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Contaminations of Modern Tragedy: from Benjamin via Strindberg, Darwin, Nietzsche and Kafka to Beckett and D. F. Wallace.

Michael Mack University of Durham, England.

Building on my recently published book *Contaminations: Beyond Dialectics in Modern Literature, Science and Film*, this article questions various critical approaches that assume that the modern and the tragic are mutually exclusive. The theoretical proposition of this article is that the exclusion of the tragic from the modern can be most convincingly circumvented via a theory of contaminations. As J M Bernstein has recently pointed out, philosophical systems such as Hegel dialectics attempt to marginalize the impact of the tragic on social life:

Philosophy could only begin its authorizing of a rational world by excluding tragedy, or by following the magnificent examples of Aristotle and Hegel, who saw clearly the claim of tragedy and sought to include it within philosophy's serene rational construction of the world. But tragedy -- the slaughter-bench and human wreckage -- cannot be excluded or included because our disasters and sufferings are not external accretions to our triumphs; as Walter

Benjamin puts it, "There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarity.[1]

My notion of contaminations highlight the simultaneity of what dialectics spaces out as binary oppositions (barbarity does not so much give rise to what it is apparently opposed --i.e. civilization -- but instantiates its opposite at the same time). A theory of contamination relates to dialectical ways of thinking while eliding their stricture of inclusion and exclusion. Rather than positing 'pure' entities which are mutually opposed with each other such as progress and regression, contaminations goes beyond dialectics by simultaneously allowing for the co-presence of what appears to be irreconcilable. My theory of contaminations can be best described by what Walter Benjamin has called "dialectics at a standstill." As I have recently argued, Benjamin advances a critique of the progression form what is considered to be negative to the positive (that takes place in dialectics) when he proposes his notion of the image which constitutes a contamination of sorts; or, as Benjamin puts it, a constellation.[2] This is especially relevant to issues of temporality as they concern modern tragedy. The past to which Benjamin refers could be another word for what the tragic modern self remembers in its interior sphere: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together with the now to form a constellation. In other words it is dialectics at a standstill."[3] As I have proposed elsewhere contamination happens when dialectics becomes arrested and two terms which are in dialectical

[1] Bernstein, "Tragedy" in Richard Eldridge (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 71-94 (p.91).
[2] Mack *Contaminations: Beyond Dialectics in Modern Literature, Science and Film*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 107-12
[3] Benjamin *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 463

opposition cease to be so and instead entangle each other in an image wherein none demeans the other.[4]

As regards temporality, tragedy in its modern form is concerned with how the promises of modernity—scientific progress, autonomy, freedom and equality —play out in the life of its inhabitants. Strindberg's Miss Julie attempts to realize these promises, while Samuel Beckett shows us how the expectancy that accompanies such hopes may leave us trapped in a futile waiting game. There are certain continuities between modern and ancient tragedy: the most striking is the investigation into humanity's limits as manifested in the persistence of terror and fear—what Aristotles calls *eleos* (fear) and *phobos* (terror)—inducing aspects of our lives such as suffering and mortality.[5] Perhaps the most distinctive feature of modern tragedy is its position within a scientific context which has abandoned religious affiliations. Rather than passing judgement on its protagonists or merely using its characters as a means to exemplify a pre-established religious or social world view, modern tragedy observes what happens to us in an age that has itself become scientific. In a quasi-scientific manner, modern tragedy observes the effect of science on the workings of the mind.

August Strindberg was the dramatist who perhaps most provocatively helped to refute the mutual exclusion of science and tragedy, of the modern and the tragic. As Sue Prideux has recently put it, Strindberg analysed and experimented with the psyche as a medical anatomist would dissect the biological constitution of the body: "the author took the corpse of the person he knew best—himself—and learned anatomy, physiology, psychology and indeed the whole history of the world from the carcass."[6] Strindberg embarks on writing what could be called 'an anatomy of the soul'. In his foreword to *Miss Julie* he accentuates his scientific approach

[4] Mack *Contaminations*, pp. 1-22.
[5] For a detailed discussion of Aristotle's notion of *eleos* and *phobos* see Wolfgang Schadewaldt's *Antike und Gegenwart: Über die Tragödie*, (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1966), pp. 16-66.
[6] Prideaux, *Strindberg: A Life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 3.

towards tragedy: "I myself find the joy of life in its strong and cruel struggles, and my pleasure in learning, in adding to my knowledge."[7] Science—learning and knowledge—here becomes entangled with a peculiar tragic, cathartic (as Aristotle would put it) or joyful recognition of often cruel transformations. The reference to strong and cruel struggles evokes Charles Darwin's *On the Origins of Species* (1859).

