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Modernist Theory and Theater between the Tragic and the Melancholic

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Messianism as a Modernist Critique of Modernity

The rejection of the covenant of Jewish assimilation by twentieth-century Messianism was an integral part of the pre-1914 pan-European critique of modernity and "romantic anti-capitalism" (Lukács), which also included thinkers like Paul de Lagarde, Paul Ernst, Ernst Jünger, Hermann Hesse, and Max Weber (Anson Rabinbach: "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," *NGC* 34, Winter 1985, 80). "In the years approaching the First World War, the self-confidence and security of German Jewry was challenged by a new Jewish sensibility that can be described as at once radical, secular and Messianic in both tone and content. What this new Jewish *ethos* refused to accept was above all the optimism of the generation of German Jews nurtured on the concept of *Bildung* as the German Jewish mystique. ... For German Jews of that earlier generation the '*Bildungsideal*' of Kant, Goethe and Schiller assured them of an indissoluble bond between Enlightenment, universal ethics, autonomous art and monotheism (stripped of any particularist 'Jewish' characteristics)." (78). An anti-rationalist Jewish spirit emerged at the turn of the century to challenge Hermann Cohen's Judaic "Religion of Reason." "This new Jewish spirit, a product of the 'post-assimilatory Renaissance,' can be described as a modern Jewish Messianism: radical, uncompromising, and comprised of an esoteric intellectualism that is as uncomfortable with the Enlightenment as it is enamored of apocalyptic visions - whether revolutionary or purely redemptive in the spiritual sense" (80). "Messianism demands a complete repudiation of the world as it is, placing its hope in a future whose realization can only be brought about by the destruction of the old order. Apocalyptic, catastrophic, utopian, and pessimistic, Messianism captured a generation of Jewish intellectuals before the First World War. The Messianic impulse appears in many forms ...: secular *and* theological, as a tradition that stands

opposed to both secular rationalism and what has been called 'normative Judaism'" (81). "The new Messianism turned on the double problem of redefining the crisis of European culture through a specific kind of Jewish radicalism, and at the same time of redefining Jewish intellectual politics through a new attitude toward European culture" (82).

Tragedy vs. Trauerspiel

A large number of these Jewish thinkers were preoccupied with both the ancient meaning and the modern possibility of tragedy. Interest in the idea of the tragic "was common among several literary, political and theologically oriented German-speaking Jews in the period preceding and following the First World War" (Jacobson: *Metaphysics of the Profane* 38). The list is impressively long and may include (in rough chronological order) Freud, Cohen, Simmel, Lukács, Mannheim, Scheler, Rosenzweig, Shestov, Bloch, Benjamin, Cassirer, Arendt, Weil, and Goldmann. They were among the several artists, writers, critics, and philosophers who, in the early twentieth century, responded to Nietzsche's call for a rejuvenation of tragedy through a recovery of its origins and fundamentals. But their response was thoroughly affected by Georg Simmel's pessimistic verdict on culture.

The contradictions of modern culture represent an intense dramatization of the constitutive conflict between life process and generated forms. This is what Simmel called "tragedy of culture." It describes the debilitating alienation between individuals and their labor, cultural creations, fellow humans, and themselves. Gradually he saw tragedy as the cursed condition of yearning for a fulfilled life and achieving it only in ossified forms. "The great enterprise of the spirit succeeds innumerable times in overcoming the object as such by making an object of itself, returning to itself enriched by its creation. But the spirit has to pay for this self-perfection with the tragic potential that a logic and dynamic is inevitably created by the unique laws of its own world which increasingly separates the contents of culture from its essential meaning and value" (Simmel: "Concept & Tragedy of Culture" [1911]. 1968: 46). What makes the human relationship to cultural objects tragic is that their human-made objectivity acquires an independent norm of

development which tears them away from the subject, and the subject from itself (in a manner that repeats the scene of its original sin) (*Tragic Idea* 99). To use the terminology of Lukács, Simmel's student, the tragedy of life, which is always in flux, is that soul gives it static forms. Therefore, if subjective experience and objective culture cannot be reconciled, if unity remains elusive and this life cannot be fully lived, we have to anticipate another life and prepare for it.

Messianism often negotiated its cultural orientation by questioning tragic thought and theater. Simmel's students (such as Lukács, Mannheim, Bloch and Benjamin) and other avid readers talked about tragedy among themselves, debating ideas and planning projects. They were particularly interested in emerging theatrical projects, from new dramas to revived festivals. Two highly representative figures stand out: Georg Lukács (1885-1971) was in conversation with 20-year older playwright and author Paul Ernst (1866-1933) [author of the *Trauerspiel Canossa* (1908)], who moved from classical "tragedy" to what he called "redemption drama" or "meta-tragedy," while Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was in conversation with 20-year older playwright and author Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1924), who moved from symbolist classicist drama to expressionist religious theater. To both of them tragedy referred simultaneously to philosophy, literary practice, and dramatic production.

