deserves attention:

As a poet, he shows us first a marvellously tied knot of a trial, slowly unravelled by the judge, bit by bit, for his own undoing. His genuinely Hellenic delight in this dialectical solution is so great that it introduces a trait of superior cheerfulness into the whole work, everywhere softening the sharp points of the gruesome presuppositions of this process.<sup>1</sup>

Oedipus' trajectory is well known. The curse over the house of Labdacus according to which this son of Laius and Jocasta would come to murder his father and marry his mother; the directive to a servant by the parents to have the child killed away from the home; the servant's sparing of the child's life out of sympathy for the child; by Polybus and Merope, whom he supposed were his real parents; the apparently random murder of Laius; the unriddling of the

Sphinx that ended the plague of Thebes and that brought him its crown; the unwitting marriage to Jocasta and the birth of his children Antigone, Ismene and Polyneices; the new plague, culminating in the death of his wife/mother, for which his presence was cause and for which his self-blinding self-banishment brought an end.

Nietzsche correctly notes Oedipus' blamelessness. To those who would blame the hero for his browbeating of the messenger Tiresias, and for his dismissal of Jocasta's warning that it would be best for him to know of the cause of his kingdom's current sufferings, miss the key point: Oedipus' adamant need to know belongs to the peculiar quality of his blamelessness, his innocence. There is nothing in his experience or in his character to indicate the propriety of reining in his quest for knowledge, or any of his quests, for that matter. One may surely call this hubris, but only from the standpoint of an ordinary figure whose life presents no exceptional difficulties and no exceptional challenges.

In keeping with this, it can also be maintained that such an ordinary life constitutes the best life for a human being. In other words, he or she lives best who is always careful to remain in a region of the greatest safety. But in such a life, no disclosure of the nature of greatness, of freedom, of courage, and even of the proper role of honouring human limits can occur. For such disclosure, an innocent tragic hero is required. In other words, tragedies are not, as many suppose, mere cautionary tales. They are not homilies, bromides or sermons embellished in dramatic form. Rather, they are sites at which the genuine nature of humanity reveals itself.

Unlike Oedipus, the hero of Coriolanus lacks, or at least seems to lack, any endearing qualities. His contempt for people of the lower class, the plebeians, is thoroughgoing. Their desire for "free corn" encapsulates their sloth and low-mindedness. Caius Marcius, his full name at the outset, lacks any trace of congeniality. The idea of the rights of others, much less honouring these rights through rational compromise, simply never occurs to him. Though noble by birth, Caius Marcius holds himself to a higher code of honour that takes no notice of the code of his fellow nobles. His overarching superiority rests upon a single crucial and indisputable quality. While many candidates could be found to contest for recognition as the most moral, or the most creative, or the most intelligent human being in any group, including the Romans at the time of this drama, only one criterion can be beyond argument: who is the best warrior, i.e., whose performance on the battlefield marks him as incontestably greatest of all. That this accolade belongs to Caius Marcius is utterly beyond dispute.

The enemy Volscans, led by their strong general Aufidius, are in nearby Corioles, routing the scurrying Roman forces on their way to sacking Rome. Caius Marcius alone thrusts himself into the midst of the Volscan charge, and single-handedly drives back the Volscan charge and, by himself, routs its army. In Rome, enemy and friend, noble and plebe, acknowledge his greatness, and honour his courage and prowess by giving him a name bearing that of the city he conquered: Coriolanus. The city wished to honour him with a seat on his council, but this required the display of his wounds and an entreaty in words to the Roman public. He could not bear to lower himself to such exhibitions of solicitude.

What, then, of his innocence? His father died a noble death in battle. His mother Volumnia takes pride in her husband's death. To the horror of Caius Marcius' wife Virgilia, Volumnia proclaims that she would rather see her son

die nobly like his father than return alive after taking any measure of self-preservation. This notion of nobility constituted Caius' entire familial nurturing, just as his identity as a Roman noble constituted his social rearing. The innocence of his nature consisted of the following: straightforwardness, constancy and loyalty were always present, calculation and nuance were entirely foreign to his nature. This made him a dreaded, impossible, invulnerable opponent in physical conflict. But as a political opponent, his character made him the easiest of marks.