Far from trumping the card of progress and improvement, Darwin draws attention to changes within the natural world that can often be quite cruel. As Gillian Beer has pointed out Darwin's evolutionism also includes a tragic vision of nature's dark, painful side: "So although Darwin gave some considerable emphasis to the language of progress and improvement, generating an onward and upward motion in much of his storytelling, these tales were constantly under the pressure of other, darker stories—of rapine, degradation, and loss."[8] Changes are part of painful struggles which are driven by chance rather than by a pre-ordained design. Darwin has abandoned the conceptual framework of a goal written into the fabric of nature which would guarantee improvement towards perfection—what the term teleology denotes.

Strindberg's notion of struggle adumbrates Darwin's famous term "natural selection" with which Darwin differentiates his scientific approach from that of the traditional natural theologians and their preoccupation with "*design* and *creation*."[9] As Beer has shown, "Darwin, on the contrary was trying to precipitate a theory based on *production* and *mutation*."[10] Strindberg combines Darwin's scientific shift from traditional conceptions of order, design or teleology to an empirical observation of chance happenings with Nietzsche's

[7] Strindberg, *Twelve Major Plays*, translated from the Swedish by Elizabeth Sprigge, (London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 63.
[8] Beer, *Darwin's Plot: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. xix.
[9] Beer, *Darwin's Plot*, p. xviii.
[10] Ibid.

philosophical investigations into the power struggles that are at work in accepted moral categories of just and unjust or good and evil.[11]

Indeed, the reading of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* so deeply resonated with Strindberg that he started a correspondence with the philosopher wherein he explicitly established a connection between Darwin's evolutionism and the Nietzschean questioning of moral categories: " 'Here's evolution!'"[12] Nietzsche uncovers in seemingly innocuous notions such as 'justice' or 'equality' what could be called the psychology of the hatred of the Other. As Robert Pippin has recently pointed out, Nietzsche's psychological anthropology brings to the fore the historical failure of Hegel's teleological (necessity based) account of freedom:

> Somehow the "realization" of freedom that had counted so heavily for the preeminent bourgeois philosopher, Hegel, had within the space of sixty years come to count for a great deal less, psychologically, in the sense used here. It was Hegel who mounted the most ambitious case for the rationality of modern forms of ethical life and who insisted most emphatically that rationality was not an abstract ideal, imperfectly but ever more successfully achieved, but that such rationality had, to use the Nietzschean word, a "life" in the historically actual social practices of giving and demanding justifications form each other (Pippin 2011: 122).

Could it be the case that Nietzsche attempts to outline an alternative to a concept of freedom which is based on teleology and necessity (such as Aristotle's and later Kant's and Hegel's)?

[11] As Prideaux has pointed out, Strindberg's scientific approach was heavily influenced by the German Darwinist Ernst Haeckel: "He was working on his scientific studies according to the Monist principles of Haeckel and he was yearning for the more stimulating members of the Berlin circle as he tried to prove the theory postulated by Haeckel: that the chemical world obeyed the same cycle of eternal transmutation as the natural world. Haeckel had suggested that elements were evolutionary products generated by combinations of varying numbers of primal atoms (the atom was a half-known entity; atomic number had yet to be discovered). Haeckel's proposal was that as combinations of atoms, the elements might not be immutable but transmutable." Prideaux, *Strindberg*, p. 187.

[12] Prideaux, *Strindberg*, p. 16.

Nietzsche argues for a type of freedom which embraces life's plurality and contingency. In this way Gilles Deleuze has characterized Nietzsche's philosophical project as an affirmation of the Other: "the sense of Nietzsche's philosophy is multiplicity, becoming and chance are objects of pure affirmation. The affirmation of multiplicity is the speculative proposition, just as the joy of diversity is the practical proposition."[13] Nietzsche's critique of the notion of equality is part of his attempt to undermine a homogenous understanding of freedom and rationality in terms of necessity and teleology.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra detects the most violent impulses behind rational demands for justice and equality. What precisely arouses such violence? Here the shadow of a traditional homogenous conception of universalism looms large: ""We want both to call bad names and take revenge on all those who are not like us,""[14] the snake says in Nietzsche's Zarathustra. Moral denunciations here turn out to partake of the struggle for power.

