

Introduction

Aristotle tells us that the key to the plots of the great Greek tragedies is that in those places and situations where tenderness belongs—for example, in families—it often goes missing. Tragic cruelty is the result. In more modern times, Friedrich Hölderlin was particularly sensitive to the absence of tenderness (*Zärtlichkeit*) in his culture, and he was acutely aware of the tragic consequences of that absence. A century later, the founders and major figures of psychoanalysis—for example, Freud and Lacan, Melanie Klein, Theodor Reik, and Otto Rank—were likewise convinced that the stream of tenderness either flows or fails to flow in the most decisive human relationships, that is, in the Eros of love relationships and in the Thanatos of cruelly destructive relationships. The present book investigates Greek tragedy and Greek epic poetry through the eyes of Hölderlin and other moderns—principally Freud, Nietzsche, and Derrida—who are sensitive to the theme of tenderness. It also goes to encounter Robert Musil’s *Man Without Qualities*, which is equally astonishing for its account of the tender relationship of “Ulrich” and “Agathe” and its portrayal of the psychopathic serial killer “Moosbrugger.”

After studying Otto Rank’s *Birth Trauma*, which reflects on the tenderness of gestation in the womb and the cruel necessity of birth, the book then turns to an examination of cruelty (*Grausamkeit*) in general. It focuses on Derrida’s challenge to contemporary psychoanalysis and his analysis (and indictment) of the death penalty. Derrida sees the transition in modernity from cruelty as blood flow—for example, in Dr. Guillotin’s “humanitarian” invention—to cruelty of a more “psychological” nature. The cudgel often takes the form of a mere word, a word that Hölderlin calls “factually murderous,” *tödtendfaktisch*, or a mere gesture, perhaps a lethal injection. Herewith a brief outline of the book’s ten chapters.

Somewhere along its way, chapter 1 calls itself a “tender rant,” and this is not far from the truth. It is unkind to the churches and to much that has

informed our Western culture, but for the sake of nothing more outrageous than “tenderness.” The chapter begins with Aristotle’s *Poetics*. It argues that for Aristotle the essence of a tragic “household” is the absence of φιλία, which is family feeling, kinship, friendship, and love. The skilled tragedian goes in search of those households where tenderness has vanished; the horrors that take place in them, the cudgelings and counter-cudgelings, arise from the absence of tenderness. The chapter then turns to Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), who in an early essay searches for the essence of community. He finds it in what he calls “the more tender relations,” *die zärtlicheren Verhältnisse*, without telling us exactly which relations he means. (An excursus on the German words *zart*, *zärtlich*, and *Zärtlichkeit* tries to uncover the meaning of this word group, which is somewhere between the English words “tender” and “delicate.”) In any case, Hölderlin’s insistence on the importance of tenderness is vital to my chapter and to the entire book. Finally, the chapter turns to Freud’s essays on “lovelife,” which I write as one word, imitating the German *Liebesleben*. The guiding thread of Freud’s “Three Contributions to a Theory of Lovelife” is the difficulty of uniting the two “streams” of tenderness and erotic excitement that a viable lovelife needs—sensual thrills and chills combined with feelings of profound tenderness. One of the most surprising aspects of Freud’s theories, and one that tends to subvert the famous Oedipus Complex, is his idea that children—boys included—often feel the intense need to express tenderness toward the father, no matter how competitive or conflicted their relationship has been. My “tender rant,” which has a very wide range, from Aristotle through Luce Irigaray, closes with the utopian thought that our own time—lurching to the right and gripping the cudgel ever more desperately—is in need of a new mythology of tenderness, whereby the word *mythology* is not meant as a derogation.