More than anyone of his contemporaries, Benjamin was determined to discredit both the theory and the writing of tragedy: If Nietzsche's God was dead, his God did not die – he only forsook the world to test people's messianic faith. [As we shall see at the end, Agamben draws on Benjamin to invoke the destituent power of messianic faith.] “An incomplete secularization, the indirect yield of Lutheranism, had left the world with a vacuum from which tragic freedom and tragic grandeur could no longer emerge. The theater of this vacuum, its ennui, its irrational and cruel passions, is that of *deus absconditus*, the theater of the hidden god” (Heller 1991: 311). Caught between ethnic nostalgia and religious desolation, Benjamin, together with several other people of his generation, aimed to give the godforsaken world of modernity an alternative, messianic vision, with the “angel of history” providing hope, utopia, and redemption to those who might identify with

the opening line of Rilke's 1st Duino Elegy (written in 1912, publ. 1923): "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?" That historical predicament was melancholic, not tragic, as mortals still looked forward to the Day of Judgment. ... While tragic time is only individually fulfilled, true historical time (the time of the empirical event) is infinite and unfulfilled. Fulfilled historical time is not individually fulfilled; it is messianic time, the historical idea provided by the Bible (Benjamin 1996: 55-6).

Benjamin's systematic endeavor to replace tragedy with the *Trauerspiel* as a modern ideal of theater and thought lasted for some ten years, and represented his life's major project of combined philosophical inquiry and stylistic study. To him, the fundamental question was "whether the tragic is a form which can be realized at all at the present time, or whether it is not a historically limited form" (Benjamin, *Origin of German Drama*, 39). That is why he asked, with Max Scheler, "how justified are we in accepting that what people describe as tragic *is* tragic?" (38) Not only did he reject attempts "to recognize elements of the Greek tragedy ... as the essential elements of the *Trauerspiel*" (100) but he insisted categorically that "the modern theatre has nothing to show which remotely resembles the tragedy of the Greeks. In denying this actual state of affairs such doctrines of the tragic betray the presumption that it must still be possible to write tragedies. That is their essential but hidden motive" (101), he concluded, accusing them of "cultural arrogance" (101).

"Benjamin's purpose in staging a confrontation between Greek tragedy and German *Trauerspiel* is to demonstrate that Greek tragedy can no more be seen as a prototypical form of German *Trauerspiel* than *Trauerspiel* can be said to contain elements of tragedy such as tragic plot, tragic hero or tragic death" (Asman 1992: 607). Like Rosenzweig before him, Benjamin rejected the idea that a rejuvenation of tragedy is possible. The Greek past represented the only possibility of tragedy. "Whereas Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* seemed to establish a theory of modernity as a scenario of tragedy, Benjamin's book on the *Trauerspiel* proposes a theory of modernity as a theory of the *Trauerspiel* in radical opposition to tragedy. The incompatibility of tragedy and *Trauerspiel* is the architectural foundation" (Nägele

1991: 113) of the latter treatise. So is the incompatibility of the classical and the baroque. As always, Benjamin's modality of thought operated in polarities: profane vs. religious history, fallen nature vs. fulfilled time, mythic vs. messianic, fate vs. redemption, symbol vs. allegory, image vs. time and so on through the entire repertoire of the overarching opposition between Hellenism and Hebraism.

The Baroque drama as the authentic origin of German theater

In the *Origin* (written 1924-5, publ. 1928), following the methodological prologue, Benjamin suggests that, since in Germany "a literary 'baroque' did not anywhere become conspicuous" (*Origin* 58), until very recently this chapter in literary history did not have its own heading and style. Instead, it was described, on the basis of very traditional "classicistic schemes" (59), as a German Renaissance. Stylistic analysis shows this to be incorrect. In fact, both ancient themes and tragic poetics were ignored by theater at that time. "We should now emphasize that the term 'renaissance-tragedy' implies an overestimation of the influence of the Aristotelian doctrine on the drama of the baroque" (60).

"The baroque cultural practice at stake for Benjamin is the collective negotiation of the dissipation of sovereignty, that is, legitimate – divinely legitimated – rule. This is the northern and largely Protestant baroque of the Reformation, the period of fragmentation that heralds modernity. As such it might be described as the antibaroque, in that the Catholic baroque world as its theatrical cosmology had first claimed control of representation, and hence of politics, and had reasserted these same principles with a vengeance in Counter-Reformation culture. The lamentation play mourns the loss of totality but makes no attempt to restore it. ... Through his attention to *Trauerspiel* versus tragedy and to Protestant practice versus Catholic formal practice, Benjamin in effect unwrites *The Birth of Tragedy* here" (Steinberg 1996: 16). Benjamin's impending Messianic Reformation renounces Athens rather than the Vatican.