The servant Jean in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* gains the upper hand over his social superior precisely through the power he exerts by calling her first mad and then sinful. At this point critics have misread Strindberg as taking side with the servant Jean. As we will see, however, Strindberg recasts tragedy in a quasi-scientific mode: the drama enables us to observe rather than to condemn the protagonists on view. Sue Prideaux follows the critical consensus when she interprets Jean as 'superhuman' (the *übermensch*) and Julie as subhuman (*untermensch*): "Instead, in an age when, largely, class and lineage were destiny, Strindberg took Ludwig Hansen with his slave blood (ditto the servant Jean in the play) to represent the *übermensch* thoroughly capable of changing the world through their will to power, whereas the Countess Frankenau (ditto Miss Julie), those two last weak dribbles of pure blood, were

[13] Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 186.

[14] Nietzsche, Friedrich *Kritische Studienausgabe. Vol. 4*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), p. 128. My translation.

the *untermensch*."[15] Rather than celebrating the triumph of the superior over the inferior Strindberg's tragedy depicts how Miss Julie courts her own downfall by courageously flaunting the heavily moralized class and gender system of her time. In his conversation with his fellow servant Kristin, Jean evokes the overall societal framework in which morality is a question of one's social position. Miss Julie offends the moral system precisely by not acting according to her social standing:

> Jean: Our young lady—to come back to her—hasn't any proper respect for herself and her position. I mean she isn't refined. In the Barn just now she dragged the gamekeeper away from Anna and made him dance with her—no waiting to be asked. We wouldn't do a thing like that. But that's what happens when the gentry try to behave like the common people—they become common….[16]

It is, however, highly questionable whether the highly eccentric Julie could accurately be called 'common'. She questions commonly accepted ways of behavior—most prominently and provocatively those of class and gender. She turns the class system upside down when she orders her servant Jean not to accept her orders: "Don't take it as an order. To-night we're all just people enjoying a party. There's no question of class."[17] This refutation of her own high class standing, confirms Jean's suspicion that she is insane: "She really *is* crazy."[18] At first Jean attempts to make Julie aware of how her uncommon behavior will turn her into someone even worse than a member of the lower, common people:

> Julie: You, I take it, are an aristocrat.
> Jean: Yes I am.
> Julie: And I am coming down in the world.
> Jean: Don't come down, Miss Julie. Take my advice. No one will believe you came down of your own accord. They'll all say you fell.[19]

[15] Prideaux, *Strindberg*, p. 17.
[16] Strindberg, *Twelve Major Plays*, p. 77.
[17] Strindberg, *Twelve Major Plays*, p. 79.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Strindberg, *Twelve Major Plays*, p. 83.

Julie here ridicules social hierarchies, whereas Jean aspires to climb the social ladder, calling himself an aristocrat. At this stage, however, Jean means it well. He tries to make Julie aware that the class system instantiates various cruel struggles which partake of the exertion of power. He implicitly refers to Nietzsche's analysis of moralism as instrument through which we denigrate others. He tries to put an end to Julie's eccentric behavior by warning her of the real harm it invites:

> Jean, *rising*: We can't go on like this, Miss Julie. Someone might come in and see us.
> Julie: Why would that matter?
> Jean: For the simple reason that they'd talk. And if you knew the way their tongues were wagging out there just now, you…[20]

By the people who are wagging their tongues Jean implicitly refers to the violence that goes with moralistic denunciation as analyzed by Nietzsche. Nietzsche sheds light on the immorality of moral denigrations (or 'bad name calling'). Strindberg, however, adopts the more neutral approach of a scientific observer *á la* Darwin who registers and analyses empirical facts. The plot of the tragedy is itself based on an empirical event as Strindberg emphasizes in his foreword:

> When I took this theme from a true story told me some years ago, which made a deep impression, I saw it as a subject for tragedy, for as yet it is tragic to see one favoured by fortune go under, and still more to see a family heritage die out, although a time may come when we have grown so developed and enlightened that we shall view with indifference life's spectacle, now seeming brutal, cynical and heartless.[21]

In this crucial quotation Strindberg brings together tragedy, the Enlightenment and the indifference of the scientific observer. Strindberg observes and analyses but he abstains from