Chapter 2 takes us back to one of the oldest documents in our literature—Homer’s *Iliad*. It asks whether even on the battlefield beneath the walls of Troy something like tenderness can be espied, and it answers, yes, precisely in the figure of the wrathful Achilles. On the basis of several texts by Hölderlin, it argues that *Zärtlichkeit* characterizes the great Achaean warrior with regard to several other personages in the epic: Priam, who begs for the release of his son’s mangled body, and receives it; Patroclus, whose death brings Achilles at long last out of his tent and out of his sulk; and Briseïs, the “prize” who is taken from him by Agamemnon, thus precipitating Achilles’s wrath and the epic *Iliad* as a whole. Even though one cannot deny the power of κῦδος (“glory” or “fame”) in the Mycenaean Age, Hölderlin may be right to see in Achilles’s volatile character a dominant strand of tenderness.

Nor is such tenderness missing from the Classical Age of Athens, the age of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Chapter 3 reads the play in an admittedly unfamiliar way. Usually the figure of Antigone is celebrated very much in the way that Hegel celebrates her, namely, as a staunch representative of the Penates, the family gods, a woman who challenges patriarchy by insisting on the burial of her brother Polyneices and who then goes bravely to her death defending the law of the family. For the first third of the play such a reading is tenable, but not for what happens after the choral song in dubious praise of Eros is sung. For from that point on, clearly, Antigone grows younger and more tender; by the time she stumbles toward her tomb she is a mere child, and once in the tomb she is almost a fetus, one that will be stillborn. Jacques Lacan is not off the mark when he says that Antigone is the perfect image of the destruction-and-death drives turned against the self. Her entire Eros aims at Death, and achieves it. However, as the old men of Thebes who form the chorus see and say, she is in the end a child, tender and vulnerable. She is, after all, the child of her paternal grandmother and her eldest brother, one of those children who, used and abused by the gods, should not have been. Sophocles's *Antigone*, in other words, is a tragedy, not a manifesto.

The figure of Antigone emerges again in chapter 4, which takes us from antiquity to modernity. She emerges as the only woman Hegel can accept without reservations, that is, a girl who dies before reaching maturity and before hearing the marriage song. Hegel contrasts her with a woman he fears and despises, the eponymous heroine of Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde*. Yet Hegel hates the author of the novel even more than the woman it is about. Friedrich Schlegel stands for all the things Hegel feels are wrong with his times: the novel pretends to adopt "the form of reflection," but it is all sophistry, and its sophistry is that of a lascivious male who seduces a mere maid and so destroys her honor. For whereas a man has other fields in which his honor is at stake, the woman, if she does not die at puberty, has only marriage and the family as her rescue.

And yet. There is something in the sensuality of the lovers—Lucinde and Julius—that threatens Hegel's philosophy of spirit. One might even be tempted to say that it is precisely the tenderness of their caresses that troubles him, as though their illicit love (for they scorn the idea of marriage) threatens not only family law and civil society but also the very system of rational philosophy. The illicit lovers are obviously spirited in their lovemaking, and Schlegel's writing too is spirited: the lovers give themselves over to one another, and the writer who celebrates them surrenders himself utterly to his text. Hegel has to worry about the implications of these surrenders for the spirit on which his entire

system depends. For there is a hint in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the phenomenologist too has to surrender to the phenomena in order to come to know them; the phenomenologist must give himself or herself over to the very “sake” of thinking, and such *Hingebung* is more than reminiscent of what lovers do—even the most shameless and illicit of lovers—when they give themselves over to one another. Schlegel seems to know about this. Hegel has to hate him.

Whereas chapter 1 discusses the Freud of lovelife, tenderness, and sensuality, chapter 5 highlights the Freud of mourning. Central to the chapter is Derrida’s account in *The Postcard*, following Freud’s own account in chapter 2 of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, of the game invented by Freud’s grandson, the son of his daughter Sophie. It is a game that has the serious purpose of controlling the mother’s presences and absences. It is as though the infant imagines that the mother is a toy tied to a string: pull the string and the mother, Sophie, will return. The chapter is called “Pulling Strings Wins No Wisdom,” however, for the reason that at some point the game fails to work. Since mothers are mortal, they pass. It would be a wisdom, a Σοφία, probably a very great wisdom, to learn that no one and no thing can control or master the comings and goings of human beings, even and especially of those tender ones we love and need. Freud and Derrida alike attain that wisdom, but it is hard-won, because it is cruel.

