

LOVING THE WORLD AND
MORE THAN THE WORLD:
TRAGEDY AND TRANSCENDENCE
IN PAUL CLAUDEL'S
THE SATIN SLIPPER

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“And thus the *Satin Slipper*, this monster
of a drama, is ultimately this: a witness, a prayer,
a sacrifice, it is the world itself, in all its facets
and forms, which is offered to God.”

The one who no longer believes in God, no longer believes in
being, and if a person hates being, he hates his own existence.¹
—Paul Claudel

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.²
—T. S. Eliot

Tragedy, the tragic—an iridescent category, which is somehow
strange and elusive, a category that withdraws the more one tries to
describe or understand what it is in its essence, a category that

¹Paul Claudel, *Fünf große Oden*, German translation by Hans Urs von Balthasar,
4th ed. (Freiburg, 2000), 63.

²T. S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday,” in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London, 1974),
86.

disappears and then reappears when one least expects it, when one did not dare expect it, a category that seems to be everywhere and yet nowhere: an impossible category, one that a person might think he would perhaps sooner have done with. For everything today seems somehow to be tragic: a tragic accident, a tragic fate, a tragic mistake, tragedy after tragedy, here of inconceivable proportions, and there in very conceivable, almost containable dimensions, the tragedies of the ordinary, the tragedies of youth, the tragedies of old age. Life, as we know, is tragic, tragedy its smallest common denominator, tragedy its inescapable destiny, which we cannot peek behind.

But what exactly do we mean by “the tragic”? Which tragedies are we concerned with here? What dark abysses, what tensions, what conflicts, come into view here? Is the word not often used when other, more precise and appropriate concepts would be more meaningful? Doesn't a concept like the tragic lose its sense when everything becomes tragic? And is this—i.e., everything that is the case—then still genuinely tragic? What do we gain when we speak again and again, and more and more, about the tragic? When everything is the thread of fate and the gift of the Norns? A new myth, that of the eternal, and eternally-recurring tragedy, of the absurd nature of life, tragedy as principle, the will to power as will to tragic entanglement? The eternal beginning of tragedy, with no way out. And this too: the tragic elimination [*Aufhebung*] of the tragic.

Let us dwell for a moment on this last point: for whoever does not rest content with analyzing the present but also ventures to cast a critical glance on the contemporary situation, may ask what it is that has brought about this inflation, this inflationary undermining and elimination of the tragic. And he might suspect that this inflation of the (apparently) tragic, that everything is indeed so tragic, that the spirit of tragedy expresses itself ever and anew and is lamented again and again, is perhaps due to an absence, a lack of the genuinely tragic, a deficient sensibility for the straying paths of tragedy or perhaps also to the incapacity to recognize the genuinely tragic, to understand it, accept it, and endure it. In the tragic mode: flight from tragedy.

The culture in which we live, the culture that constantly presents itself in postmodern guise as it makes its pronouncements, may make it increasingly difficult to understand what the tragic is in the end. Tragedy is precisely not the same as mere misfortune and

pure accident, it is not simply the domination of the gods and idols, of abstract numbers and laws, not simply the ups and downs of human life, not simply fate and contingency. Rather, it is something deeper, something other, the inbreaking of a wholly other order and a sign that man is free, that this freedom however always encounters limits, and cannot in fact be freedom without these limits, that it stands before the claims of other freedoms, finite and infinite, that freedom can fail, man can go astray and incur guilt. All of these things, the depths and fragility of human existence, the seduction and temptation of freedom, the abyss of the unforeseeable, lay bare the genuine moments of the tragic: the possibility of falling, sin, the conflict between two orders, two worlds, between earth and heaven, between immanence and transcendence, law and family, above and below, reason and will: freedom in the moment of challenge, in the moment of temptation, in the moment of decision.

But then: what would happen if these two worlds no longer existed, if there no longer were any tension of this “between,” which is constitutive for the tragic? What would happen if human action were no longer understood within a system of coordinates that still included the experience of these two orders and their tensions, if everything had its place simply within a single horizon? Does tragedy exist in a world that has lost transcendence, in which this world is all there is? Or for a consciousness that lacks transcendence, which is no longer aware of anything other than itself and its reflections? What tragic conflicts are still possible if there is nothing left but the world alone, consciousness alone, freedom alone, when the tensions and mysterious abysses of human existence, in which the tragic has its roots and its home, prove to be easily dissolved: for example, by a genealogy of morals, by a psycho-analytical or sociological explaining away of all the potential conflicts of guilt (through *too much* insight and *too much* understanding), or by a positivistic or scientific denial of freedom (through *too much* explanation and *too much* knowledge)?