[20] Strindberg, *Twelve Major Plays*, p. 82.
[21] Strindberg, *Twelve Major Plays*, p. 62.

passing judgement: "But, to begin with, there is no such thing as absolute evil; the downfall of one family is the good fortune of another, which thereby gets a chance to rise, and, fortune being only comparative, the alternation of rising and falling is one of life's principal charms."[22] In contrast to some critics (such as Prideaux) Strindberg abstains from passing moral judgement on Julie. He rather sees her as phenomenon of modern times. Modernity is transitional and Julie's wavering between the new and the old embodies this hybrid state of what Strindberg considers modern: "But Miss Julie is also a relic of the old warrior nobility now giving way to the new nobility of nerve and brain."[23] Strindberg's expression 'nerve and brain' describes the psychological concern of modern tragedy. Tragedy has always been preoccupied with knowledge or its lack. Aristotle's notion of *harmatia* denotes the tragic hero's epistemological limits which in turn exemplify the restrictions which constitute the human condition. *Harmatia* is a blindness which prevents humanity to perceive the consequences of freely chosen actions which by hindsight reveal themselves to be tragic. Strindberg translates tragedy's traditional concern with knowledge and its human limitations into the modern scientific arena of psychology and psychiatry. This is why the play *Miss Julie* has a rather circumscribed ambient which revolves around the mental life of only two protagonists. The plot is no longer an issue. Instead the internal workings of the mind move front and centre:

> The plot speaks for itself, and as it really only concerns two people, I have concentrated on these, introducing only one minor character, the cook, and keeping the unhappy spirit of the father above and behind the action. I have done this because it seems to me that the psychological process is what interests people most today. Our inquisitive souls are no longer satisfied with seeing a thing happen; we must also know how it happens. We want to see the wires themselves, to watch the machinery, […].[24]

Modern tragedy analyses the way the mind work. In doing so it questions preformed positions about class, psychology, religion, science and gender. In *Miss Julie* tragedy in a scientific

[22] Ibid.
[23] Strindberg, *Twelve Major Plays*, p. 66.
[24] Strindberg, *Twelve Major Plays*, p. 69.

manner discovers novel ground. It unfolds a case history which makes us see anew what it means to life in modernity. As Michael Levenson has put it:

> In its modernist aspect, case history resists classification according to type and class; it moves instead toward the Strindbergian recognition: that existing categories (such as "character") cannot account for the *indeterminacy* hidden beneath a proper name. We can begin to speak of the modernist case, I propose, when the self defies canons of intelligibility […]. The *specification of a conundrum*—the obscurity of motives, the demand for new methods of understanding, the shock effect of newly disclosed habit and appetites—is the project of modernist case study, which lives on the border between art and sciences (and pseudosciences) of human behaviours.[25]

By now this modernist approach to drama as arena wherein we can experience and perhaps discover new aspects of our socio-psychic constitution also informs quality TV—what Dana Polan has recently called the "popular modernism" of *The Sopranos*. The famous TV series *The Sopranos* opens with Tony Soprano contemplating a statute in the waiting room of his psychiatrist Dr. Melfi. Two aspects of this opening scene are strikingly related to the itinerary of modern drama: the focus on the workings of the mind which is highlighted through the psychiatric setting and a peculiar contemplation of art. The contemplation in question here is peculiar because it seems to be futile. The camera focuses on Tony Soprano's critical and searching gaze—it moves from a close-up of his contemplative face back to a corresponding close-up of the statute and back again to the face—but the back and forth between the mind looking for meaning and the aesthetic object it focuses on does not seem to yield any meaningful result. One could read this scene as one of the prime examples of a postmodern quest for significance which produces nothing else but nothingness: the emptiness of the gaze of a mob boss.

[25] Michael Levenson, *Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp 77-78.

A futile quest for meaning is nevertheless significant—even if it does not establish recognizable symbols of the meaningful. Perhaps the most obvious example of such futile attempt to find some lost meaning is Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. This play hovers between modernism and postmodernism one might say. What is crucial here is that it harks back to an arch modernist text, Kafka's parable *Before the Law*. Beckett acknowledged the closeness of his way of writing to that of Kafka. As Dirk van Hule and Mark Nixon have recently pointed out, in "his letter of 17 February 1954, for instance, he claimed that he had stopped reading Kafka's *Das Schloss* toward the end, because he felt too much at home—'je m'y suis senti chez moi, trop' (LSB II 462)."[26] A striking difference between Beckett and Kafka's approach to a terrifying type of comedy concerns the different forms it takes in the two writers. Beckett's writing registers disturbances, whereas Kafka's writes in a detached or matter of fact way. As Beckett "told Ruby Cohn, 'What struck me as strange in Kafka was that the form is <u>not</u> shaken by the experience it conveys' (letter to Ruby Cohn, 17 January 1962)."[27]