Chapter 6 is a study of Robert Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, “The Man Without Qualities,” published (in part) in the early 1930s. The chapter focuses on Agathe, the sister of this indeterminate man. Whereas Musil’s name for the man without qualities changed several times during the years he was writing the novel, which he never finished, his name for the sister remained constant: Agathe, the feminine form of the Greek word for “the Good,” Ἀγαθή. Yet the sister too is hard to define in terms of qualities. She sometimes acts like a criminal; she sometimes drives to distraction the people who are trying to help her; and sometimes she feels like killing herself. She and her brother Ulrich are in search of tenderness, however, and Musil begins to use the word *Zärtlichkeit* more and more as he writes about the two of them. The siblings invent the expression “the other state” or “the other condition,” *der andere Zustand*, to designate a relation to the world that would be *zärtlich*, tender. But not simply a relation *to* the world. At one point they actually say that the world *reveals itself* as tender; they speak of “the suddenly unveiled tenderness of the world that touches without cease all our senses and that all our senses touch.” The claim is not psychological but ontological, or at least phenomenological. Yet in the end, after two thousand pages have passed (my chapter is not as long

as that), Musil does not know what to do with Ulrich and Agathe; better, they cannot tell him what they can do or must do, and Musil died before he could resolve the complications of the plot. Nevertheless, once one has seen the Good, even in a woman without qualities, it is impossible to forget her.

Part Two of the book is devoted to the theme of cruelty. If life is cruel, as one so often hears, when does that cruelty begin? At birth, replies Otto Rank. Chapter 7 reads Rank's *Birth Trauma*, which traces all forms of anxiety and neurosis back to the cruel experience of birth. Rank is thinking not only of the crisis involved in the transition from aquatic existence to a life in the air, a life of breathing, and of the pressure on the skull as one makes one's arduous way, nor only of the comparatively rough handling one receives on the other end of birth. What makes birth particularly cruel is that it truncates our tender existence in the womb. Rank is fascinated by the infinite number of instances in art, literature, religion, and psychology in which intrauterine existence is celebrated as Paradise—the Paradise we all have lost. True, were we to remain in the womb, we might eventually drown or suffocate. Yet back then we were well equipped to survive there, nourishment was at hand, the lights were dimmed, and it seemed we could swim and somersault and frolic endlessly. The psychoanalysts are agreed that it was better than sex. Or at least that sex is an asymptotic effort to return to Paradise.

Who can be surprised that the anxieties that arise as soon as we are born often turn into aggression and cruelty of one sort or another, either toward ourselves if we are well raised or against others if we are raised in the absence of tenderness? In extreme cases of aggression and cruelty, cases of criminality, it occasionally happens—at least in countries that are somewhat backward in their development—that these cases result in condemnation to death by execution. It is surprising to find a philosopher troubling himself about the death penalty, but in the penultimate seminar of his life, this is exactly what happened to Jacques Derrida. He found himself troubled by the history of blood flow—for, as it turns out, the word *cruelty* comes from the Latin word *cruor*, “I am bleeding.”

Chapter 8 is a close reading of the two published volumes of the transcript from Derrida's penultimate seminar in Paris during the years 1999–2001. This “death penalty seminar,” along with the last seminar, “The Beast and the Sovereign,” are remarkable philosophical events, and now remarkable texts. If it seems surprising that Derrida should take such a detailed look at the death penalty, practiced no longer in Europe but still energetically pursued both in the United States and in the nations that the United States regards as its mortal