Lukács saved God from death in Nietzsche's hands by making him a spectator of human drama: "God must leave the stage, but must yet remain a spectator; that is the historical possibility of tragic epochs" ("The Metaphysics of Tragedy" [1911],

Tragic Idea 102). He also responded to Simmel's iconoclasm by proposing that "every true tragedy is a mystery play. Its real, central meaning is a revelation of God before the face of God" (102). Benjamin writes with Lukács against Nietzsche as he uses the former's metaphysics to attack myth. However, while the early Lukács, like Nietzsche, still believed in the re-creation of tragedy, Benjamin declares tragedy long dead. The only theater possible is that of the hidden or evacuated god (their difference usually unclear), better known as the passion play. The search is on for an untragic drama that would illustrate a critical stance toward antiquity. "For the fact is that ever since the Greeks, the search for the untragic hero on the European stage has never ceased. Despite all the classical revivals, the great dramatists have always kept as far away as possible from the authentic figure of tragedy" (Benjamin 1977b: 5). Benjamin claims that in this search for the untragic there is an especially German path which winds through the Middle Ages, the Baroque, the late Goethe, and reappears in contemporary expressionism. Less than a survey, the recovery of that path constitutes his cultural program. "And if one only learns to recognize its characteristics in many different styles of drama from Calderón to Strindberg it must become clear that this form, a form of the mystery play, still has a future" (Benjamin 113). Expressionism is such a style, and Benjamin vindicates it. "For like expressionism, the baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will. This is true of all periods of so-called decadence" (*Origin* 55). During periods of decadent "artistic will" (Benjamin is using Riegl's influential term) "a formed expression of real content can scarcely be extracted from the conflict of the forces which have been unleashed. In this state of disruption the present age reflects certain aspects of the spiritual constitution of the baroque, even down to the details of its artistic practice" (55).

We get a sense of what Benjamin had in mind from his Calderón and Hebbel essay (1923), based on a comparison between tragedy and historical drama [= fate tragedy], where he emphasizes the representation of fate as a game turning history into nature, the force of fate naturalizing history. "The world of fate was self-contained. It was the 'sublunar' world in the strict sense - a world of the wretched or glorious creature where again and again the rules of the fate to which every

creature is subject were to confirm their validity in an astonishing and virtuosic way, *ad maiorem dei gloriam* and for the enjoyment of the spectators" (Benjamin, Calderon essay 378). [Hebbel (1813-63) did not understand Spanish drama (381).] Benjamin's advocated actively for a Calderónian drama by getting involved in the revision of contemporary play. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's engagement with Calderón, especially his *Life is a Dream*, started in 1901 and culminated in his most ambitious play, *The Tower* (1925, 1928). After its first appearance, he published (1924-5) in his magazine Benjamin's Goethe essay, and was so influenced by it that he revised the play, whose premiere Benjamin reviewed in 1926 and revisions read later in manuscript. Having started with Greek tragic models (Alcestis, Oedipus, Electra, Ariadne), Hofmannsthal turned to Calderón and Grillparzer, the theatrical models of the Austro-Spanish tradition, as he joined the "conservative revolution" in which Austro-Bavarian Catholicism (cf. Carl Schmitt) sought community and cohesion, opposing Prussian secular modernity. Despite his misgivings, Benjamin remained interested in this *Trauerspiel* till the end of his life.

"Benjamin remained faithful to the program of the *Trauerspiel* essay. As far as the theory of drama was concerned, his attempt to create a blueprint for untragic drama, the drama proper to modernity, remained his principal lifelong concern" (Heller & Fehér: *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism*, 1991: 314). Later, in the 1930s, he thought he had found such a blueprint in "epic theater" which to him was essentially untragic drama. Specifically, in the critique of Aristotelian catharsis he discovered a quality that moved Brecht's didactic *Lehrstück* away from its Schillerian concern with the stage as a moral institution and close to a passion play whose originary untragic hero is Socrates. "The anti-Nietzsche polemic of Benjamin, commenced almost two decades earlier and inspired by the young Lukács' theory of drama, has now described a full circle. The Socratic principle, the alleged gravedigger of tragedy, returns as the new dramatic muse in the epic, untragic theater" (316). Let's look now at the distinct character of the *Trauerspiel*.

Sovereignty

As we saw earlier: "The baroque cultural practice at stake for Benjamin is the collective negotiation of the dissipation of sovereignty, that is, legitimate – divinely legitimated – rule" (Steinberg). Benjamin argues that "it is the single fact of the royal hero which prompted the critics to relate the new *Trauerspiel* to the ancient tragedy of the Greeks" (61). However, since the content of the *Trauerspiel* is history, not myth, "it is not the conflict with God and Fate, the representation of a primordial past, which is the key to a living sense of national community, but the confirmation of princely virtues, the depiction of princely vices, the insight into diplomacy and the manipulation of all the political schemes, which makes the monarch the main character in the *Trauerspiel*. The sovereign, the principal exponent of history, almost serves as its incarnation" (62). Drawing heavily on Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922), Benjamin proposes as the central topic of the *Trauerspiel* the sovereign facing a specific "state of emergency" which represents the interruption of the history of Christian salvation. ["Sovereign is who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 5). In a state of emergency, in a conflict which "can be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state" (6), he has the "monopoly to decide" (13) "what constitutes the public interest or interest of the state, public safety and order" (6) on the basis of who the enemy is.]