In such striking calm manner, Kaka's parable *Before the Law* introduces a remarkable destruction of traditional metaphysics and ethics: it reduces classical or theological or metaphysical meaning to the meaninglessness of pointless waiting rather than actively searching. Later on in his first session with Dr. Melfi, Mr Soprano highlights his longing for what he bemoans as the contemporary loss of action. He has come too late. As a result he has missed the action. Gary Cooper embodies the wordless world of action: "What happened to Gary Cooper—the strong silent type?"[28] Instead of action and drama, contemporary American society reduces even the most ruthless—an aspiring member of the mob—to the perceived

[26] Van Hule and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 221.
[27] Van Hule and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library*, p. 101.
[28] *The Sopranos. Series One. First Episode*

passivity of reflection and worse still, to a state of depression or paralysis as physically manifested in Mr Sopranos's panic attack.

Tony Soprano's gaze seems to be searching and yet the search in question turns out to be nothing else but part of a paradoxical activity which is passive: what one does when one 'kills time'. It is this passive activity which is the subject here rather than a study of character. The paradox of passive activity highlights what the anti-hero Tony Soprano lacks in dramatic terms at the very opening of this long winded drama or, more precisely, soap opera. The opening scene to the entire series pivots around the absence of not only action but also goal-inspired contemplation: it simply presents us with the passivity and futility of waiting.

The Sopranos is of course a work of popular culture but one that has taken its cues from modernism and modern drama. The futility of action and the absence of a meaningful goal are prime characteristics of modern drama, art and literature. The Greek Aristotelian name for aims or goals and transcending meanings is the word *telos*. In his *Poetics* Aristotle famously argues that a purging of the emotions, a *catharsis*, is the aim or the telos of tragedy.

One of the crucial questions for modern tragedy is: *What happens to tragedy once we have lost aims, goals and transcendental meanings—in short teleology?* In many ways Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Kafka's parable *Before the Law*, and in its postmodern pop-culture form *The Sopranos* are concerned with and driven by this question of lost gaols and actions— or, more precisely, by the purported loss of drama and action.

In Kafka's parable a man from the countryside (a simple *haaretz*) encounters a guard who will not let him enter the portals of the law. Crucially the door-keeper denies entrance with reference to time: "A man from the country comes to this door-keeper and asks for entry into the law. But the door-keeper says that he cannot grant him entry now. The man considers and then asks if that means he will be allowed to enter later. 'It is possible,' says the door-

keeper, 'but not now'."[29] The parable revolves around the expectations between now and later which too seem to motivate the passive activity of futile waiting in Beckett's famous play:

> Vladimir: One can bide one's time.
>
> Estragon: One knows what to expect.
>
> Vladimir: No further need to worry.
>
> Estragon: Simply wait.
>
> Vladimir: We're used to it.[30]

The knowledge in question here is empty though. Waiting furthers expectations and expectations seem to rationalize the continuation of mere waiting. We do not really know what to expect, except some form of security. The play closes with a note on further waiting until either death or Godot were to arrive. Here the intellectual or spiritual dimension of any expectations ascribed to the name Godot become apparent:

> Vladimir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. [*Pause*] Unless Godot comes.
>
> Estragon: And if he comes?
>
> Vladimir: We'll be saved.[31]

There is one protagonist who is called Lucky because he has abandoned all expectations. In the futile life of *Waiting for Godot* luck coincides with the loss of hope—or as Kafka has put it, "there is an infinite amount of hope, but not for us." Estragon and Vladimir remain expectant. This is why they keep waiting for Godot.