Where freedom no longer exists, or where there is nothing left anymore but freedom, then the tragic also disappears. And if the contemporary culture tends to swing back and forth dialectically between the two alternatives—the absolutization and the denial of freedom (in an increasingly insane frenzy, which may in fact be the tragedy of our time)—then it quickly becomes clear why the tragic itself has passed away, why it remains at best an antiquarian leftover of another, older order, or is so leveled, so straightened out, that it

fits, it expresses the attitude of the mind that is no longer willing to accept anything unconditional anymore beyond its own absolute self-affirmation. In this case, everything becomes tragic, and the *Weltschmerz* that man experiences when he is lonely, thrown back upon himself, despairing, or in a bitter gallow's humor giving all things a ludicrous, an ironic, or a cynical twist, becomes universal. Perhaps it would really be easier to endure the boredom and the disgust if one calls it tragic and gives the human predicament the heroic shine of the *conditio tragica*.

And thus the flip side of the universalization of the tragic seems to be the loss of a capacity to understand what the tragic in fact is, to understand that the world, history, and the cosmos itself is tragic, but in a way that is different from the merely horizontal manner of speaking which belongs to the pseudo-tragic. The difference is so great that another vision, another way of looking, seems to be necessary, there needs to be a different sensibility for the tragic, the genuine drama, the ineradicable tension in which human life, and sin as well (*etiam peccata!*) stands, in which God writes straight with crooked lines—in which, that is, Paul Claudel's *The Satin Slipper* is played out: in the world. The world, the unity and abundance of places and times, is the arena in which the *Satin Slipper* takes place. In this world, within a single horizon, a bold, a speculative synopsis of the whole is risked: history as cosmic, as divine drama. But what comes to pass within this horizon is possible only on the basis of the openness, of the transparency of this horizon to that which lies beyond the horizon, that which lies outside, behind, over, under, and next to the horizon, that which, from the other side, first allows the horizon in fact to be a horizon, that which penetrates it, pervades it, and undergoes it.

And with this we find ourselves already in the middle of the *Satin Slipper*; we find ourselves with Paul Claudel, the tragic poet, around whom things have apparently grown quiet, and who has little to say to us, or so it seems, despite a few signs of a reawakened interest in him and his work. As one of the most significant and important French writers of the first half of the twentieth century, he himself has today drifted into the background even in France—to say nothing of his multifaceted, monumental work: poems, plays, theological and philosophical speculations, or biblical commentaries. This should surprise us, if we were to compare him—this great convert, this fighter and fiery witness for the Gospel that he recognized as the truth, this wanderer between world and conti-

nents, this master of the language of human psychology—to his age or even with Shakespeare, Calderon, or with Dante. Is he a forgotten world poet?

There may be reasons for the fact that Claudel no longer plays the role he once did: already in his own age he—both his work and his person—did not enjoy only a positive reputation. His character was too irritating, many people had trouble putting up with Claudel's certainty of salvation, not to say his salvation triumphalism. The form of his work, in many people's view, had an extraordinary elegance, but the content seemed very often dry, relentless dogmatism. Much of his writing comes off today as too stuffy, too difficult, distant. But does this mean that it is right that Claudel has become a forgotten world poet? Did he already have his time in the sun, like so many others, whom we also have some trouble calling to mind, whom we do not in fact really need to call to mind?