"Benjamin situates the state of emergency against the terms of the medieval mystery play, which is seen to provide a story of redemption; the secularization of the mystery play in baroque drama leaves a state of emergency without redemption, resulting in the evacuation of eschatology. In the baroque drama, the state of emergency is expressed in the ambivalence of the character of the sovereign and sovereign action. The virtuous prince suffers stoically the state of emergency, giving rise to the genre of martyr drama, while the vicious prince responds tyrannically in the drama of tyranny. The *Trauerspiel* locates both responses within the character of the sovereign, with the character of the monarch in the state of emergency vacillating between passive martyrdom and tyrannical violence. ... In place of the catastrophic resolution of tragedy, Benjamin locates the formal principle of *Trauerspiel* in the mourning for a perpetual and irresolvable state of emergency"

(Howard Caygill: "WB's Concept of Allegory, in *Companion to Allegory* 247). He suggests that "in the terms of the martyr-drama it is not moral transgression but the very estate of man as creature which provides the reason for the catastrophe. This typical catastrophe, which is so different from the extraordinary catastrophe of the tragic hero, is what the dramatists had in mind when ... they described a work as a *Trauerspiel*" (Benjamin 89).

As Novalis writes in 1798: "Every representation of the past is a mourning-play [*Trauerspiel*] in the genuine sense."

"In the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin brings together his own earlier reflections on fate and character with Rosenzweig's concept of the decline of the tragic hero to introduce the notion of *Trauerspiel* as religious tragedy. Only through the drama of the martyr is the *Trauerspiel* as 'heilige Tragödie' believable" (Jacobson: *Metaphysics of the Profane* 246). "The martyr-drama was born from the death of Socrates as a parody of tragedy. And here, as so often, the parody of a form proclaims its end. The agonal has disappeared from the drama of Socrates ... and in one stroke the death of the hero has been transformed into that of the martyr. Like the Christian hero of faith ... Socrates dies voluntarily," (113-14) and establishes the tradition that, through the passion-play and the mystery-play, leads directly to the martyr of the *Trauerspiel*. "The *Trauerspiel* is confirmed as a form of the tragedy of the saint by means of the martyr-drama" (Benjamin 113). "The tragedy of the saint is the secret longing of the tragedian" (Benjamin 112).

The triad of the sovereignty in the baroque tragedy consists of the three interrelated figures of the tyrant, the martyr, and the intriguer.

1. Benjamin places the baroque sovereign between politics and theology with state and godlike power. The baroque concept of sovereignty "emerges from a discussion of the state of emergency, and makes it the most important function of the prince to avert this. The ruler is designated from the outset as the holder of dictatorial power if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should lead to a state of emergency. This is typical of the Counter-Reformation" (*Origin*, 65). The sovereign finds himself in a situation where he must decide yet he cannot, so he remains uncertain and ambivalent. "The antithesis between the power of the ruler and his

capacity to rule led to a feature peculiar to the *Trauerspiel* which is ... the indecisiveness of the tyrant. The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of emergency, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision" (70-71). "The tragedy ... of social revolution, therefore, is the *Trauerspiel* of the constant interplay between exception-decision-apparent peace and *again division*. The play of an insurmountable revolution, which, therefore, can be seen *sub specie aeternitatis*" (Cacciari: *The Unpolitical*, 83). Since a determined decision and a definitive act are impossible, everything becomes acting in a theatrical framework, on the stage of the royal court.

"At the moment of temporal crisis the tyrant, whose status is crystallized around the capacity for decisive action, is suddenly rendered incapable of making a decision. This tendency to lose the power of decision at the moment of emergency is related to another consistent theme: the slow descent of the tyrant into madness. Confronted with the urgent necessity of restoring order, the tyrant responds by losing his wits. The confrontation between order and disorder, human meaning and the meaninglessness of the natural continuum, receives in the *Trauerspiel* a characteristically graphic 'resolution': the tyrant responds to the threat of disorder and the need for decision with a mad, self-destructive, meaningless spasm of violence himself, ranting, lamentation, indecision, excessive mournfulness, paralysis, suicide. As he destroys himself, the tyrant fulfills his role as the incarnation of history by being turned - along with his court - into a corpse" (Pensky: *Melancholy Dialectics*, 78-9). Benjamin argues that "the martyrdom of the hero leads" to stoic morality while justice "transforms the tyrant's rage to madness" (*Origin* 78). Baroque theater is fascinated by the tyrant's "sheer arbitrariness of a constantly shifting emotional storm" (71), with "the seventeenth-century ruler, the summit of creation, erupting into madness like a volcano and destroying himself and his entire court" (70).

2. "The sublime status of the Emperor on the one hand, and the infamous futility of his conduct on the other, create a fundamental uncertainty as to whether this is a drama of tyranny or a history of martyrdom" (Benjamin 73). While the drama of the tyrant caused fear, the drama of the martyr caused pity. "Seen in

ideological terms they are strictly complementary. In the baroque the tyrant and the martyr are but the two faces of the monarch. They are the necessarily extreme incarnations of the princely essence. As far as the tyrant is concerned, this is clear enough. The theory of sovereignty which takes as its example the special case in which dictatorial powers are unfolded, positively demands the completion of the image of the sovereign, as tyrant." (69). At the same time, "an element of martyr-drama lies hidden in every drama of tyranny. It is much less easy to trace the element of the drama of tyranny in the martyr-drama" (73). "Just as Christ, the King, suffered in the name of mankind, so, in the eyes of the writers of the baroque, does royalty in general" (Benjamin 73). Herod, the Jewish king (a very popular Baroque subject), is a tyrant while Hamlet, the Christ-like figure, is a martyr.