[29] Kafka, *The Trial*, translated by Idris Parry, (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 166.
[30] Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 37
[31] Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 88

This expectancy of the protagonists in Kafka's parable 'Before the Law' and in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* turns out to be the tragic and yet also the comic component of a modern form of drama that is curiously lacking in precisely the dramatic or eventful. Nothing happens except that the play enacts the 'waiting' announced in its title. As in Kafka short stories, Beckett's dramas turn from the metaphorical to the literal. It is this translation of sings into enactments—*Waiting for Godot* literally depicts waiting—which accounts for both the comic and the tragic aspects of Beckett's plays. The American writer David Forster Wallace has described this unsettling mixture of the comic and the tragic as follows:

> And it is this, I think, that makes Kafka's wit inaccessible to children whom our culture has trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance. It's not that students don't "get" Kafka's humor but that we've taught them to see humor as something you *get*—the same way we've taught them that a self is something you *have*. No wonder they cannot really appreciate the central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home.[32]

The comic is disturbing and perhaps even terrifying here, because it unsettles our accustomed hopes and expectations. Waiting is a draining experience for Vladimir and Estragon—one that gives rise to suicidal ideation: "Vladimir: "We'll hang ourselves tomorrow."[33] It is as if Kafka, and following him Beckett, took issue with the tragedy of banal, almost ridiculous, ordinary, every-day life filled as it is with tedious, uneventful tasks which render us passive, waiting subjects. Here the tedium of modern bureaucracy mutates from the comic to the tragic, from the innocuous to the monstrous, from innocence to guilt. Michael Levenson has recently used the term 'Kafka effect' for this point of indistinction between the comic and the tragic in modern drama and literature at large:

[32] Wallace, *Consider the Lobster and other Essays*, (London: Abacus, 2007), pp.64-65.
[33] Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 88.

> The 'Kafka effect' is to show that simplicity—simple words, clearly drawn events—is both a property of the banal and the catastrophic. The reading of a letter and the headlong rush to suicide can both be told in the same straightforward prose. This recognition may be the closest link between Kafka and Freud: not the schematic rendering of the Oedipus conflict but the continuity between everyday life and extreme states, between familiar gestures and uncanny outcomes.[34]

The uneventful, the seemingly innocuous passing of time here turns from the banal or comic to the deadly, the catastrophic or, in short the tragic. Nothing happens and then all over sudden we are told that we have come too late: "The door-keeper realizes that the man has reached the end of his life and, to penetrate his imperfect hearing, he roars at him: 'Nobody else could gain admittance here, this entrance was meant only for you. I shall now go and close it'."[35] As in Beckett there are two different forms of time: one that is endlessly filled with the boredom of waiting and the accompanying diminution of hope or expectancy and then the sharp, brief and yet bristling point of disappointment and pain.

Similar to the signifier Godot in Beckett's play, the portals of the law evoke the promise of knowledge, scientific insight and intellectual fulfilment which supposedly should be open, available and attainable for everyone. The door keeper, however, intimidates the naïve man from the country: "Such difficulties had not been expected by the man from the country; the law is supposed to be accessible to everyone and at all times, he thinks, but as he now looks more closely at the door-keeper in his coat of fur, at his great pointed nose and his long and straggly black beard, he decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to enter."[36] Expectation partakes of disappointment. Those who wait are co-opted by the lofty promise of what they are longing for. As a result they keep on waiting without questioning what they are doing, or rather not doing. *In modern tragedy agency falls prey to temporality: to the empty, non-dramatic, uneventful drift of time*.

[34] Levenson, *Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 87-88.
[35] Kafka, *The Trial*, p. 167
[36] Kafka, *The Trial*, p. 166.

The question of time which here becomes a matter of waiting—of wasting or killing time as with Tony Soprano in the waiting room of his psychiatrist—replicates the futility of socio-scientific and socio-political promises. The good life of scientific modernity should be accessible to everyone. This at least constitutes the promise of modern democracy. In *The Sopranos* it becomes corrupted as the cheap materialism, worse still, ruthless violence and exploitation of the mob.

The disappointment with this promise manifests itself precisely in the decision to wait: the modern drama of action and contemplation goes empty-handed; is in itself disappointing. The man from the country-side obeys the guard and keeps waiting until he has become old, bearded and frail—close to dying. At this point the guard again intervenes and informs the man from the country-side that no-one else would have had access to the law but he. At this moment, however, the information that the door-keeper hands down to him, has become useless news, because the man has been waiting for almost all his life for this insight which now has lost all practical value for him. When it reaches him he is as good as dead. He cannot act on the information. As in Beckett's play waiting has become an end in itself empty of significance.