Two tribunes of the plebeians, Sicinius and Brutus, successfully baited the hero at the public hearing where he was supposed to receive his honours. Provoked into hurling contempt at the manipulated masses that had initially come to honour him, he was banished entirely from Rome for his insults to the people. In characteristically impolitic response, he roared:

You common cry of curs! Whose breath I hate  
As reek o' the rotten fens<sup>2</sup>, whose loves I prize  
As the dead carcasses of unburied men,  
That do corrupt my air, I banish you;  
And here remain with your uncertainty!  
Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts!  
Fan you into despair!...  
Despising, for you, the city, thus I turn my back:  
There is a world elsewhere. (Act III, Scene III, Lines  
119...134)

In his exile, he seeks his former enemy Aufidius, to whom he offers his Roman throat to be slit. But the Volscan general envisions a far better option, enlisting Coriolanus in his effort to sack Rome. With Coriolanus leading the charge, the destruction of Rome seemed inevitable — a consequence that somehow escaped the attention of the tribunes and the people in their resentment. At the last moment, however, Volumnia, Virgilia and young Marcius, small son, came to kneel before him and begged him to spare the city of his birth. With the greatest reluctance, he agreed to make the peace, foreseeing the result of this one small concession:

O mother, mother!  
What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,  
The gods look down on this unnatural scene  
They laugh at. O my mother! Mother! O!  
You have won a happy victory for Rome;  
But, for your son — believe it, O! believe it,  
Most dangerously have you prevail'd  
If not mortal to him. But let it come. (Act V, Scene III, Lines  
183–190)

Not long thereafter, Aufidius leads him into hordes of armed men who taunt him as they slay him. Directly after his death, however, even Aufidius cannot hold back his admiration:

My rage is gone,  
And I am struck with sorrow...  
Though in this city he has widow'd and unchilded many a one,  
Which to this hour bewail the injury,  
Yet he shall have a noble memory a noble memory. (Act V,  
Scene V, Lines 146...153)

There are certainly differences between the respective heroes of Oedipus the King and Coriolanus. No curse, at least no express curse, hangs over Caius Marcius as it does over Oedipus. Oedipus achieves his honours through his vigorous intelligence (this intelligence also serves as the cause of his undoing). Coriolanus' courage and military virtue are the source of his honours. However, the dialectical trajectory that Nietzsche remarked upon in Oedipus the King received an inspired replication in Coriolanus. Just as Oedipus' resolute need to know belongs to the nature quality of his innocence, Coriolanus' straightforwardness and transcendent guilelessness belongs to his innocence. And just as the poet of Oedipus the King presented a political/legal knot of circumstance which gradually unfolded at the hand of and as the destruction of the actor, so too the poet of Coriolanus presented a close analogue of that knot which the hero untied in his actions as they led to his own destruction.

Through their innocence, both powerful heroes disclosed the vulnerability that resides at the heart of the best of humans. Neither one could be likened to the epic hero Odysseus, whose cleverness made it possible to face many dangers successfully (also, to engage in many foolish and unnecessary exploits), and to return home to Ithaca and Penelope after 20 years. The skillful Odysseus disclosed the more pragmatic, shrewder human penchant for "managing" his vulnerability by avoiding areas where danger may lurk. This accounts for the poet Hölderlin's admiration of Achilles, and his despising of Odysseus:

[Achilles] is my favourite (Liebling) among the heroes, so strong and sensitive (zart), the most successful and ephemeral blossom of the heroic world "born for such a short time" according to Homer because he is so beautiful. I might also think that the old poet has him appear so rarely, and lets the others make so much noise... in order to profane him as little as possible amidst the turmoil against Troy. Concerning Ulysses [Odysseus], the poet could describe plenty of things. [Odysseus] is a sack full of small change for which one needs a long time to count, but with gold one is finished much more quickly.<sup>3</sup>

