

# SUFFERING, VICTIMS, AND POETIC INSPIRATION

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Poetic inspiration has something to do with the divine. The Greek tragedies are classic examples of that. The poets regarded themselves as inspired by the divine Muses, and in their works the gods are quite naturally present in the lives of human beings. Sometimes the gods treat them in a friendly way, sometimes they spur on conflicts or even inspire human beings to take revenge upon one another. At the end of some tragedies the gods appear as a *deus ex machina* who brings everything to resolution, or at least pretends to do so. Nevertheless, it is not these various gods, but rather human beings themselves, suffering human beings more precisely, who are at the center of this dramatic event inspired by the divine Muses. Human beings suffer because they come into conflict with each other and fall victim to the vengeful and violent acts of others.

In the Greek tragedies human beings do not act in a calm and sensible way. Rather, they are in bondage to their passions, and through these passions the gods speak to them. While performing a sacrifice of purification and thanksgiving, Heracles flies into a rage inspired by several of the goddesses and slaughters his own children. In a Dionysian frenzy Agaue and her companions tear apart her own son. Orestes, believing himself to be obeying a command of Apollo, kills his mother, who had committed adultery and murdered her own husband. And above all, the great, genocidal war of Troy did not so much originate in the longing of Paris for Helen, as in a dispute between the gods. In every respect human beings seem to be more the victims of the gods than themselves wicked persons who commit evil deeds—and they are above all the ones who suffer the most. Helen, the "cause" of the massive slaughter of the Trojan war, is exclusively depicted by Euripides in the role of one who suffers greatly, indeed even beyond the bounds of human endurance. Even Medea, who goes so far as to kill her own children, is not

depicted by the same poet as a moral monster, but as a woman overwhelmed by boundless grief.

The gods thus appear in a somewhat murky light: they are indispensable to the poets' purpose yet at the same time severely criticized. For Euripides they are often much worse than human beings. In his *Heracles*, he goes so far in his irony as to depict the goddess of vengeance herself criticizing Hera, who makes Heracles suffer in order to quench her thirst for revenge which was caused by the unfaithfulness of her husband Zeus. Euripides considers all these stories of gods to be humanly-contrived fables. Nevertheless, he also believes that there can be no drama without the gods. How could the mysterious depths of human passions be understood without the gods? If the poet had no one to indict except other human beings, his works would quickly become nothing but tepid moral tracts. The gods are indispensable and yet they must be criticized: the poetic inspiration in the Greek tragedies thrives on ambiguity. Suffering humanity is confronted with an incomprehensible fate which only the poet's ambiguous parables and images are able to depict.

The great suffering figures in the tragedies of Euripides find their echo in another tradition's suffering figure, whose fate is also depicted in poetic words. A suffering figure who also both listens to and argues with his God: Job. A misfortune has befallen Job, which he simply cannot understand. And while even his alleged friends torment him, he suffers even more from his God. Job feels persecuted by God, tormented and driven to despair. Job would like to argue with God and even take him to court. But he cannot do so. He experiences God as an invisible enemy who is present everywhere. Nevertheless, he turns to this same God in his deepest distress and is confident of finding a savior in him. The God of Job is contradictory: this is a God on whom Job can rely but with whom he must also struggle. However, it is just this contradiction which turns his conception of God into such a fascinating symbol, a symbol vital to the poetry of Job's dialogues and debates with God. If today, even in secularized circles, the figure of Job attracts the attention of many, this may be due especially to the dramatic nature of the image of God in the Book of Job (see Steinwendtner). In the background story, which deals with a wager made between God and Satan, an attempt is indeed made to resolve the contradiction and ambiguity in God and in the fate of the person who suffers. And for this very reason the moralizing tone gains the upper hand over the book's poetic inspiration.