3. "The German dramatists ... know the two faces of the courtier: the intriguer, as the evil genius of their despots, and the faithful servant, as the companion in suffering to innocence enthroned" (98). The intriguer, who "stands as a third type alongside the despot and the martyr" (95), is the plotter who contests the rule of the tyrant and holds the key to the fate of sovereignty. "Baroque drama knows no other historical activity than the corrupt energy of schemers. In none of the countless rebels who confront a monarch frozen in the attitudes of the Christian martyr, is there any trace of revolutionary conviction. Discontent is the classic motive. The sovereign alone reflects any kind of moral dignity, and even here it is the totally ahistorical moral dignity of the stoic" (Benjamin 88). The king is "constantly intervening directly in the workings of the state so as to arrange the data of the historical process in a regular and harmonious sequence... In the course of political events intrigue beats out that rhythm of the second hand which controls and regulates these events" (Benjamin 97). "The sovereign intriguer is all intellect and will-power" (95). The plot of the drama is based on this virtuosic challenge, which treats the exception as a game and the court as a troupe of actors. "Unlike the sovereign, however, the plotter 'knows' that the court is a theater of actions that can never be totalized but only *staged* with more or less virtuosity. By this heeding only the rules of the game without seeking to reach ultimate principles, the plotter *begins* where the sovereign hopes to end: with the exclusion of the state of exception. The

state of exception is excluded as theater. What characterizes this theater is that in it, nothing can ever authentically take place, least of all the stage itself" (Samuel Weber: "Taking Exception to Decision: WB and CS," *Diacritics* 22:3-4, 1992, 17). The image of the absolutist court "becomes the key to historical understanding. For the court is the setting par excellence" (Benjamin 92). It is where "history is secularized" and "merges into the setting" (92). "To understand the life of the courtier means to recognize completely why the court, above all else, provides the setting of the *Trauerspiel*" (97). [Pirandello's too!] "But whereas in the Spanish drama the primary characteristic of the court was the splendour of royal power, the German *Trauerspiel* is dominated by the gloomy tone of intrigue" (97).

Benjamin's Hamlet

"Benjamin devotes an independent section of the book to a discussion of *Hamlet*, something he does not do with any other play, figure, or playwright, and it appears that rather than being a mere example, the play serves him as an almost necessary exemplar of the *Trauerspiel*" (Ferber: *Philosophy & Melancholy*, 68). "Conceiving the everyday as futile and trifling, as mere empty play, has produced melancholy in great men, writes Benjamin, while mentioning Luther himself as having suffered from melancholy and a 'heaviness of soul.' According to Benjamin, Hamlet, the consummate Lutheran, also strongly protests this existential emptiness, expressed in his own melancholy" (Ferber: *Philosophy & Melancholy*, 29). That was what he calls the "philosophy of Wittenberg": "Human actions were deprived of all value. Something new arose: an empty world. ... For those who looked deeper saw the scene of their existence as a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions" (Benjamin, *Origin* 138-39).

When Benjamin says that mourning "revives the empty world in the form of a mask" (139) he implies two facets of emptiness, "that of the empty world and that of the mask into which this world is transferred or molded. ... The meaningless world, lacking any potential for salvation, is echoed in the only way it can be approached - an empty mask. ... The mask duplicates the loss without replacing it with an

alternative. The mask is also, of course, a theatrical mask - the empty mask of the *Trauerspiel* itself" (Ferber: *Philosophy & Melancholy*, 31).

In Hamlet's case "what seems to be a normal mournful response to his father's death at the play's beginning is soon revealed to be a melancholic reaction to what exceeds any concrete death or loss and refers rather to a much more fundamental state of disenchantment with what Hamlet sees as an empty, sterile, and barren world" which is for him "a ruin of meaning, an empty cast of what was once meaningful to him and is now inhabited by nothing significant or redemptive" (Ferber: *Philosophy & Melancholy*, 30-1).

To "passionate contemplation ... alone was attributed the power to release those in high places from the satanic ensnarement of history, in which the baroque recognized only the political aspect" (141-2). Hamlet is the "sorrowful Contemplator" (157) who "cannot find satisfaction in what he sees enacted, only in his own fate. His life [is] the exemplary object of his mourning ... Only in a princely life such as this is melancholy redeemed, by being confronted with itself" (158). "The prince is the paradigm of the melancholy man" (142). "Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them" (157).

And now, let's look at Pirandello's *Enrico IV* (1922), a Modernist *Trauerspiel*, also written in the 1920s, whose contemplative Hamlet is not killed but lives as a madman, while his play within the play becomes his own life.

["It is certainly Pirandello's *Hamlet*. Belcredi is its Claudius, Countess Matilda its Gertrude, Frida its Ophelia. And Hamlet's antique disposition has spread itself over the whole life of the Pirandellian protagonist" (Bentley 67).]