To say this another way, neither Oedipus nor Coriolanus are in any sense thinkers. Their actions arise from strong impulse. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche distinguishes the noble precisely along these lines:

...a powerful physicality, a flourishing, abundant, even overflowing health, together with that which serves to preserve it — war, adventure, hunting, dancing, war games, and in general everything which involves vigorous, free, joyful activity.<sup>4</sup>

Thought is the province of the weak, who need it in order to live as safely as they can amidst their superiors, and who use it to manipulate the nobles and to foment confusion and doubt in their actions where there was once instinctual certainty. Even Kant, arguably the driest of thinkers, regarded thought as a second-order phenomenon, a mark of human finitude. Intuition (*Anschauung*) is our immediate and primary relation, which thought merely serves by providing the missing (and limited) unity.

Oedipus and Coriolanus are too noble for thought, for the rational legerdemain of dialectic. Thus, they are doomed to fall victim to it.

## II

Oedipus did not have an "Oedipal curse." Properly speaking, the house of Labdacus became aware of the curse through an oracle related to the one at Delphi. In her memorable *The House of Labdacus*, poet Gjertrud Schnackenberg creates a scene in which the god watches a performance of Oedipus the King and witnesses the terrible destiny it has woven for the family of Laius and Jocasta. The curse is the work of Necessity, pitilessly rolling over and crushing that family. In addition to the beauty of her language, Schnackenberg's interpretation resists the modern and contemporary temptation to raise issues such as free will vs. determinism, and the Aristotelian invocation of pity for the fallen hero. Her stark, unsentimental couplets build inexorably to the devastating conclusion.

As the first oracle: Flee from birth. At which a string  
Shudders inaudibly, a premonition

That even the god will be frightened, leaning above  
The premiere of Oedipus,

The god frightened  
By the self-blinding --- and a story,

The meaning of which nobody knows, Or whose meaning is  
that nobody knows,  
Though once upon a time

The god of poetry  
Told the whole story of Oedipus  
In one flashing sentence,  
In the time it takes for the heart to beat once ---

The prophesy he gave to Oedipus...  
A story sent to the god by Faceless Necessity...<sup>5</sup>

An Oedipal curse concerns a complex, damaging, defective relation of a son to his mother. Volumnia, the mother of Caius Marcius, is surely a most remarkable character. As we have seen, she celebrates her widowhood proudly, based on her dead husband's fearlessness in battle. To Virgilia, her daughter-in-law, she is not only the most insufferable possible mother-in-law, but the most soul-sapping: she would rather see her son slain in battle, and shows derision toward any desire Virgilia might have to enjoy her husband's caresses in bed. Her thorough influence over Caius Marcius is both obvious and frequently noted by his countrymen. (If one wanted to view her in another and more favourable light, one could accurately say that she valued a nobly led life above all other considerations.) Caius Marcius has no father to guide him, nor did he have a mother with any trace of tenderness in her heart. For Volumnia, only the cold calculus familial and Roman honour mattered, and her single-minded determination to instil these values into her son met with success. Caius Marcius grew to embody genuine Roman nobility in a pure, almost inhuman form, going even so far as to refuse his mother's request that he show his wounds and ask the favour of the public for a well-deserved seat on the Council. This is his Oedipal curse.

Was he inhuman? His friend and supporter Menenius Agrippa, and old man wise in the ways of the world, a noble Senator, and a friend to all Romans, had this to say:

His nature is too noble for this world:  
 He would not flatter Neptune for his trident,  
 Or Jove for his power to thunder. His heart's his mouth:  
 What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent:  
 And, being angry, does forget that ever  
 He heard the name of death. (Act III, Scene I, Lines 256–260)

Thinking through his friend's appraisal, Coriolanus' is cursed in one direction by being too large for this world. Recalling Nietzsche's characterization of the noble, this might be reconceived as: this world is too small for Coriolanus. That innocence, the effective result of the absence of a healthy break between mother and son (indeed, of any break at all), is its ongoing occasioning cause. In my view, this is the reason that Coriolanus provides a greater challenge to standard notions of tragedy than does Oedipus. Coriolanus is in one sense a most unsympathetic hero. Unlike Oedipus, Coriolanus blusters, rages, boasts, and speaks arrogantly on those occasions that he speaks at all. Those seeking self-reflective, eloquent Shakespearean soliloquies are hereby referred to Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear. (The absence of such soliloquies is the unique merit to which I alluded at the outset.)

