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THE NECESSITY OF CHOICE: REFLECTIONS ON FILM AND HISTORY IN OCCUPIED EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

HISTORY 400CZ:

THE OTHER EUROPE: HISTORY AND CULTURE FROM THE BALTIc TO THE BLACK SEA WITH DR. ANDREW BERGERSON

ABSTRACT:

Using the tragic-heroic archetypes of Achilles and Hamlet, this paper examines the nature of choice in the real and imagined lives of two individuals living in Nazi-and-Soviet-occupied East-Central Europe: Maciek, a fictional character in Andrzej Wajda's celebrated post-war film Ashes and Diamonds, and Rudi, an historical person examined in Andrew Stuart Bergerson and Maria Stehle's "Rudolph Mosaner's 'Wanderjahre.'" An interdisciplinary, comparative analysis of these dramatic figures yields insights into the nature of human agency and the necessity of choice, especially in vital situations. Ultimately, for human agents, acceptance or refusal of choice itself may be equally important to particular decisions between two or more morally weighted options.

Philosophy, one will recall, literally means *a love of wisdom*. Wisdom, of course, is not the acquisition of information for its own sake, but knowledge in action—*knowledge applied*. In other words, wisdom is intimately related to choice. While philosophers since Plato have often reflected on choice, they have not been content to merely develop procedures for arriving at the best of two or more options. They have also insisted on the importance of examining the nature of choice itself. While *what* (content) and *how* (method) are irreducible considerations of a problem for all human agents, equally important is the question of *why*—*why choose at all?* Illustrating the problem of agency through tragedy, philosophers and dramatists have bequeathed to us a wisdom that insists on the *necessity of choice*. The personal successes and failures of tragic heroes like Achilles and Hamlet, as well as real historical persons closer to our own time, are replete with lessons concerning choice. Drawing from both art and life, this paper will use the traditions of philosophy and tragedy to examine the nature of choice in a modern context. Through

interdisciplinary lenses, I will show how issues of choice connect literary figures like Achilles and Hamlet to the 1958 classic Polish film, *Ashes and Diamonds*, and Andrew Stuart Bergerson and Maria Stehle's historical article about a German soldier during World War II, "Rudolph Mosaner's 'Wanderjahre.'"¹ Critical reflection and comparison of these narratives will demonstrate that refusing choice condemns one to an undignified end and a fate worse than death.

In a lecture given in 2005 and later republished as *Philosophy in the Present*, French philosopher Alain Badiou insists that philosophy cannot have something to say about every problem. Because a philosopher is someone who decides what important problems are or invents new problems, a philosopher cannot be asked "on television, night after night, what he thinks about what's going on."² In other words, only problems with particular features provide a situation for philosophical intervention. For example, a philosopher might find a situation worthy of reflection or examination if the situation elucidates a choice. Badiou illustrates such a situation by retelling the argument between Socrates and Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*. In this dialogue, "the thought of Socrates and that of Callicles share no common measure, they are totally foreign to one another."³ On one hand, Callicles argues that "might is right," that justice is "cunning and violence" and that "the happy man is a tyrant." On the other, Socrates argues that the happy man is the virtuous man, the "true man" and "the Just."⁴ Badiou argues that between the two lines of thought, "justice as violence" and "justice as thought," there is no common relation. Thus Plato's dialogue presents not a discussion, but a confrontation. And faced with this situation, the task of philosophy "is to show that we must choose."⁵

Tragedy also emphasizes the necessity of choice, even if human freedom seems limited when confronted with fate. Over time tragedians have developed two tragic-heroic types—those who fail because of a mistaken choice but retain their dignity, and those who fail because of indecision and are condemned to an unsympathetic end. In the Greek tradition, Achilles represents this former kind of hero. During a particularly intimate scene in the *Iliad*, Achilles refuses to fight the Trojans because he has been publicly dishonored by one of his allies, the Greek warrior-king Agamemnon. Idle in camp, the usually fierce Achilles shows a rare moment of existential contemplation and vulnerability. He reflects that there is little glory in war and that death in combat is senseless. Although sincere, Achilles' doubts are short lived. Even though his death was predicted both by oracles and by his enemy, Hector, Achilles refuses to return to his home-

land where he foresees living into old age. After the death of his best friend Patroclus, a newly ennobled Achilles returns to battle and defeats Hector and the Trojans, winning great glory. While the *Iliad* does not recount Achilles' death, Greek tradition holds that he was later killed by Paris, which establishes Achilles as a tragic hero. Juxtaposed with his ultimate fate, an early death, Achilles' earlier moment of introspection and doubt evidences his agency. Confronted with a difficult fate, Achilles chooses a path of courage and glory—important virtues of the Greeks—and is thusly remembered.