The historical background of Pirandello's *Enrico IV*:

"The Investiture Controversy," a conflict between state and church

The protagonist of the play, an amnesiac nobleman around 50 years-old, has been playing for twenty years Heinrich IV (1050-1106), a major figure of the 11th century, at the age of 26. Heinrich became King of the Germans in 1056, and from 1084 until his forced abdication in 1105 he was also referred to Holy Roman

Emperor. He clashed with Pope Gregory VII over the primacy of the sacerdotium over the imperium. In 1075 Henry resisted Gregory's reforms over his right to nominate and invest bishops who at that time had both ecclesiastical and imperial authority in their principalities. The following year, the Assembly of Worms declared Gregory deposed and, in response, the Lenten synod declared Henry deposed, and excommunicated him. The Emperor was deserted by the bishops and opposed by princes who started planning the election of a new king. To avoid the danger of national assembly where he would face his critics a year later, in January 1077 he secretly crossed the Alps and appeared outside the castle of Canossa (where the Pope was the guest of the Emperor's enemy, Marchesa Matilde of Tuscany) to beg for Gregory's forgiveness. After three days in the snow, the penitent was brought back to the fold. Henry suffered humiliation but saved his throne. (I have incorporated the "Walk to Canossa" to my paper "Why I am not a Post-Secularist," *boundary 2* 40:1, 2013, 77-80.) His strategic repentance was an interesting policy move even though its success was short lived since just two months later the princes who supported Gregory elected an anti-king and civil war broke out in Germany. In 1080 both depositions were renewed as the two strong men were clashing again.

Twenty-two years ago the unnamed protagonist was 26, the age of both Enrico and Di Nolli now. The particular moment that fascinates him is the one that inspired his choice of costume in the pageant of the carnival twenty years earlier – the King doing penance so that he can prove he has repented, be received by the Pope, and have his excommunication lifted. However, throughout the play, he makes no effort to comprehend, let alone convey, the historical circumstances. He moves up and down the Emperor's life confused as to how these chronological choices are made. Bishops and nobles, palaces and monasteries are mentioned but the high stakes involved at this turning point in Catholic history are not. An early reference to "the terrible war between Church and State" (81) is forgotten. To him, monumental past may be closed and definitive time but it is not history. It is just a complete play. "It's the clothes he looks at – not the man inside them" (Pirandello 92).

Henry stops the Flux and fixes Form

This is Pirandello's only costume play and his only major work that he labeled "a tragedy." It is a very special tragedy about the effort to tame form and escape what he called throughout his life the "tragedy of life" along thoroughly Simellian lines. In the early essay "*Umorismo*" (1908) Pirandello first formulated his famous dialectical distinction between the flux of life and the fixedness of form: "Life is a continual flux which we try to stop, to fix in stable and determined forms, both inside and outside ourselves. ... The forms in which we seek to stop, to fix in ourselves this constant flux are the concepts, the ideals with which we would like consistently to comply, all the fictions we create for ourselves, the conditions, the state in which we tend to stabilize ourselves. But within ourselves, in what we call the soul and is the life in us, the flux continues" (*On Humor* 1974, 137). In the preface to the *Six Characters* (1921) he wrote about "the inherent tragic conflict between life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it, immutable" (quoted in Brustein 302-3). In 1923 he wrote that he had "always felt the immanent tragedy of life which ... requires a form, but senses death in every form it assumes." This is the "tragic law of movement and form" (quoted in Giudice 1975: 145-46). Henry's tragedy suggests that if, as Modernists feared, form can kill life, then life, instead of avoiding it, should become total form, total art work, in this particular case, a masquerade. This brings to mind Shakespeare's hero, to whom he has been often compared.

"Hamlet is the sole observer of *theatrum mundi* or *theatrum historicum*" (Cho 266). He is also its sole protagonist. "As has been often observed, he does not act in the purposive, effective way commanded by the ghost of his father: rather, he acts as an actor, while observing as spectator and staging as *director*. He does not so much accomplish his mission as stage it" (Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, 193). Hamlet is "player/actor, participant/partaker, and, it is possible to say, also an observer. His life does not represent only the irrupting reality, but equally his life is a play that regards itself as a play. Not only is there a groundless reflection upon things by the subject, turning this reflection into enigmatic mourning, but also the melancholy regards melancholy as play and sublates it *sub specie aeternitatis*" (Fohrmann: "Enmity and Culture" in Monagle & Vardoulakis, eds.: *The Politics of Nothing*, 27 [Benjamin/tragedy folder]). This is one way of dealing with the "tragedy of life."

Here we can also draw a connection with Benjamin's aesthetics of drama. In his study of German Romantic criticism he observed that "what attracted the theoretically inclined Romantics so magnetically to Calderón - to the extent that he might be regarded, despite their admiration for Shakespeare, as their own special dramatist - is that he fulfilled to perfection one condition they strove for above all else. This was that infinity should be guaranteed through mere reflection. ... The action is playfully diminished by the reflections that Calderon's heroes always have at their fingertips. This enables them, so to speak, to twist and turn the entire order of fate in their hands like a ball so that you can examine it, now from this side, now from that. What, after all, had been the ultimate goal of the Romantics if not to see genius, even when bound by the golden chains of authority, still irresponsibly absorbed in its own reflections?" (378-79).