At the same time, I suggest that Caius Marcius Coriolanus is the most sympathetic hero of all. While the trajectory of his fate bears a close resemblance to Oedipus', Coriolanus is undone by his ever so slight accession forced by his Oedipal curse. He beholds his mother, wife, and son on their knees. He hears their entreaties, taking special note of Volumnia's as we have seen. He weakens. Why? As a result of an emotion that seemed to be completely purged from his soul: human love. He senses his doom at the very instant of this yielding. He did not give in a great deal. He did not rejoin the Romans, whom he banished forever. He did not renounce a single one of his deeds or words. He merely agreed not to sack the city of his birth, but rather to offer a peace that would be agreeable to both sides.

This first compromise of his life proved deadly to him, as he suspected. As soon as he deferred to human love, he was no longer Caius Marcius Coriolanus, As soon as he compromised, he was no longer Caius Marcius Coriolanus. This abdication of his true nature, this act of grace, brought him no redemption whatsoever. As he correctly foresaw, it foretold only disaster for him. The cause of his self-caused disaster: the incursion into his heart of a bolt of human love could also be called his Oedipal curse. Aufidius' taunt as he whipped his forces into a murderous frenzy against his now helpless adversary drove Coriolanus into a now ineffectual but revelatory rage:

Auf. Name not the god, thou boy of tears...  
 Cor. Measureless liar, thou hast made my heart  
 Too great for what contains it. Boy! O slave! — (Act V,  
 Scene V, Lines 99...103)

Thus ends the life of Caius Marcius Coriolanus, man among men, boy tied to the apron strings of his mother.

There is vast disagreement concerning the meaning of Aristotle's treatment of tragedy in his *Poetics*. The range of interpretation of the "tragic flaw (*hamartia*)" (1453a) is wide. On one side, it is a moral flaw in an otherwise noble character leading to the hero's downfall, e.g. hubris — or excessive pride, or transgressing the appropriately human limits. Or, it might be interpreted as (another possible translation of *hamartia*) "missing the mark" as

an archer might, e.g., attempting to achieve a specific result, and merely falling short, without an implication of moral blame. Or one can take the radical view that no blame at all attaches to the hero. From a human point of view, misfortune befalls the hero. But ultimately pain and disaster occur by virtue of the hand of Fate. (The latter is my view.) There is a similar range of interpretations of other major Aristotelian notions: the arousal of fear and pity, and the purgation (katharsis) of these emotions.

However, the interpretations gather around a common premise, namely that the spectators of a tragedy are vicarious participants in its action, and undergo a salutary psychological change as a result of this participation. In the case of Oedipus the King, the ideal tragedy in the eyes of Aristotle, there is little difficulty reading the flashpoints into the Sophoclean drama. The soul, as well as the stature, of Oedipus is undoubtedly noble. However, his demand to know what is not proper for him to know, shown in his repeated abuse of the messenger Tiresias who seeks to warn him away from this forbidden knowledge, is his tragic flaw. The spectators are united with Oedipus in the fear and horror of the disclosure and of his subsequent actions. However, their distance from the actions allows for the release from the all-too-human knot of potential misery to which all human beings are subject.

The Aristotelian template still enjoys much life, and can well be applied to other Shakespearean tragedies with an ease similar to its application to Oedipus the King. Looking at the hero's tragic flaw, e.g., Hamlet is noble but indecisive, Macbeth is noble but lustful for power, Lear is noble but vain. Can we say, however, that Coriolanus is noble but proud, in the same way that we speak of the aforementioned heroes? I think not. The nobility of Coriolanus does not rest upon a mind that seeks both justice and certainty, as does Hamlet's. Nor does it calculate in the seeking of power, as does Macbeth. Nor does it at all seek flattery, as does Lear's.

