

From Romance to Tragedy. Some Reflections on the Importance of Genre in Anxiety Culture

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“Philosophy, and in particular moral philosophy, is still deeply attached to giving good news.” So begins the English philosopher Bernard Williams’ *“The Women of Trachis: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics.”* It is a stark opening statement, and later in the essay Williams recommends “stark fictions” (a loose constellation of literature stemming from Greek tragedy’s presentation of “extreme, undeserved, and uncompensated suffering”) as “a necessary supplement and a suitable limitation to the tireless aim of moral philosophy to make the world safe for well-disposed people.”

This presentation asks, following Williams’ quote, whether it is not only moral philosophers who suffer from a surfeit of optimism and an abiding but ungrounded commitment to making “the world safe for well-disposed people,” but rather educators, policy makers, prominent media outlets, and other actors who play a large role in navigating anxiety culture.

The presentation begins by invoking a whole range of conceptual oppositions: how political realism stands to liberalism in international relations, how non-ideal stands to ideal theory in political philosophy, how historicism stands to transcendental idealism; or to move towards more everyday concepts, how romance stands to tragedy, how optimism stands to pessimism. What each of these oppositions should suggest is that different basic orientations open up different sets of attachments, especially to literatures considered and questions pursued.

The goal of this presentation to ask what kinds of question spaces and political projects are opened up by projects that run on a continuum from optimism (“providing the good news”) to pessimism. The American philosopher William James famously believed that philosophical works were often as much about the temperament of the philosopher as the argument itself (“tough minded” and “tender minded” to continue our conceptual oppositions). This may be true, but my goal in plotting this continuum is to demonstrate that generic reflections (as in Williams’ reflection on tragedy and “stark fictions”) can have programmatic importance for a field. I will use the example of contemporary Post-Colonial theory to demonstrate this, but will conclude with some general remarks about education, politics, and media in anxiety culture.