The most famous tragic hero of the latter category—the tragic hero embodied by one who *fails to choose*—is not from Greek but rather Shakespearean tragedy. This is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, the angst-ridden protagonist of the play that bears his name. Faced with the knowledge that his father has been murdered by his uncle, Hamlet becomes erratic, melancholic, and indecisive. He toys with his lover, Ophelia, sometimes approaching her with tenderness, and other times with rage. In one scene he famously screams for her to leave: “Get thee to a nunnery!”⁶ Eventually he drives her mad and she takes her own life. Hamlet’s soliloquies are notoriously ridden with anxiety and indecision: “to take arms against a sea of troubles” or “to die.”⁷ Ultimately, his downfall is the result of his own fence-sitting on whether to avenge his father by killing his uncle, Claudius. Hamlet’s indecisiveness allows for his enemies to conspire to kill him, and although he avenges his father’s death, he dies needlessly while performing the act, his flesh ripped open by a poisoned rapier. While the deaths of Achilles and Hamlet are both in some ways senseless, Achilles is redeemed because of his decisiveness and embodiment of courage in the face of fate. Hamlet’s downfall is unsympathetic—his death by no means inevitable and is effectuated primarily because he repeatedly denies his own power to choose.

In many ways, the protagonist Maciek in Andrzej Wajda’s 1958 film *Ashes and Diamonds* is analogous to the tragic-heroic archetype exemplified by Achilles. The film is set in a small town in Poland on the last day of World War II. Maciek, a member of the Polish resistance, has been given an order to kill a local Communist official named Szczuka. The first assassination attempt is botched when Maciek and his partner Andrzej shoot up a car full of cement plant workers they mistake for Szczuka’s entourage. Andrzej, Maciek’s superior officer, then receives further orders that Maciek is to finish the job while he himself will be transferred elsewhere. At this point the film takes several detours.

Maciek has a brief love affair with Krystyna, the barmaid of the hotel, and the relationship gives him pause to consider his occupation. In a scene reminiscent of Achilles' existential reflection, Maciek expresses doubts about his occupation as a soldier to Andrzej, and he asks what they are fighting for. Andrzej coldly replies that Maciek will be considered a deserter if he does not kill Szczuka and reminds him of the Polish cause. In the end, an emboldened Maciek maintains fidelity to the Polish resistance, killing the Communist official in a dark street while fireworks erupt commemorating the end of the war against the Nazis. The film draws to a close as Maciek is unexpectedly and senselessly shot by Polish soldiers and momentarily wraps himself in a white linen sheet hanging from a clothesline. The image of the blood-soaked cloth evokes the red and white of Poland's flag, cementing Maciek's status as a hero, if a somewhat ironic one. Like Achilles, Maciek represents a man of action caught in a universe of moral confusion and violence. Unable to escape death, he forgoes the chance of love and domestic life for higher virtues and the cause of his nation. The lesson of the tragic hero embodied by Achilles and Maciek is that although we may not be able to choose how we die, we have to opportunity to choose for what we live.

To return to Badiou, the narratives of Achilles and Maciek are philosophical situations because they present the protagonists with choices that bear no relation. Between the call of love and the call of duty there is no common measure. As agents each must choose and as an audience we must also choose. The importance of these stories lies less in the particular content of the choices of their protagonists than in the act of choice itself. In other words, one may not agree with Achilles and Maciek and still respect *that they chose*. The second kind of tragic-hero, Hamlet, however, refuses to choose. He drives his lover mad, causing her to take her own life, and then he loses his life himself. This kind of tragic hero—someone who refuses to choose when confronted with a difficult problem—has historical counterparts, and can be seen as an archetype of many collaborators of genocide and oppression during Nazi and Soviet occupation of East-Central Europe during World War II. Far more prevalent than hard-line, orthodox followers of Nazi or Stalinist ideology were “non-ideological” people who collaborated in oppression or genocide with the occupying regimes—in other words, those who chose neither active participation nor resistance.