In the emotional austerity of his nature, Coriolanus is more distant from the spectators than any of the others mentioned here, and perhaps more distant than any other hero in literature. There is little or no bond of recognition between a very human spectator, who can at least identify in themselves the "tragic flaws" of the other heroes. And Coriolanus' "tragic flaw" that leads to his downfall? A minute particle of human love! The quality most widely regarded as a virtue and as a major component of a good life becomes precisely the quality leading to the hero's demise. In yet another anachronistic Nietzschean observation, this one articulated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pity for man is the "final sin."<sup>6</sup> If Coriolanus could be said to awaken our pity, this pity would belong to an entirely different order than pity on a merely humanistic plane. To take a glance in this other pity's direction, it would consist of sadness that true sublimity cannot be accommodated in this, our world.

Nietzsche's command to love one's fate, *amor fati*, brings an alternative view of tragedy. According to this view, one does not wish for matters to be other than they are, even down to the tiniest detail. This is why, in an earlier citation, he ascribes "real joy for the Greek in [Oedipus the King's] dialectical solution," which "shows us first a marvellously tied knot of a trial, slowly unravelled by the judge, bit by bit, for his own undoing. His genuinely Hellenic delight in sharp points of the gruesome presuppositions of this process." His implicit claim that the play's cheerfulness trumps all "fear and pity" not only runs counter to the Aristotelian view, but posits an entirely different experience for the spectator. Of course there is no way of verifying exactly how Greek

spectators experienced their tragedies.

One might wish to credit Aristotle's view, since he was one of those Greeks who attended the tragedies at the Dionysian festivals. However, Aristotle lived for the most part after the golden age of Greek drama, and was himself the creator of the scientific approach to all subjects. This approach called for a systematic division and analysis of parts, and their articulation in relation to the whole — whether that "whole" was nature (Physics), the Soul (De Anima — On the Soul), or Poetics. In other words, Aristotle decisively introduced rational processes into the consideration of all subjects, a legacy that remains and stood unchallenged until Nietzsche reinstated instinct and impulse.

In *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, tragedy emerged out of interplay, strife, and eventual reconciliation. The Apollinian impulse toward beauty, form, order and individuation joins the Dionysian impulse toward drunkenness, earthboundness, frenzied dance, and the surrender of the individual to the maelstrom of nature. The primordial unity is the unity of turbulent Dionysian nature. According to this interpretation, the hero is not first of all a noble individual, but Dionysus dismembered, torn from the primal unity. Oedipus' earthly sojourn may be considered as a temporary offering to humanity which is fated to return to the unity of nature from which it was initially severed. Pity for Oedipus makes sense only if his true origin is forgotten, just as does pity for ourselves and for others:

For to our humiliation or ennoblement and our exaltation, one thing above all must be clear to us. The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art, for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified — while of course our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than pity Oedipus, behold him as the one who discloses this truth of our nature and of ourselves. Ecce homo!

What, then, of Coriolanus? How is "existence and the world eternally justified" through this figure, this work of art? This question raises what I earlier called perhaps the greater challenge posed by Coriolanus. If, as Menenius Agrippa claimed, he is "too noble for this world," how can existence and this world justify itself in the face of a man whose measure differs from and far exceeds that of this world, and for whom a trace of human love is his only weakness? As in the case of the Aristotelian criteria, we can address Coriolanus in terms of Nietzschean aesthetic justification, but require a different register to do so. He might qualify in some crucial ways as a Nietzschean "superman" (*Übermensch*), but he certainly qualifies as a man. He is shaped by familial forces, as are all of us; he is shaped by social forces, as are all of us. As has Oedipus in electing to carve out his eyes and go into exile, he has shaped himself.