enemies, the surprise diminishes when we think of Derrida's preoccupations during the final decades of his life. Among them, the theme of sovereignty is paramount, and the right to execute malefactors or to grant them pardon is the principal privilege of the sovereign head of state. Add to this Derrida's involvement with Heidegger's analysis of being-unto-death in *Being and Time*, an involvement that stretches over all the decades of Derrida's writing career, and the death penalty seminar makes sense. Derrida claims that death by execution would have to have—even though it does not have—central importance for Heidegger's analysis. He begins to wonder whether the cruelty of the death penalty is precisely what is *proper to* humankind—what Heidegger calls the *Eigentlichkeit* or “authenticity” of Dasein. For philosophers have universally supported the death penalty, always taking the side of conservative theologians, whereas many of our greatest writers—Victor Hugo, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Albert Camus are exemplary in this respect—have vigorously opposed it. Among the philosophers, Derrida pits Nietzsche against Kant, who regards the “law of the talion” and hence capital punishment to be equivalent to the categorical imperative. Nietzsche challenges Kant by asking whether the supposed equivalence of guilt (crime) and inflicted pain (punishment) is in any sense credible, or whether its vaunted rationality “reeks of cruelty.”

However, Derrida sees a development taking place in which the death penalty may finally come to an end. That development he traces in what he calls “a history of blood.” Does that development mean that cruelty is coming to an end? Or does it mean that a new word for cruelty has to be found? Derrida suggests the German word *Grausamkeit*, which means that which causes a shudder of horror to pass through us. It would denote a less bloody and more “psychological” sense of cruelty. Psychoanalysis therefore becomes another central focus of the death penalty seminar, as Derrida searches for a new notion not only of *cruelty* but also of the *unconscious*. And, one must add, a new notion of *conscious thought*, inasmuch as the *calculative thinking* that seeks suitable punishments for sundry crimes invariably participates in mindless cruelty.

Chapter 9 then takes a closer look at Kant and especially at Kant's idea of freedom. Freedom is essential in Kant's view. Were there no freedom, no one could be held accountable. The need to punish wrongdoing comes first in Kant's system of morality. But this means that the usual view of Kant's ostensible call for respect of the human being as end rather than means—respect for the human being's dignity and worth—is untenable. If the human being is midway between angel and beast, gravity causes it to slip toward the latter. Thus, imputability and accountability (*Zurechnungsfähigkeit, Verantwortung*)

become principal concerns for Kant. One sees this not only in his *Metaphysik der Sitten*, which is Derrida's point of reference during the seminar, but also in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, to which this chapter turns. Another principal source for the chapter is Robert Musil's *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, this time not for its tale of Ulrich and Agathe but for its astonishing portrayal of the trial of Moosbrugger, a serial killer who has been condemned to death. The arguments of the jurists who insist on Moosbrugger's execution, even though everyone can see that he is completely mad, are principally Kantian in origin. The question soon becomes whether those arguments are as mad as the phantasms that rule and wreck Moosbrugger's mind.

The book ends by reporting on Derrida's address in July 2000 to the Estates General of Psychoanalysis, published as *States of the Soul of Psychoanalysis*. In part, the address continues to pose the question of cruelty as *Grausamkeit*, that is, a more "refined" or more "psychological" form of cruelty. Yet Derrida's principal interest is to move beyond such cruelty—if such a "beyond" is at all possible. What makes it seem unlikely, if not impossible, is that the principle of sovereignty and the power that sovereignty embodies perpetuate cruelty. Power especially comes into play with Freud's concept of *Bemächtigung*, a word that has *Macht* at its center. For "empowering" and "overpowering" appear to be at work in every "principle" of psychoanalysis. The "beyond" that Derrida hopes for would challenge not only sovereignty but the entire structure of "principles." For principles always have a "prince" or a nameless "potentate" behind them who is ready to enforce them with astonishing cruelty.

My own question to Derrida—better, my conversation with him—involves the possibility that what Nietzsche and Heidegger call "will to power as *art*" can show the way to such a beyond—a beyond of both cruelty and principles. For it seems that the creative power of art cultivates a kind of tenderness on the part of the artist toward his or her "objects" or "themes." Masterful artistry cultivates not mastery but receptivity, and receptivity goes gently with tenderness. At least, that possibility is the hope of the present investigation.