This apparent emptiness of public significance is what George Steiner referred to when he coined the expression and his book title *The Death of Tragedy* (1961). Steiner first defines the ancient roots of the tragic by a certain irrationalism but then goes on to argue that modernity inaugurates the death of tragedy by depriving drama of public significance. There is at least the potential for paradox here because the supposedly modern withdrawal of sense and reason is already part of its pre-modern foundations (i.e. the irrational). Steiner allocates reason and justice to the Biblical tradition which he contrasts with the blind necessity that governs the tragic culture of ancient Greece. The Biblical hero here *par excellance* is Job:

> God has made good the havoc wrought upon His servant, he has compensated Job for his agonies. But where there is compensation, there is justice, not tragedy. This demand for justice is the pride and burden of the Judaic tradition. Jehovah is just, even in his fury. Often the balance of retribution or reward seems fearfully awry, or the proceedings of God appear unendurable slow. But over the sum of time, there can be no doubt that the ways of God to man are just. Not only are the just, they are rational. The Judaic spirit is vehement in its conviction that the order of the universe and of man's estate is accessible to reason.[37]

According to Steiner a rational, ordered and just world is incompatible with tragic drama. His account of Job and the Biblical tradition, is, however open to criticism. To be sure from a strictly structural perspective, the book of Job is not a tragedy but a comedy. The book opens with suffering and ends with compensation for this suffering as Steiner rightly points out. Steiner here follows Northrop Frye who in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) argues that Job aspires to be a tragic Greek hero but fails: "The Book of Job is not a tragedy of the Promethean type, but a tragic irony in which the dialectic of the divine and the human nature works itself out. By justifying himself as a victim of God, Job tries to make himself into a tragic Promethean figure, but he does not succeed."[38] He does not succeed because the God of the Bible is just and rational rather than an irrational Greek deity who allows blind necessity to rule.

Following Frye, Steiner establishes a strong contrast between the moral order of Biblical literature and the capricious and rather irrational gods who run the show of Greek tragedy. Concentrating on Frye's point of Job's failed tragedy, Steiner contrast the Biblical literature in its entirety (both Jewish and Christian) with the disturbing blind necessity or irrationality which he allocates to the universe of ancient Greece: "Tragic drama arises out of precisely the contrary assertion: necessity is blind and man's encounter with it shall rob him

[37] Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 4
[38] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 42.

of his eyes, whether it be in Thebes or in Gaza."[39] Steiner argues that our culture has been shaped by the optimistic rationalism of Biblical literature rather than by the tragic recognition of irrationality with which he characterizes Greek culture: "The evasion of tragedy is a constant practice in our own contemporary theatre and film. In defiance of fact and logic, endings must be happy. Villains reform and crime does not pay."[40] In contrast to Steiner's rather simplistic account of Hollywood and modern film and drama in general, the villain Tony Soprano does not improve. Moreover, Steiner contradicts himself: he first distinguishes the tragic culture of ancient Greece as irrational or non-scientific and then goes on to condemn the lack of tragedy in modern or contemporary theatre as well as film on the grounds of irrationality (in defiance of fact and logic). As Terry Eagleton has recently pointed out, Steiner's theory of tragedy grows out of a certain world view which takes issue with those who exult in paradigms of progress and cultural improvement:

> For obituarists of tragedy like George Steiner, only tragic world-views can finally sustain legitimately tragic works of art. If the modern epoch has witnessed the death of tragedy, it is among other things because two dominant *Weltanschauungen*, Marxism and Christianity, are judged by Steiner (mistakenly, as we shall see) to be inhospitable to tragic insight.[41]

What, however, would qualify as tragic world-views? In Steiner's and ironically Eagleton's more recent approach too, tragedy starkly contrasts with science and rationality. Whereas tragic world-views emphasize the irrational (Steiner's blind necessity in Greek culture), the non-tragic seems to be modern, because it comes across as rational and scientific.

Tragedy remains mired in the suffering of the body and the imponderable fate of embodied existence, subject to illness, decay and death. In continuity with what he

[39] Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 5.
[40] Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, pp. 135-36.
[41] Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 10.

mistakenly sees as the right-wing agenda of his opponent Steiner, Eagleton emphasizes the absence of change, and the timeless persistence of pain. Eagleton does so because he has an urgent ethical agenda. He wants to remind us of the persistence of pain in the face of our contemporary culture shaped as it is by the assumed smoothness of supposedly painless techno-consumerist globalization. Techno-consumerist culture touts the attraction of non-commitment and tempts us to become infatuated with the rapid, ever-changing array of new technological products.