René Girard also attempts an interpretation of the dramatic dialogues, which tries to resolve the ambiguity in God. *Does his interpretation, as a consequence, destroy poetic inspiration? Can this inspiration still survive if making everything as unambiguous as possible is the goal? Are not the*

*experiences of those who suffer so incomprehensible that the ambiguities found in the works of poetry alone can do any justice to them?*

Girard bases his interpretation not only on his own theory, he also considers the debates between Job and his enemy-friends in the light of the fate of Jesus. And as a matter of fact definite contrasts do seem to stand before us here. The God whom Jesus proclaims is a God of forgiving purified of the satanic masks, a God who lets the sun rise over the good and the wicked alike and who, full of mercy, seeks after his lost sons and daughters. In the name of this God, Jesus prefers to be killed rather than to resort to violence himself. Light and darkness seem here to be distinguished from one another unambiguously: the light of the good God and the darkness of wicked humanity. Have then the ambiguous words of the poets given way as well to the unambiguous words of moralists and preachers?

In the Christian tradition many people have thought so. No less a person than Sören Kierkegaard speaks—in the name of God's Word which unambiguously separates marrow from bone—vehemently against painters and poets who only create images. Kierkegaard was himself a poet through and through. He made use of roles, played roles, and wrote under ever new disguises. He gave himself a pseudonym and later the pseudonym of a pseudonym. He played many "hide-and-seek games" and even turned his whole existence into a playing of roles. As an aesthetic writer, he strived, like other writers, to please his readers. Yet he nevertheless criticized this way of writing at the same time. As soon as he became even more unambiguously a religious writer, he also gave himself a new role and intentionally provoked the ridicule of the public.<sup>1</sup> From 1848 onwards, he wanted finally to sacrifice the aesthetic completely in favor of the religious. However, he carried out this abandonment of the aesthetic once again in a highly poetic way. He depicted the respected Christians of his time and how they in all their roles turned up their noses at a humiliated Jesus. As a person who suffered himself, Kierkegaard discovered the impossibility of directly communicating the Word of God. Only in his last attacks on the Danish church, which he castigated as a traitor of Christ, did his language become more one-sided and polemical. But even here biting comparisons and sparkling satires occasional flash through like bolts of lightning.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kierkegaard, "Der Gesichtspunkt" 58-65; also, *Kleine Aufsätze*. When breaking off his engagement Kierkegaard gave himself a role, too: "Kierkegaard opferet sein Ansehen, indem er sich als 'Schuff' ausgibt, um Regine von jeder Schuld zu entbinden" (Tschuggnall 70).

Kierkegaard, the critic of the poets and yet himself a poet through and through, influenced many poets after him. How was he able to do so? By taking manifold roles upon himself, but without ever playing them recklessly. Rather, he entered as deeply as possible into the suffering which these roles entailed and by doing so was thus able to enter into the depths of human existence.<sup>2</sup> Here he discovered anew the various roles of Christ and realized that the clearness (unambiguity) in the Word of God must not be confused with the clearness to be found among moralists or those who work out philosophical systems. The clearness (unambiguity) in the Bible can only be communicated through the experience of suffering.

Therefore let us now turn our attention once again to the figure of Jesus. The prophet from Nazareth announced a God of loving kindness and uncovered the evil which lurks as a dark volition and mysterious passion deep in the hearts of human beings. These inclinations—as the judgement discourses of the New Testament, in contrast to the Greek tragedies, show—lead one not simply to kill, but even to Hell. Therefore murder is here no longer the last dark point of reference. Murder becomes itself a parable of an even darker world and of an even deeper suffering, and allows a world which is eternally closed-in-on-itself to show through.

That an atrocious deed deserves punishment is quite amenable to the moral sensibilities of most persons. Human action, however, is always limited and from this perspective therefore can only be punished in a limited fashion. The image of Hell depicts an eternal punishment that goes beyond all limits. The purely moral perspective is therefore surmounted and the word "Hell" becomes the symbol of a deeper dimension of evil before which every effort to master a problem is doomed to failure.

The discourses about Judgment and Hell,<sup>3</sup> by which Jesus wanted to shake up the leaders of Israel, were rejected and with them the messenger of the message as well. The hidden will to commit violence, which Jesus had uncovered in the hearts of human beings, struck back at Jesus who himself had to bear the consequences of his own actions and preaching. Thus Jesus

<sup>2</sup> This is a struggle, moreover, that we are led to realize we share with the author—or, to be more precise, with one or more of the author's *personae*, the masks or pseudonymous authors through whose voices Kierkegaard addresses us and in whom he images for us not only his own subjective presence but ours as well" (Webb 226).

