The Politics of Tragedy and Democratic Citizenship. By Robert C. Pirro.
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In order to know what a word means, Ludwig Wittgenstein
observed, one should look to see how it is used. It is an approach
that Robert C. Pirro adopts in his wonderful new book, *The Politics of
Tragedy and Democratic Citizenship*. What makes Pirro's seemingly
straightforward approach to tragedy so remarkable is that it runs
contrary to the dominant trend in classics, philosophy, literary
criticism, and political theory. In each of these disciplines

considerable ink has been expended in seeking to define the term in ways that serve the definers' academic interests. It is an effort that has produced some heated disagreements, both in and across disciplines. Yet these efforts are united by the desire to distinguish their claims from the rather more prosaic ways in which the term "tragedy" is used in everyday speech.

Pirro's approach is, however, to bracket these definitional debates and to look instead at the ways in which the term "tragedy" is employed by various political actors in a myriad of political contexts. In effect, he collapses the distinction between "high" and "low" uses of the term to show how the concept of tragedy can be used to understand both everyday and cataclysmic political events. It is an innovative approach that yields new insights about the role of tragedy in understanding and enabling political agency, engendering political solidarity, and shaping political identity.

Pirro begins with a discussion of some of the ways in which the term "tragedy" has been employed by political elites, either to build solidarity—in the case of Robert Kennedy's remarkable eulogy for Martin Luther King, Jr.—or to avoid responsibility—such as when Robert McNamara described the Vietnam War as a tragedy as a means of downplaying his own role in the conflict. Pirro notes that on the political left, there has long been a distrust of any attempt to employ a tragic worldview because it is seen as promoting a nihilistic fatalism that denies political agency. The first section of the book is given over to showing the ways in which this position is mistaken.

Pirro offers three examples of the role of tragedy in generating political agency. The first is Václav Havel's attempts to engender productive political engagement in Czechoslovakia following the collapse of Communism. Showing how Havel employed theatrical metaphors drawn from Greek tragedy, Pirro argues that the poet-leader was able to demonstrate to his fellow countrymen that political community extends beyond the self-interest of individuals, the significance of their own political action, and the importance of political engagement, even as he recognized the potential conflict between public action and individuals' private commitments. The second example is the effect of Italian Neo-Realist cinema on postwar Italian society where, Pirro suggests, the tragic framework of films by Zavattini, Rossellini, and others offered a way of making sense for a country seeking to raise a democratic society out of the ashes of a

fascist state. The third is Cornel West's attempts to formulate and inculcate a tragic sense—emerging out of black Christianity—as the basis for class solidarity and political action. This chapter is one of the best in the book: few critics are able to offer such a detailed knowledge of West's work and to highlight its many virtues while acknowledging its faults.

The second section of the book concerns the ways in which the use of the word "tragedy" has been a source of political solidarity. Pirro produces two examples: Nelson Mandela's use of the term in post-apartheid South Africa, and the widespread use of the term in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Noting that Mandela had played the role of Creon in a production of *Antigone* put on by his fellow prisoners on Robben Island, Pirro argues that he employed the language of tragedy and drama in the service of his political goal of democratic transformation, and in his own personal struggle to make sense of his suffering and that of his fellow South Africans. Contrary to the currently dominant understanding of tragedy as agonistic and conflictual, Pirro shows how Mandela's use of the term was a source of democratic reconciliation. In his chapter on 9/11, Pirro takes on the frequent assertion that America is a nation lacking a tragic sense. Beyond simply noting the frequency of the use of the word "tragedy" in the aftermath of the attacks—itself a rebuke to David Simpson and his claims to the contrary in *The London Review of Books*—Pirro also shows the ways in which such invocations generated a shared sense of community. In a moment in the text that best illustrates his method, Pirro observes:

> The solidarity-promoting effect of vernacular uses of "tragedy" is also apparent if one imagines the word choices of al-Qaeda plotters after they learned of the success of their attack plan against American cities. English-language expressions like, "This has been a *disaster* for America!" or "The losses to America have been *catastrophic*!" seem more plausible choices than "This has been a great tragedy for America!" or "We have inflicted tragic losses on our enemy!"

Indeed, Pirro emphasizes his point about the solidarity-producing effects of tragedy by noting that when al-Qaeda did talk about tragedy, they referred to the occupation of Palestine, a description "aimed not at [their] American enemies but at an imagined audience of people who might share [their] regret at the suffering of Islamic people."

The final section of the book is concerned with the role of tragedy in the formation of political identity. Here Pirro turns to the Germans, who, he notes, have long "represented themselves as *the* tragic people par excellence." He offers up three examples: the playwright Botho Strauss's use of tragedy to shape the public culture of post-reunification Germany; the struggle of the East German intellectual Christa Wolf to do the same; and, charmingly, Michael Schorr's movie *Schultze Gets the Blues*, which, Pirro argues, demonstrates the possibility of a deep, as opposed to touristic, multiculturalism as a basis for political solidarity, agency, and identity. In his conclusion, Pirro acknowledges his debt to Hannah Arendt's conception of tragedy and her continuing influence upon his work.

Pirro has written a fascinating book that challenges a number of contemporary academic conceits in productive ways. Certainly, this reader has been forced to rethink his own rejection of colloquial uses of the term "tragedy" as a source of insight. The book is, as the author acknowledges, somewhat episodic, being in large part a collection of previously published essays, and as such it might have benefited from a clearer narrative thread. Additionally, the author might have included a little more background detail on some of his examples; for those of us unfamiliar with recent trends in German intellectual life, for instance, the last section of the book was less clear than it might have been. Nevertheless, Pirro has made a valuable contribution to the burgeoning debate over the role of tragedy in democratic politics. It is a considerable achievement.

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