Eagleton's insistence on our embodied life subject as it is to illness, decay and mortality is all the more relevant in our digital age which differentiates itself from the age of analogue technologies precisely by its ability not to produce products which do not deteriorate over time:

> […] it is rather that human history includes the history of the body, which in respect to physical suffering has probably changed little over the centuries. No doubt this is why the body in pain, despite a few splendidly perceptive accounts of it, has scarcely been the most popular of topics in a body-oriented academia, hardly able to compete with the sexual, disciplined or carnivalesque body. It confirms much less readily to a certain case about historical pliability. And the suffering body is largely a passive one, which does not suit the ideologies of self-fashioning. It is of no particular consolation to the victims of torture to be told that their anguish is culturally constructed, as it is, perhaps, to be told that one's lowly place in the hierarchies of gender or ethnicity is a changeable historical affair. [42]

Eagleton marshals the notion of tragedy in order to foreground "what is perishable, constricted, fragile and slow-moving about us, as a rebuke to culturalist or historicist hubris."[43] Historicism partakes of the culturalist assumptions of poststructuralism and reads bodies in terms of arbitrary constructions which are subject to historical change or self-refashioning. The body in pain, however, cannot easily be transformed via new signifying practices. This is Eagleton's point about the enduring relevance of the tragic in a culture that emphasizes change towards

[42] Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. xiv.
[43] Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. xvi.

ever more perfect and smoothly run scientific improvements like the contemporary workings of the not to be worn down digital in contract to what preceded it: analogue technology. Do these technological improvements which help facilitate the availability and non-deteriorating quality of our consumption of visual and textual data (i.e. the digital) render social and embodied issues like poverty, suffering and death issues with which we no longer need to be preoccupied because they have been overcome?

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Kafka's parable *Before the Law* highlight the non-fulfilment of modern social, political, intellectual and economic promises. Estragon and Vladimir remain down and outs. They are waiting for Godot but they encounter Pozzo who exploits and degrades his servant and companion Lucky. The bleak twist here is that Lucky can count himself lucky precisely because of his desperate condition in which he has abandoned all expectations for a better future. As we have seen it is precisely such expectancy which keeps Vladimir and Estragon (as well as Kafka's naïve man from the countryside) enthralled to the futility of waiting.

Modern tragedy and drama makes us aware of new issues, questions and disturbing discoveries. One such disturbing discovery is indeed Beckett's phenomenon of waiting: of promises and expectations which are not to be fulfilled. Steiner not only denies that Beckett's drama is tragic; he goes so far to deny that it could be called dramatic: "Beckett's writing is 'anti-drama'; he is showing, with a kind of queer Irish logic, that one can bar from the stage all forms of mobility and natural communication between characters and yet produce a play."[44] Steiner refuses to realize how this lack of mobility constitutes a crucial aspect of tragedy within modern culture. Modernity is premised precisely on the promise of mobility and meaningful change—a transformation of class barriers such Miss Julie attempts to carry out in Strindberg's

[44] Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 350.

play. What happens if this promise turns out to be illusory? Modern tragedy after Strindberg addresses the anxiety which informs this question.

Steiner's dismissal of Beckett's work as non-tragic and anti-dramatic is due to the radical opposition which Steiner posits between the rationality or science and tragedy. Beckett's innovation to the dramatic repertoire vitiates a notion of tragedy which seems to be characterized by the absence of new discoveries. More recently Eagleton too employs the term tragedy to emphasize the persistence of timeless issues and in order to take issue with the urge for innovation and scientific construction which he sees manifested in poststructuralist theory (see the quote above).

What I am proposing here as the concluding argument of this article is that Modern Tragedy is not an oxymoron. Why the two notions appear to be oxymoronic in the first place is due to the posited contrast between the scientific or rational and the tragic. It is this misleading dichotomy which Steiner has provocatively established and which keeps haunting the critical consciousness of even those like Eagleton who dismiss *The Death of Tragedy* as reactionary. Eagleton too characterizes, as we have seen above, the tragic as the non-changeable, the non-innovative, the timeless, in short, the non-modern. This is not to dismiss the powerful point Eagleton is making about the tragic as an awareness of the persistence of pain, death and poverty throughout history. It is, however, to questions the rather rigid association of tragedy with the non-scientific, the changeless and the repetitive—in short to unsettle the common equation of the tragic with fate and irrational determinism.

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