In his sadly neglected massive poem "Coriolanus and his Mother (in keeping with the neglect of Coriolanus)," Delmore Schwartz imagines himself into the human soul of Coriolanus in exile, seeking escape from his past in order to refashion himself and his life:... he kneels by the water, bends over it, and then, staring at the water, knelt above it, he sees his own face there, folded over

and over, and he coughs amazed to hear the sound of his body in the silence, sneezes! In a sudden chill, in his body's weakness and disbelief. He sees his face, his thick lips, curly hair, flaring nostrils, broad forehead...

It is the moment of vision and decision. Staring upon that face which is his own, he sees his own life, and the lives rejected and the choices chosen, and the immediacy of anger and pleasure, and the abstracted stare of memory, and the strangeness, to himself, of his own face, the most peculiar of flowers.

And then his mother's face replaces his own and blooms until it becomes an enormous image, quivering or trembling in the water or in the sky... And then, as if decided that he will not speak to him, she says to him:

"You cannot depart from me. You are nothing apart from me, you do not exist without me. I will be with you no matter where you go. Your lips are mine, your globe like head and your deep body, your swinging arms, your strength, system and urge, habit, complexion, and dress. I fed you. I gave you each part of your being, or you took that part from me. The word of your tongue is mine. Your effort to depart from me is your pain, your evil. I am your mother or Rome. I am Volumnia or Rome.

"But I am yours. You are your own; lips, face, hair, look, your own, your property. This is your freedom. You are free. Self-choosing, a king. Your words are yours, even though you are mine... Nothing compels you, no imperative dictates to you, the actuality of your choice is what it is for you, your individuality grasps the uniqueness of each moment. This surpasses me. This is your freedom. Choose!"<sup>8</sup>

Coriolanus' blindness to his significance belongs to a different order than that of Oedipus, who comes to understand his own. Caius Marcius is the human being who is entirely indifferent to his humanity, and comes to despise and regret the one moment in which his humanity makes itself present. The Delphic oracle "know yourself" would not register for him, nor would any questioning of the meaning of life, either of his, of others, or in general. He could not unbridle the Sphinx, but the Sphinx would choke on him -- and he would walk away boasting. His indifference to his own significance in the overall scheme of things makes him unique. It is his very blindness that discloses something of the nature of human sight. In his indifference to his vulnerability, we are brought before our own.

### III

Wonder is the only beginning of philosophy, Socrates explains to Theaetetus. (Theaetetus 155d2-3) All of us who engage in philosophy are perpetual beginners. In this spirit, I wonder whether the ongoing power of such tragic figures as Oedipus and Coriolanus to hold our attention provokes a challenge to the conventional wisdom on both sides of the philosophical divide. A broad-brush sketch of this wisdom is as follows: Anglo-American, analytic philosophers have long sought to apply scientific discipline to philosophical issues, even changing these issues in the process. Contemporary Continental philosophy, primarily through the widespread influence of French philosophers such as Derrida and Foucault, seek to overturn the philosophical tradition by disputing the belief of a core or centre of fundamental precepts. The former

seeks a stripped down, logical construction of philosophy. The latter seeks its deconstruction. Both dispute the existence of a foundation as a point of departure for philosophical thought.

I wish to argue that the hold of tragic heroes upon contemporary audiences and readers is no reactionary response to the drift of partiality in contemporary philosophy, nor is it a nostalgic return to a less complex and sophisticated era. Rather, the artistic creations that we call tragic heroes have the vital role for us twenty first century human beings of providing the unity that is missing from our theoretical discourse. Oedipus and Coriolanus are figures who are one with themselves at all times. For us fragmented human beings, their aesthetic existence announces a condition that serves as both the greatest possibility and the greatest danger. Without a unified identity, our names are mere labels used to catch a plethora of different and often contradictory qualities. With a unified identity of unimpeachable principle which allows no flexibility, we are tossed helplessly onto the winds of fate, treated and mastered as playthings by clever but small-minded human beings whose worth can be measured, as Hölderlin says (perhaps unfairly) of Odysseus, in coins of cheap denomination.