We ought to keep ourselves from answering questions of this sort too quickly with a “yes” or “no.” Perhaps there comes a moment when it is good once again to read an author who has been forgotten for a period, or perhaps marginalized for a long time, to see what he still has to say and what challenge he and his thinking present to us. For there are so many authors, so many thinkers, who have been forgotten, perhaps not because they had nothing more to say, but because what they say is not something we want to hear, indeed, because we are no longer willing to listen to what speaks to us in their work, we are no longer willing to adopt the attitude of *Gelassenheit* and openness, which alone would allow us entry into their work. For it may be that, if we approach a writer like Claudel, we need first to open ourselves to the logic of paradox, to the subversion of our customary ways of looking and understanding: for, as the announcer says at the start of the *Satin Slipper*, “What you don't understand is the most beautiful, what drags on the longest is the most interesting, what you do not find amusing is the funniest” (15).³

And in relation to Claudel, the poet of paradox, the writer who reverses perspectives, provokes astonishment, and upsets the order of the imagination, there is reason to suspect that we will

³Parentetical citations are from Paul Claudel, *Der Seidene Schuh*, German translation by Herbert Meier (Freiburg, 2003). For an English translation, see *The Satin Slipper*, trans. Fr. John O'Connor (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1931).

always encounter some challenges. Different ones perhaps, with different accents from those in the first phase of the reception of his work, but these shifts of emphasis, the peculiar life his work has lived, the dynamic proper to his work, all of this would be neither an idiosyncrasy nor something bad: for it is only with a certain temporal distance that it begins to become clear what remains in an author's work and what passes away. But what does remain? Can we venture a speculation in this regard?

Perhaps it is this: that which is enduringly important, that which does not cease to move and challenge us, is the longing for the infinite, the exuberant, overwhelming *ec-stasis* [*Aus-sein*] towards a "more," towards the excess of grace, the excess of the supernatural, the excess of beauty and sensual delight, the excess—though this notion indeed makes us uncomfortable today—of sacrifice and of the catholic, which is an excess of the world, something greater than the world alone, a "more" that makes the tragic possible in the first place: "A person who sees the *Satin Slipper*," Claudel says,

does not need to be a believing Christian, but he must have a need for something other, a need for the supernatural, he must have profound feelings that he himself would like to express. Then, even if many things pass over his head, he will discover in this play the place or landscape that seem suited to the unfolding of certain unspoken feelings he carried within himself.⁴

And this landscape that constitutes the *Satin Slipper*, this world in which it plays out, is ultimately a landscape of paradox: nature can be described only in the light of the supernatural, the world only in the radiance of grace, life only in death, joy only in the shadow of the Cross: "Joy alone is the mother of sacrifice" (51). Don Rodrigo thus in that moment finally celebrates his consummate embrace of freedom, as he—old, gray, a failed, beggarly, wounded eccentric, who earns his bread by selling paintings of the saints—was condemned by the treachery of the Spanish king and, lying in chains, looks ahead to a more than merely uncertain future (371). It is no wonder that the soldiers write him off as crazy, they who keep watch over him and later sell him to a nun, the old rag-picker, like a discarded scrap, an old pot, a lump of metal. The one who not long beforehand was needed by the king of Spain, the one who de-

⁴Jean Amrouche, *Gespräche mit Paul Claudel* (Heidelberg, 1958), 238.

manded the whole world and nothing less (359), this man with a passion for the world embraces freedom as he lies in chains—on the way to a final conquest, a final grasping of the world, which bears the name of humiliation and points to another, transcendent world, a world beyond the earth's horizon: "I want to live in the shadow of Mother Teresa! God created me to become her poor servant" (376).

Servitude in the shadow of Teresa of Avila, in the shadow of unity with God, in relation to God, pointing to God, in this servitude, this nothingness, Don Rodrigo finally, after a long, meandering journey, experiences his freedom: in an intimacy with that star, that love, the Dona Prouheze, whom he was not permitted to know on earth. This dialectic, this paradox, makes sense only if one understands it in relation to the paradox that lies at the center of Christian faith, namely, that God himself sought nothingness even in the womb of a woman (237), the paradox that had so powerfully motivated Rodrigo's actions. For, according to Don Rodrigo, there was only one reason he traveled the ocean, he conquered the world, he set out for South America and the Far East. It was not out of lust for possessions or power, but simply "because I am a Catholic man, and so that every member of the human race may be joined as one and no one may believe anymore that he has the right to live in unbelief, separated from the others, as if we had no need for each other." This vision of a unified humanity, all human beings under God, created and redeemed, explains the restlessness, the holy zeal, with which Rodrigo plunged into what superficially and seen from the outside can only be called ruin: "You will stand no more alone! I bring you the world, the whole word of God, and all these brothers, whether you please each other or not, so that you learn, whether you wish to or not: we all come from a single redeemer!" (280).