Pirandello's Henry is a melancholic introvert out of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* of Shakespeare and Calderón. He is the king who withdraws from the tragedy of fluid time into the melancholy of fixed history. In the words of the Doctor, his state of mind is "a morbid wallowing in reflective melancholy, accompanied by, yes, considerable cerebral activity" (100). His hubris is that he has tried to stop time, to freeze the flow of history into historical time where everything is settled and fortune has already worked out. "Henry manages to escape from time by entering history, which is frozen time. He followed the outline of a plot already written, foreordained, predetermined ... Henry finds consolation for his melancholy and despair by constructing himself into a historical figure, fixed and immutable" (Brustein 297).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4sTR5fla2k>

He knows that reality cannot be controlled, identity cannot be fixed, and life is a masquerade in the world's carnival. The double burden of words and the dead, of language and time, weighs heavily on people's shoulders. Life in the living world is condemned to repetition. The forward movement promised by each daybreak can only lead backwards to the renewed duplication of conventions and habits. Those who follow it are the herd who hold on to their presumed identities and are comforted by hopes of authenticity. They also wrongly identify appearance with

reality, portraits with mirrors, roles with characters. Contingency has condemned humans to inauthenticity, society has imprisoned them into roleplaying. The flow of real time will never let them be who they want to be, never reveal truth to them. Their condition is a fallen one because they will never be able to see behind appearances. The only way out of relative time is absolute time, the only escape from variable truth is monumental history, the only protection from the madness of sanity is the sanity of madness, and the only refuge from the compromises of identity is the conventions of the masque.

Henry's greatest enemy is time. Amid its fluidity, he fights valiantly to capture the permanent. By embracing history, he hopes to conquer chance. Thus he asserts his right to self-determination not by forming an original self but by borrowing a historical figure, that is, by playacting. He believes that "one can exist only if one ceases to live and decides, with premeditated tenacity, to simulate endlessly. In this manner one has total mastery over the precarious and the unfixed: life. By impersonating Henry IV of Germany, Enrico IV is incontrovertibly a character, one and inalienable, as established by history" (Santeramo 1999: 108). "A fixed construction, the mask of Henry IV is more secure than the flimsy, unstable, unprotected, and socially imposed constructions of others who struggle ceaselessly against the daily disintegration of their identities and the eternal changeability of life" (Bassanese 1997; 82). Theatricality transcends life's inauthenticity.

The motivation of his resistance to flux is strictly personal and private. Since he does not believe that the human lot can improve, his opposition is a private matter. Henry resists but does not rebel. He has rejected social oppression and present time for eight years but nobody has known about it. He seems to believe that, if life is a *theatrum mundi*, the only alternative is what Fyodor Sologub called in 1908 a "theater of one will." In it, scenery, lighting, and the other elements of the stage ought to give form to "the tragic play of fate with its marionettes" (1986: 118) where earthly masks fall away as a single will reveals and affirms itself triumphantly. Thus he stages an existential masque as a resistance against social masquerade. In a letter to an actor, Pirandello wrote in 1921 that, in order to perform the role to the best of his ability, the protagonist "had given himself the anguish and torment of a very intensive analysis, very detailed and precise, which had obsessed him for about a month." After falling from his horse, "the mask studied with such

scrupulosity in every one of its smallest details became in him *the persona* of the great and tragic Emperor" (quoted in Caesar, *Characters & Authors in LP*, 202-3).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nu1F95YF4X0>

[Pirandello called Heinrich "*tragico imperatore*" in the play and in an 1890 poem.]

Pirandello called him *il grande Mascherato* (the great Masked One). Only he knows that identity is based on roleplaying, that self is performed. In this regard, his hubris consists in his attempt to construct a permanent, secure self. So secure is this consciously performed self that Henry's name is never mentioned when he is out of character. "The 'loss of self' here is not mere absence of self, let alone a mere theory that there *is* no self; it is an assault on the self by the self" (Bentley 1966: 73). He is a nameless twentieth-century man who has suffered a tragic fall. Last, we should not assume that Henry is sane since "Pirandello is very careful not to have him confess in so many words that he has been merely playing the madman" (Styan 1962: 145). We should not accept his claims at face value. "On whose authority do we have it that the nameless one was ever cured? Only his own" (Bentley 1966: 70).

Henry directs

Throughout his life, the protagonist has been a potentially tragic figure, one of those divided selves who can suffer the betrayal of friends (113) *and* watch themselves suffer. Even before his accident, he was an eccentric prone to theatrics. We hear that he was always aware of life's theatricality and loved to explore it by representing, improvising, acting out (89) *and* watching himself act. Directing his self was a major preoccupation, and also gave him a distinct air of self-awareness that made people think he was "mad" (114). Here is what the Countess tells the Doctor about his life before the accident: "He was a little strange, it's true, that was because there was so much life in him. It made him eccentric" (89). The Baron amplifies: "He was often genuinely exalted. But I could swear, Doctor: he was looking at himself, looking at his own exaltation. And I believe the same is true of every move he made, however spontaneous: he *saw* it. I'll say more. I'm certain it was this that made him suffer. At times he had the funniest fits of rage against himself." He adds that "the lucidity that came from acting all the time ... being

another man ... shattered, yes, shattered at a single blow the ties that bound him to how own feelings." Furthermore, he used to direct: He was famous for his *tableaux vivants*, he was always getting up dances, benefit performances, all just for fun, of course. He was an awfully good actor, believe me. Marqis: And he's become a superb and terrifying one - by going mad." History is fixed theatrically (in *tableaux vivant*), and living such a fixed history is a performative art. Henry directs *tableaux vivants* like the one at the end of Act II with his four counselors but he is also incorporated in Dr. Dionysus' one at the beginning of Act III.