My brief conclusion has two parts. The first concerns the more general significance of tragic heroes such as Oedipus and Coriolanus for philosophy. The German Idealist philosopher F.W.J. Schelling (early nineteenth century) maintained that philosophy was the esoteric (literally, "within the walls") expression of the Absolute, and art was its exoteric (literally, "outside the walls") expression. Contemporary philosophy of any kind rarely speaks of an "absolute" of any kind. However, Schelling's insight retains every bit of its force, in my view. Perhaps we might take it even further, and claim that art completes philosophy, that it provides what is lacking in contemporary discourse. Tragic heroes, even and perhaps especially ancient tragic heroes, stand in for the missing foundation.

The second part of my conclusion concerns my brief for Coriolanus, both the play and the character. The principal accomplishment of the twentieth century has been its erosion of confidence in progress, and in the rational nature of us humans. The Holocaust, the Killing Fields in Cambodia, the genocides in Africa, just to mention a very few particularly well known events, dramatic events, have had their impact everywhere. Such events have turned turn of the twentieth century optimism to turn of this century pessimism, with weariness and melancholy its high end and gloom and hopelessness at its bottom.

Oedipus is an affirmative hero, capable of grasping the nuances of his fate, capable even (in Oedipus at Colonus) of reconciling with himself and of healing the unbearable psychic wound through his noble suffering. As such, he answers a profound need for us. To say that matters are hopeless, that the harm that humans have done is irremediable is to say more than we can possibly know. In the language of Socrates in Plato's Apology, it is both foolish and disgraceful, however apparently bleak the landscape.

What Coriolanus discloses, however, may speak to us more intimately. He is not an affirmative hero. Nor is he a "negative" hero, whose journey enacts the meaninglessness of all life. There is neither fall nor deliverance, but for Coriolanus there is only the inexorable wheel of destiny. In this, he is a both a traditional hero and a hero for our age.

He merits Schiller's elegy for Achilles, perhaps his closest analogue in military prowess and fearlessness, and in his contemptuous demeanour. In Nänie, the

poet sings of the gods and goddesses crying at Achilles death, since the beautiful (*die Schöne*) has passed away, the perfect (*das Vollkommene*) has died. Aufidias' post-mortem encomium bears witness to the honour due this hero. At the same time, Coriolanus can be said to flatten the stage, such that Romans and Volscans are seen as undifferentiated in their mediocrity and baseness. Coriolanus the hero discloses to us that our own stage is, for the most part, a desert, and that the voices that proclaim otherwise are, like the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus, manipulators and frauds.

In Plato's Republic, Socrates claims that no current regime was suitable for philosophy or for anything great, and the best one could hope for is individual contentment (*agapa*) though living justly, honouring the gods, and staying out of harm's way. (The latter did not prove possible for him.) (496a–497a) In our age, this is the same. Our great human beings are often imprisoned and/or killed, and our benefactors — scientists, artists, philosophers, scholars, statesmen, philanthropists — are on the margins (except in those rare cases when they enjoy a superficial celebrity). Our world belongs to the heirs of Sicinius and Brutus, who have managed to amass power, riches and weaponry. This is an image of a world disclosed uniquely in art through the tragic figure of Coriolanus, who for that reason deserves our closest attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. Vintage Books (New York, 1967), 68.

<sup>2</sup> "Fens" means very bad air that has an infectious, noxious stench.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin. *Werke und Briefe, Band 2*. Eds. Beissner and Schmidt. Insel Verlag (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), 595.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Vintage Books (New York, 1967), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Gjertrud Schnackenberg. *The Throne of Labdacus*. Farrar, Girard and Strauss (New York, 2000), 4–5.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In *The Portable Nietzsche*. Ed. And Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Penguin Books (New York, 1982), 354.

<sup>7</sup> Delmore Schwartz. *Selected Poems (1938–58)*: Summer Knowledge. New Directions (New York, 1951), 124.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*, 32.

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