This too remains important: many things can be described, some things intimated, and still fewer suggestively point, but nothing in this paradoxical event allows itself ultimately to be understood or explained: "It is written," the Japanese man says to Don Rodrigo, "that the great truths are communicated only in silence" (278). The great truths, meanings, opens up in that which is not said, that which lies between the lines, in the inexpressible, in the totality, in the superabundance, in the ever-greater, ever-other, ever-more astonishing aspect of action and event, in the improvisation, the inspiration of play, of disorder, and joy of imagination and movement (cf. also 9). The more deeply one enters into the *Satin Slipper*

and its world, the more one engages with this world that is initially so foreign, so alien, so monstrous, the more the whispered tones and undertones open up, the more it becomes clear what this world in fact is: the presentation of a whole, “out of which the spectator,” as Claudel explains his intention, “is able to draw whatever he wishes, to bring home above all something spiritual.”⁵ The presentation of the Whole of the world.

And the claim the play thus makes—a play for everyone and for all times, a play of the world, the world as play—is also reflected in the arena and the event, in the common horizon of all possible times and places of this *opus mirandum*, of that work in which all things, the abundance of times and places, of historical events and nations, of continents and cultures, of the characters and races, are related to one unifying pole (we will see later more precisely which one) and in which thus, in this integration of the cosmos, a vision of what “catholic” can mean is developed. For the Church herself summons the *universum*, she binds herself to the universe, since the world has become too constricted for her: “She allows another to rise up from the bosom of the water. From one end of creation to the other, she has summoned everything that there is among God’s children, as a witness; all generations and all ages!” (117). And thus the *Satin Slipper*, this monster of a drama, is ultimately this: a witness, a prayer, a sacrifice, it is the world itself, in all its facets and forms, which is offered to God.

The fact that every action, even an insignificant gesture of a hand, is an offering is something Rodrigo’s brother recognized and so offered himself, this Jesuit priest who was fastened to a mast floating in the sea, completely surrendered to God’s will—as a brother reflecting brother, a foreshadowing of what Rodrigo, the former Jesuit novice, still had to experience, after his journey through the world. And thus the poet’s activity is also an offering, in which he lends his voice to words: for

[j]ust as meaning needs words, so do words need our voice. We want to pray to God with his own handiwork, the whole of it! Nothing of what he has created is in vain, nothing is foreign to our salvation. Without forgetting the tiniest thing, we want to take up his work into our knowing and humble hands and offer it to him. (118)

⁵Amrouche, *Gespräche mit Paul Claudel*, 237.

Thus, a baroque abundance gets put into words in the *Satin Slipper*, which is appropriate in Spain at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, an endless baroque fullness, that is, the inexhaustible meaning of God's work, which includes all things in its embrace, the highest and the lowest, the most sublime and the most ridiculous, order and chaos, reason and imagination, self-control and passion, the temporal and the eternal, man and woman, love and hatred.

It would be presumptuous to attempt to summarize, even schematically, everything that happens, all of the characters' actions, how everything connects with everything else and forms an event, so that at the end—as the play's subtitle puts it—the worst is not the surest: Don Rodrigo and Dona Prouheze, the two lovers, who are ultimately unable to find one another on earth, or are not permitted to find one another, Don Pelagio and Don Camillo, the Chinese servant and the Negress Jobarbara, America and Europe, Christianity and Islam, Spain and Africa, the old and the new world, saints, a guardian angel next to a cultured professor, fishermen and actresses, a chancellor, his king and even the moon. Indeed, the world, everything, truly everything, even the tiniest and most unremarkable thing, all of this is made into an offering, as a witness. It all becomes a painting that Claudel juxtaposes to Rubens, the one who, according to Don Rodrigo, is Flanders' guardian against the Reformers' unbelief, the proclaimer of the Gospel, of the Incarnation, of the Logos' taking flesh in the world: "Who has glorified the flesh and blood more than Rubens; the flesh and blood, in which God himself longed to clothe himself, as the instrument of our salvation? . . . It is Rubens who transforms the tasteless and desultory water into a noble and eternal wine." Thus, transformation is another theme, making the world transparent to God, seeing the world anew in relation to God: in the light of grace, in the light of creation, in the light of redemption, to bring back the world, everything, the beauty of all that is: "Will all this beauty thus be in vain?" (118).

