

# Concept of the tragic is a modern one

**Professor Vassilis Lambropoulos.**

By Nikos Vatopoulos - Kathimerini

The modern age has given birth to the tragic. This "birth," which came like a dark light in an age of great speed, was witnessed by Professor Vassilis Lambropoulos of the Modern Greek Studies Department of the University of Michigan in the US, and today he talks about the great ideological trends of the past 200 years. The early romanticism of the 1790s, the existentialism of the 1920s and 1960s radicalism were all spearheaded by the concept of the "tragic" and – like cycles of change – they underlie the thoughts that continue to this day to determine many of our prejudices and beliefs. "The Tragic Idea," Lambropoulos's latest book, was commissioned for the "Classical Interfaces" series published by the British house of Duckworth.

"This series, which began about three years ago, analyzes ancient ideas and concepts in a present-day context," explains Lambropoulos. "Basically, it examines their significance in modern times and their dissemination." The professor's book focuses on illustrating just how modern the concept of tragedy actually is, in contrast to what most people believe.

"My book," he says, "shows that the German Romantics, starting with Schiller, extracted an abstract and universal concept, the tragic, from tragedy as a theatrical genre. Gradually they began to attribute the concept to a variety of human experiences and principles – liberty, love, anxiety, illness and life in general."

"This was an innovative concept because, as the book shows in its first pages, where it discusses tragedy in the early and mid-18th century, from the ancient Greeks to the French, English and German critics, writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment, when one referred to something as tragic it was a reference to a tragedy – plot, emotions, etc – and never to things outside the theater, such as human fate."

The book is organized in such a way that the ideas of thinkers such as David Hume and Martin Heidegger present a kaleidoscopic and at the same time profound study on the history of the concept of the tragic. "The book may be seen as a somewhat difficult read because it deals with the purely philosophical concept. But, it is also written in such a way that it can be used as an introduction or a study guide. This is why all the chapters are brief," says Lambropoulos. The broad selection of writers leads to a new map being charted around the concepts of the tragic as initially introduced into Western thinking by romanticism, the notion of the hero, of love, passion, death, decay and sacrifice.

"Therefore," says the writer, "my approach to the theories of the tragic is microscopic rather than macroscopic. I cover 150 years, from Schiller to Heidegger. I could have gone on to look at more recent philosophers, but the publishing house had set a limit on the number of pages for the series and also, by the 1930s, the context of the debate had been more or less set," he says. There is still room for debate in the future though, he adds, "because the utility of the term has by no means been exhausted."

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