An historical example of such a person may be found in

Andrew Stuart Bergerson and Maria Stehle’s article, “Rudolph Mosaner’s

‘Wanderjahre.’” The article recounts the autobiographical testimony of Rudolph Mosaner, or Rudi, on his life in Europe during the Nazi occupation. The central thesis of Bergerson and Stehle’s work is that Rudi, a soldier in the German army, employed irony both during and in the retelling of the events of this period of his life to “negotiate complex ethical-political postures that preserved a sense of moral distance” from the violence in which he was complicit.⁸ In his testimony, Rudi consistently downplays the violence for which he was either complicit, participatory, or a beneficiary. In Rudi’s account he breaks rules, mocks his commanders, and depicts himself as a “habitual nonconformist and ironic trickster.”⁹ Rudi himself is never at the center of violence. Consider Rudi’s testimony of a period during which he was attached to a motorized unit traveling through Belgrade, Budapest, and Croatia. Although historical evidence suggests his unit was involved in violent encounters, Rudi omits description of any military engagements whatsoever and claims that “the fighting was concluded by the time his unit arrived and that the SS were responsible for most of the destruction.”¹⁰ Bergerson and Stehle note that such rhetorical maneuvering was common in postwar recollections, a “largely untenable distinction between the ideologically committed, genocidal SS units and the politically indifferent, military minded *Wehrmacht*.”¹¹ Furthermore, Bergerson and Stehle insist that Rudi’s irony was not simply a post-war affectation to hide his complicity with Nazism; rather, Rudi used irony to survive on a daily basis *during the war*. For Rudi, irony was a defense mechanism used to obscure his own refusal to choose—neither active participation nor active resistance to the Nazis. Rudi’s ironic posture and selective omission of particular historical events in his testimony evidences that he felt a sense of guilt over this refusal. While denial of choice drove Hamlet mad, Rudi was able to maintain such denial and his sanity and continue living by cultivating a pathology of ethical avoidance with irony at its heart—behavior in effort to achieve what Bergerson and Stehle dub a form of moral *sovereign impunity*.

All of these characters—Achilles, Hamlet, Maciek and Rudi—were trapped in a fatalistic universe. For each of them death lurked in the shadows, around the corner or just over the next hill. While the fates of Achilles and Maciek are lamentable, their acceptance of personal agency is commendable. Not so for Hamlet and Rudi. Rudi largely fits the Hamlet model of tragic hero, except that he did not die, as many did, on a battlefield in Europe. He survived into old age and dies of natural causes. In a sense, this makes Rudi’s fate even more tragic. Through Rudi’s autobiographical

interviews at the end of his life, upon which Bergerson and Stehle's article is based, we witness a demise worse than death in the usual sense. To borrow from another literary tradition, Rudi had become a *qelipot*, a Kabbalistic term which refers to the husks of the dead—the condition of a body that goes on after the loss of its soul.

Today, many contemporary historians work towards non-ideological or non-metaphysical interpretations of history. Well-intentioned they may be, their insistence on neutrality merely obscures various ideologies operating just under the surface of their work. Historians must aim beyond the construction of factual narratives. Drawing from traditions like philosophy and tragedy, they must understand the relationship of the narratives they construct to the archetypal narratives upon which we humans organize our personal identities and social relations. Truth is important, but no less important is *truth-effect*—history means nothing if it does not compel the transformation of life.

ENDNOTES

¹Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009).

²Badiou, 2.

³Ibid., 3.

⁴Ibid., 4.

⁵Ibid., 5.

⁶Hamlet, Act III, Scene I.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Andrew Bergerson and Maria Stehle, “Rudolph Mosaner’s ‘Wanderjahre’: Irony and Impunity in Nazi Europe,” *War, Exile, Justice and Everyday Life, 1936-1946*, ed. Sandra Ott (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, 2011), 288.

⁹Ibid., 291.

¹⁰Ibid., 293.

¹¹Ibid., 294.