No, it will never be in vain, that which has once taken place will never be forgotten, "that which once was passes for eternity into the indestructible archive" (152). For, "does this beauty not come from God, and is it not made in order to return to him once again?" (117). And Don Rodrigo also expresses this vision of beauty, which, arising from God, returns back to God, in moving words: "That which is beautiful unites, that which is beautiful comes from God,

I can't call it anything else but catholic" (116f). And therefore what is at issue here is not a rejection of the world, but solely an affirmation of the world, the fullness of the world, and not a mere transcending of the world—how easy this option is, but how fatal, when the world is denied and dismissed too quickly for the sake of cheap transcendence; it is a making transparent, a making diaphanous, a making translucent. It is not about seeing through the world (for in that case one would end up seeing nothing at all), but allowing one's vision to penetrate in and through it. And if it is about allowing one's vision to pass through it, then that through which one's vision passes necessarily and indispensably becomes a medium, which becomes itself transformed in the process or the event of being seen through, it acquires a sacramental nature, it begins to glow with a holy light, not as a catalyst which would enable the eyes to see the heavenly kingdom, but which would remain before and after the same. To penetrate into and through the world with one's vision, indeed, presupposes that the world is taken seriously, that it is loved, that it appears and is acknowledged in this seriousness, this love, in a new light, a light that belongs to it, as what it truly and most profoundly is: the world that God so loved that he descended into it and took flesh in its nothingness.

Hence the love, hence the joy, hence the opulence in the *Satin Slipper*, that drama of the Incarnation: "But," Dona Prouheze exclaims, "I love life! I love the world, I love Spain! I love this blue heaven, I love the good sun! I love the lot that the gracious God has chosen for me" (26). And even Don Rodrigo knows how to speak about this love for the world, he too loves intensely the fullness of reality: "How I love the millions of things that are all there at once! There is no soul so deeply wounded that this infinite concert would fail to awaken a gentle melody in it! Look, and while the earth, like a wounded man after the battle, solemnly expels its breath, the population of heaven takes its place, as if it were immersed in a math problem, glimmering in its mysterious occupation" (54). And thus, just as the love of Dona Prouheze and Don Rodrigo is oriented to the world, so too this chaste love for the world, so deep and unfulfilled, is reflected in their love for one another: the beauty, but also the abyssal darkness of the world, of the temptation, which Rodrigo sees himself exposed to and which he endures unto the possibility of his soul being betrayed, his and also that of Dona Prouheze: "I don't care a straw for her soul! I need her body, nothing other than her body, the shameful guilt of her body, which

I share! To enjoy it and to let it go! There is no other way I can be free of it" (127).

It is a love, a longing, that will not find any fulfillment in the world, that *cannot* find any fulfillment in the world. "Oh! I have found something so great," Don Rodrigo says. And at the same time, he must acknowledge the tension, the tragic entanglement in which he finds himself: "Love ought to give me the keys to the world, and not take them from me" (147). Don Rodrigo's holy zeal is therefore always close to a holy spite. But ultimately what remains is an increasingly holy zeal that grows into the abandonment and humiliation with which the play ends. And at the same time Dona Prouheze inserts herself into her fate, not a hopeless fate, but a sad, a tragic one, an event of the cross, which remains ordered to its overcoming, to the resurrection. This orientation to the resurrection, however, does not occur in such a way that the tragic event would thereby be negated, or would prove to be an ineffectual farce. Instead, its fullest and most profoundly tragic element becomes recognizable first in the fulfillment of the tragic at Golgotha: "Yes, I know that he will be joined to me only on the cross and that our souls will be wedded together in death, in a night without human reason. So that his soul and his body might be torn apart from one another, I would willingly be the two boards that are set in a cross" (155). And conversely Don Rodrigo is for Dona Prouheze "forever the cross onto which I have been nailed" (238). Their way of love is a way of the cross.