<sup>3</sup> In the religious tradition of Israel there was a conception of hell even before Jesus. This hell, however, was only destined for the heathens and apostates and, therefore, did not turn into a vital problem within the religious community as it only concerned those who were "out". In contrast to that, Jesus's preaching about hell was particularly directed at the leaders of Israel, which gave rise to deep problems in the center of faith.

himself fell into different, apparently contradictory roles: The messenger of God's loving kindness became the preacher of judgement, and the one announced as the coming judge was condemned and judged himself (see Schwager 43-108). Did the God proclaimed by Jesus thereby become once again ambiguous as well? Was the God of loving kindness and forgiveness ultimately nothing but one aspect of an ambiguous image of God, to which the God of judgment, violence, and Hell also belongs?<sup>4</sup>

Jesus did not react with violence in turn against the violence which threatened him. He in fact commanded a disciple, who wanted to defend him with a sword, to desist from doing so. Jesus also did not—in contrast to the prophet Jeremiah<sup>5</sup>—curse his enemies before God, but instead prayed for them. Consequently, he remained absolutely true to his message about the God of enemy-love and of nonviolence even in extreme mortal anguish. For him as *the acting and praying one*, God always remained unambiguous, and his Abba never became, as Girard rightly stresses, a sacred divinity in the sense of a mixture of loving kindness and vengeance, of peace and violence. Precisely because of his nonviolence, however, Jesus did become the victim and thus fell into the role of *the one who suffers*. As such he was bound to experience quite personally that which Job, the psalmists, and the prophets with their contradictory God had experienced. He too was able to cry out in deepest despair: "Eloi, eloi, lema sabachtani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). He did not receive a direct reply to this anguished question.

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<sup>4</sup> Such a view would correspond with a deep trait in today's way of thinking. From a merely psychological point of view Carl Jung judges as follows: "Das ist das ewige Evangelium (im Gegensatz zum zeitlichen): man *kann* Gott lieben und *muß* ihn fürchten" (102).

<sup>5</sup> Remember how I stood before you  
to speak good for them,  
to turn away your wrath from them.  
Therefore give their children over to famine.  
hurl them out to the power of the sword,  
let their wives become childless and widowed.  
May their men meet death by pestilence,  
their youths be slain by the sword in battle.  
May a cry be heard from their houses.  
when you bring the marauder suddenly upon them!  
For they have dug a pit to catch me,  
and laid snares for my feet.  
Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me.  
Do not forgive their iniquity,  
do not blot out their sin from your sight. (Jer 18:20-23)

Our *spontaneous* human reactions tell us that to abandon someone inwardly in his deepest mortal anguish stands in contradiction to love. Of course, Jesus was, according to Christian belief, liberated soon after from death. The Resurrection, however, does not negate the experience of being abandoned to die alone. Many persons before and after Jesus also had to endure similar experiences, and for those who suffer profoundly, their fate is always somehow incomprehensible. There exists not only for our *spontaneous feelings*, but also for all *people who suffer*, a mysterious depth of God which cannot be fathomed and to which we cannot do justice with any of our unambiguous images or concepts. In spite of all the clearness (lack of ambiguity) in our actions and our faith (because it is not faith in a God of violence and revenge), the Christian God remains a mysterious God for all who suffer and also those who empathize with the suffering. The actual experience of suffering can only be roughly captured in the language of poetic inspiration. Nevertheless, the mysterious nature of God for those who suffer clearly differs from the contradictory nature of sacred divinities. The condemned and crucified Jesus never became the cursing Jesus pleading for revenge, but only the one who questions. Jesus's God of love did in fact through Jesus's suffering turn into a God of mysterious love, but never into a God of violence and vengeance.