For this love is not allowed to exist, it is an impossible love—because of the oath that Dona Prouheze gave to Don Pelagio: "No doubt," Don Pelagio says, "but what God has joined, no man may put asunder." And afterwards: silence—this is Claudel's stage direction. And then there is at length a further explanation: "It is not love that makes marriages, but consent. Not the child, which I never had, nor the pleasure of society, but consent in the presence of God in faith. Unto my own passing away, unto the last remaining bit of this consent, which two beings are able to give to one another, for better or for worse. What she gave to me I cannot give back to her, even if I wanted to" (102). Here there emerges into view the tension in which the world, the worldly, stands, here we see the orders, the challenges of freedom, the boundaries that are placed before man.

They live in exile away from one another—and yet, through a higher order, they are mysteriously bound together. As Dona Prouheze says, "I know we both drink out of the same cup. It is the

common horizon of our exile” (201). And therefore, at their last meeting, just before her death, she is able to assure him: “Rodrigo! It is true what I have sworn to you night after night. I have been with you across the sea, and nothing kept us apart” (250). It is no wonder that in a world that fails to see these conflicts, the conflicts of orders that cannot be joined together in a simple unity, in a world that has thus become shallow, all that is left are soap operas, and no tragedies.

Everything—this love, the world, the cosmos—all of this is ordered to God, everything, and therefore even sin is included, *etiam peccata*, also sin, also darkness, evil, that which rebels against God, what ought not to be: “Do you believe,” the guardian angel says to Dona Prouheze, “God abandoned his creation to chance? Do you believe that the figure of the earth that he created is without meaning?” (217). Life, the form this world has in its relation to God, is not a vain ray of sunlight, no, life also includes guilt, also sin and—not least, and once again—also renunciation, also sacrifice: as Dona Prouheze—who should know because she has experienced it in its greatest depths and will experience it even more deeply (even unto death . . .)—puts it, “there is nothing that man is less created for than for happiness, and he also quickly grows weary of it” (68; cf. also 169). For, ultimately, the essential thing for man is not happiness, but the salvation of his soul, the “deliverance to souls in prison,” as the final words of the *Satin Slipper* have it, the final words that gather everything together and carry the event into the open space of the world. And therefore, too, Don Rodrigo grows bored “watching happy people, it is immoral . . .” (277). No, happiness, the petty happiness that the world seeks, is not the essential thing.

If that were the essential thing, rather than the deliverance of souls in prison, then the soul, and her salvation, would not be vulnerable and exposed, she would not thirst for deliverance, for a consummate embrace of freedom, there would in fact be no soul, few things would be intelligible, the plot of the *Satin Slipper* would be absurd, it would make no sense. But because there is such a thing as the soul, because she longs for deliverance and salvation, because she stands, with other souls, on the stage—not that the world *represents*, but that the world *is*—for this reason, the *Satin Slipper* itself can become an image of the world, of man, and of the world’s transparency to another world.

For what matters to man is always again and again the entire world, the earth; he desires, like Rodrigo, “to perfect the beautiful

apple The globe! An apple that you can hold in your hand” (343). According to Rodrigo, the apple that once grew in paradise still exists: “Where there is order, there is paradise. Turn your eyes to heaven, and the astronomers will tell you whether no order governs there. But now, thanks to Columbus, thanks to me, we are a part of the astronomical whole, and fortunately free from all things but God” (343). But who is it that speaks here? It is no longer the young, active Don Rodrigo, but, as he himself says, “an old man, an ill-fated conqueror, a spent seaman, a ruined tradesman, the poorest and most ridiculous man on the Spanish sea” (332).

At a few places, we catch a clear glimpse of the dangerous hubris of Don Rodrigo, so widespread among men: to be free from all things but God. No, we ought to say here—contra Rodrigo, contra the denial of sin’s power, contra the temptation to be too much a master, to see too much order—not free from all things, but always also entangled, always also sinful (and therefore human!), once again: *etiam peccata*, also the sins. “Is love outside of the sacraments not a sin?” Dona Prouheze asks her guardian angel, who—almost laconically—answers: “Sin too! Sin also serves!” And Dona Prouheze retorts: “So it was good that he loved me?” Yes, was it good? The guardian angel’s answer is unequivocal: “It was good that you taught him longing” (209).

For was it not Rodrigo who, out of restless longing, out of unsatisfied love, initially strove to conquer the world? Who wanted to make it into a unified world (188)? What would have happened if it had been possible to fulfill his love for Dona Prouheze? We hardly dare ask the question. The possibility of its fulfillment was not granted, no, for it was only then, in the failure, that the world, the mission to all men, the conversion of the earth to Christ, became the task into which Don Rodrigo threw himself, wholly and without reservation. “For this America,” Don Rodrigo must be told, “nevertheless has had its hook deep in you, for even longer,” it is supposed, “than the face of this woman that works on you . . .” (144). Nevertheless, Don Rodrigo’s longing, his urge to go to the West, and then, later, to the East, into the lands of Asia, needed this woman’s face, needed love, in order to develop, in order to become so radical that he was able to master his task. Perhaps the tragic element lies precisely in this, that this *irrealis* could never become a *realis*, that fulfillment remained unattained, that the world, the expanse of the world and of his task became a limit for Don Rodrigo.

His insatiable longing, this drive, this offering for the salvation of the world, all this is a part of the divine plan of salvation, of the drama of the story played out between God and man. For God sends Rodrigo to the peoples “who groan and wait, their faces turned back to the rising sun. To them he goes as one sent. He brings enough sins with him to understand their darkness. God showed him enough joy that he is able to grasp their despair” (218). The task of his will, which ultimately ought to lead to the task of negating his will before God: in the end, and not beforehand.

For nothing could have been left out. All of the steps were necessary, the big as well as the little ones, he could not have dispensed with a single one, he could not have come to a decision earlier. Every test that the king allowed him to be put through was important: “I want him to see the face of the woman he loves once more in this life; I want him to look at her, to drink in her gaze and to take it with him! The two of them ought to look each other in the eyes one last time. Let him know who it is that loves him! Let him have her entirely in his will, and part from her by his own unaided will. Forever, and never to see her again!” (123). Every one of the king’s tests and much more. The time, the time of testing and of sin, life, longing, and disgrace, zeal and impetuosity, the time of the world was necessary, the crooked lines were indispensable, for where else, indeed, could God have written otherwise?

And thus this delight in the world is able to find its fulfillment, the consummate embrace of freedom, when it negates itself in the end, in a final act of freedom, when the self-will, the eternal wanting, the ecstasis in relation to all things, the will to world, sends itself into lowliness, and becomes open for the will of God, for his straight writing, rediscovering in his will its own: “Whoever has once experienced the winnowing of the wings of fate upon our secret longing, will not easily free himself from it” (124). The solution is radical, but it too can be understood only if one looks at the world from beyond its horizon, from that “beyond” which transposes everything worldly into a paradoxical dialectic: Dona Prouheze dies, she becomes disincarnate, she desires to become a star in the knowledge of the cosmic dimensions of her love for Rodrigo, she sacrifices herself for him, she presents herself wholly to him: “My love, allow me to break open! Let me become a star! . . . Come, dear Rodrigo! I am ready! Place your murderous hand upon that which belongs to you! Sacrifice what belongs to you!” (215). And later she dies, with permission from the man she loves, but whom she is not

permitted to love on earth (253). Nevertheless, her soul lives and afterwards, as her guardian angel again says, Don Rodrigo “is no longer able to long for you without also longing for the place where you are” (212).

The world is not everything, it remains, with all the tragic implications, transparent to another “place,” another “time,” another “world”: “When we encounter joy, what difference does it make if here below a bodily intimacy was forbidden us? . . . I want to be with you in the origin! I want to be unified with your cause! With God I want to learn to keep nothing for myself, to be the creature that is pure goodness and that gives away everything, that keeps nothing for itself and from which everything is taken away!” (259). And in this respect that which truly makes tragedy possible in the first place is revealed in this play, the *Satin Slipper*, so that in the disorder of the world a deeper and more paradoxical order may manifest itself, the order of sacrifice and of love, the order of the incarnation and the cross, an order that is transparent to God’s saving action, to the divine plan that, in its providence, allows man to be a co-actor, but that—as our hope has it—does not allow the tragic to stand as the final word: “For order is only in heaven, only there does music exist, and if the music of this world doesn’t prevent us, we can hear it” (170).—*Translated by D. C. Schindler.* □

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