Thus an answer to our question becomes apparent: *The ambiguity of human experience remains as well in the most central Christian sphere and there is a Christian poetic inspiration which—like the Greek inspiration and the inspiration of the Old Testament—lives from the ambiguous experiences of suffering and evil.* In this context the figure of Dostoyevsky, "who has been a favorite author of writers up to now" (Jens, "Ich" 269), automatically comes to mind. As an ideological polemicist and Russian Slavophile, Dostoyevsky could, to be sure, lose himself by seeing things in banal black and white oversimplifications. As a poet, however, he always brought to life characters who in their complexity were open on all sides and who, almost simultaneously, were making their way both to Heaven and Hell.<sup>6</sup> Dostoyevsky's poetry revolved continually around the question of the mystery of evil and

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<sup>6</sup> A cold-blooded murderer like Raskolnikov "könnte sich in Sibirien, an der Seite der ihn begleitenden Dirne Sonja, zu einem frommen Einwohner im weitabgewandten Totenhaus wandeln: ein Strichmädchen und ein Doppelmörder, die der Welt der Starzen, der Mönche im Kloster näherstünden als der russischen Society, wo Popen und große Herren den armen Jesus einen guten Mann sein lassen" (Jens, "Ich" 269). About the demonic dominating figure in "Dämonen" (demons) Jens says the following: "Doch dieser Stawrogin heißt, in der Dostojewski eigenen, schon auf Joycesche Namensgebung verweisenden Geheimsprache: 'Der Mann am Kreuz'" (273).

suffering. And he often had atheistic characters bring to light truths which are taken entirely from the Christian sphere.<sup>7</sup> The poetic world of Dostoyevsky is therefore fascinating and unfathomable at the same time, because in his world the characters often go so far that they run the danger of swinging to the other extreme. There is, nevertheless, a boundary which is never crossed. For an Alyosha the world can become incomprehensible. Yet he can never bring himself to clamor for violence and hatred and he always remains the one who empathizes completely with those who suffer.

In the modern post-Christian world, the level of contradiction, as is clear from the work of Franz Kafka, even surpasses that of Dostoyevsky. What did the poet from Prague intend to depict in the *Prozess* (*The Trial*) or the *Schloss* (*The Castle*)? In the epilogue to the first edition of the *Schloss* Max Brod, Kafka's personal friend and editor of his works, wrote the following:

Without excluding more specific interpretations—which while perhaps being completely correct are nevertheless, like the inner bowls of a Chinese carving by the outer bowls, enclosed within this more comprehensive interpretation—it must be said that this 'Schloss' to which K. does not gain access and to which he, for some unknown reason, is not even able to draw nearer, this very castle is exactly what theologians call 'grace', the divine guidance of human fate (of Kafka's village), the efficacy of pure coincidences, mysterious decisions, talents and damages, the undeserved and the unattainable, the 'Non licet' hanging over the life of all. The two manifestations of God (in the sense of Kabala)—judgement and grace—are so depicted in the "Prozess" and in the "Schloss." (529)

In contrast to this interpretation, Hans Küng rightly asks why this oppressive story from the protagonist K. can be regarded as religious and grace-filled (186 ff). The atmosphere in the *Schloss* is indeed just as oppressive as that in the *Prozess*, which is often interpreted as a symbol of judgement and hell. If the symbols for grace and judgement are practically identical, then Kafka's world must be extremely ambiguous and contradictory (see Beicken). Nevertheless, one limit remains even in this world: violent criminals are never glorified or celebrated. Through the ambiguous experiences of a suffering

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<sup>7</sup>In *The Brothers Karamazov* the atheist Ivan, for example, questions the whole world order when experiencing the suffering of one single child. What made Ivan think that the suffering of a child has to be taken more seriously than the world order? Such thoughts can only come from Jesus!

person a mysterious transcendence shines through<sup>8</sup> that is not totally removed from the God of Jesus.

Since Kafka's death the world has become ever more "kafkaesque." The whole machine of technology and civilization can be seen as a monster that is slowly destroying our planet, a "Hell Machine" as it were with which the human race is preparing its own destruction. For this reason the negative dominates in contemporary poetry and often threatens to become so preponderant that every trace of transcendence seems to vanish. In the more important works of modern literature, however, this is not the case. Karl-Josef Kuschel, a theologian and literary expert, made a very thorough examination of the theme, "Jesus in German-speaking Contemporary Literature," and came to a conclusion which Paul Konrad Kurz, poet and literary critic himself, summarized in the following way:

Kuschel can prove that the great figure to which contemporary literature refers is not Odysseus, Don Quixote, Hamlet or Faust, not Marx, Nietzsche or Lenin, but Jesus himself; not so much the Jesus of 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life', as, rather, in every respect the Jesus of 'ecce homo', the Jesus who is misunderstood, alien, rejected and ultimately eliminated by the representatives of society. ( 15)

For modern authors the world is not only ambiguous, but often confused, violent and without meaning. Nevertheless, they by no means glorify violence. They rather side with the suffering victims of injustice and violence and thus make the same decision which is also at the foundations of the theory of Girard. In this respect they also live in a world which is at least to some degree unambiguous. Since they too as poets cannot be content with accusing others of being wrongdoers or violent criminals, they have to depict victims who suffer a fate which can be hardly if ever understood. The suffering of these victims thus makes the fate of all others who suffer shine through, and so the suffering of the crucified Jesus as well. Thus the suffering of these victims becomes a burning question in our mute world.

Poetic inspiration of every age has always lived from ambiguity as well as from the experience of human suffering. But while the images of God

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<sup>8</sup> When analyzing the numerable possible interpretations. Hans Küng draws the conclusion that the *Schloss* actually is "nicht Ausdruck der Gnade, wohl aber einer chiffrierten, ängstlichen Transzendenzerfahrung, wo die Transzendenz rätselhaft, undurchsichtig, ängstlich bleibt, dem Menschen aber ein Weg offengelassen, eine Hoffnung nicht verunmöglicht wird" ( 297).



which inspired the poetry of Greek tragedy and of the Book of Job remained totally contradictory and God could then appear as the one who helps and kills at the same time, the New Testament excludes the element of violence and revenge from its conception of God. This novel view then gained general acceptance in Christian poetry and finally even in modern post-Christian poetry. However ambiguous and contradictory the world may be nowadays, those who act violently cannot inspire any more great poetry,<sup>9</sup> and the powerful of this world are no longer called into question by a God who is a violent heavenly ruler, but rather by those who suffer and by the victims themselves.<sup>10</sup> The burning question is no longer the question about loving kindness or violence, but is now quite different: Are the victims of violence only mute signs that cannot be deciphered in a mute and dark world or does hope exist for them as well? In a work co-authored with Hans Küng about great European poets, the German literary critic, Walter Jens, gives his essay about Dostoyevsky the title "Ich aber will sehen, wie der Ermordete aufsteht und seinen Mörder umarmt" ("I, however, want to see how the murder victim stands up and embraces his murderer"). The decisive and unresolved question that runs throughout modern poetry is, in fact, the following: Does hope exist for the victims of murder, that they will rise from the dead in order that they might embrace their murderers? If this hope were indeed to disappear in the future, poetic inspiration would—by totally excluding the perspective of the New Testament—begin once again to glorify those who act violently.

Translation by Patrick O'Liddy

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<sup>9</sup> Looking back on a symposium where writers, experts in literature, and theologians met, Walter Jens formulates following lasting questions addressed to his partners in the discussions: "*Du, Seelsorger, wo ist Dein Gott, wenn nach der selbstinszenierten Vernichtung der Welt niemand mehr da ist, der die Worte hören kann: Ich bin, der ich bin. '? Und du, Schriftsteller, was trägst Du, als Christ, dazu bei in Deinem Werk die Unvereinbarkeit zwischen der Religion Christi und einer christlichen Religion darzustellen, die sich im Bund mit der Macht, den Waffen, dem Tod endgültig ad absurdum zu führen beginnt!*" ("Die bleibenden Aufgaben" 265).

<sup>10</sup> Immer wieder hat Dostojewski, wie vor ihm Kierkegaard und nach ihm Kafka, selbstgewisse Diesseitigkeit nicht durch die Glorie (als erhöhte Diesseitigkeit), sondern durch den Dämmerchein des Niederen, von der Macht Diskreditierten, Erbarmungswürdigen und Abgetanen denunziert" (Jens, "Ich" 272).

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