Recovery from his illness gave him the greatest opportunity: the pleasure to experience madness with perfect lucidity. Now he could be what others called him *and* be the sole spectator. He could be his best audience, an audience of one, turning his divided self into a *modus vivendi*. Yet, he escaped time but not his analytical ability, his inner division. Henry is not a character in search of an author. He is not a real person interrupting a rehearsal and appealing to the director in the name of something more essential. He is an unnamed person who has become his own author, has scripted his role, and is directing its performance. Now "he enacts a masquerade, yet remains outside the masquerade - possessing the weird clarity of his lucid madness" (Brustein: *Theatre of Revolt* 297). Thus he is "an actor, a character in disguise" and adds that "he is also a critic who cruelly judges his own performance" (290). Henry is "Actor, Artist, and Madman, and, besides this, possesses an extraordinary intellect, reflecting on all three" (296). Furthermore, since he writes the script and shapes the parts, Henry has control over people, or rather, over people's interaction with him, a power he relishes.

The play's intricate theatricality is accentuated by the pervasive presence of carnival, pictorial, theatrical, social and other masks. The entire play is "a series of masks put on and taken off" (Paolucci: *Pirandello's Theater*, 94). [Pirandello called his collected plays *Naked Masks*.] As a result, identities are shifting. No character is singular: they all move from one self to another, possessing between two and five identities. "Every character in *Henry IV* possesses a double identity within the fictive world; every character, already fictive, plays the part of a fictive character in the fiction within the fictive world of the play" (Schlueter: *Metafictional Characters*, 22). There is constant doubling as people

enter and exit the Middle Ages. As roles multiply, identities become fragmented. As historical moments multiply, time becomes fragmented.

Now let's address ourselves to a question that preoccupied so many Modernists, especially those committed to varieties of Messianism.

Is Pirandello's "tragedy" tragic or something else?

If *Hamlet* is the "ur-text of metatheater in the baroque era" (Witt: *Metatheater and Modernity* 117), *Enrico IV* is the ur-text of Modernist metatheater. [cf. Camus' *Caligula*, Genet's *Maids & Balcony*, Stoppard's *R&G*] However, here is a great variety of opinions regarding the tragic character, dimension, or element in it.

Some find that "Pirandello's most renowned protagonist is an absolutist. He is unyielding in his perceptions, and his rigidity both elevates and isolates him. ... As an absolutist, he transforms him into the near impossible: a twentieth-century tragic hero. In a minimalist world that by its nature beats down the very idea of classical tragedy, Henry fashions for himself a new universe from his own consciousness modeled on the past. He has elevated himself to a level he will be unable to sustain: this is his tragedy" (Fairchild 2001: 30). In this view, Henry is "the tragic figure par excellence of our time, the twentieth-century scapegoat figure who sums up in himself the terrifying insecurity of self-consciously living a life based on lies, a life that he knows to be a fictional expression of the self he cannot otherwise find" (Caputi 1988: 96-7). Others find that the hero is "too lucid ... to be tragic" (Witt 1990: 158) and the play is a "near tragedy" (159).

A particular tragic genre is the drama of outcasts and criminals, a tradition that goes back to Karl Moor in Schiller's *Robbers* (1781) and Oswald in Wordsworth's *Borderers* (1795-97). Henry may be seen as an endlessly reflexive outcast who holds a mirror to society's reason by playing an outcast, somebody who has been excommunicated for resisting church authority and lives under the burden of anathema, and in the end, by killing, he fulfills the role of the sublime criminal.

Some have wondered whether the play may be seen as a revenge tragedy, suggesting that protagonist is part Lear, part Fool, part Edgar in feigned madness (as a revenger's mask).

There is a role Henry cannot play, “the great and tragic emperor” (81), because to him history, like life, is a masquerade. Thus he cannot understand that by repeating the tragedy of a world-historical personage, he turns into the protagonist of a farce. “There is always, in Pirandello’s drama, a *potentially* tragic situation, within the circle of the comedy of illusion. But the nature of the development of the plays is such that the effect of this inner drama is usually not tragic, but simply pathetic” (Williams 1968: 164-65). The reason is that outside history issues turn from ethico-political to moral: a reflection on representation becomes a painful awareness of the mask, a private drama and a public farce.

[“It is a structure of feeling – a crisis of individualism in which the very thing that must be defended, the ‘personal impenetrable world,’ is, by the fact of its compromising existence in others, the thing that turns back and destroys oneself – which is very deeply rooted in modern experience” (165).]

In the words of Jan Kott: “What was once tragedy today is grotesque.” History cannot provide a safe refuge from present time. Henry endures the torture of self-division, the mental suffering of introspection but his historical tragedy never materializes. “His aim in life is nothing less than to attain to tragic seriousness” (Bentley 1966: 67) but he cannot star in a tragedy because he is too fascinated by his virtuosity, too self-absorbed into his righteousness. “The protagonist insists on tragedy; the author does not. The protagonist is a character in search of a tragic poet: such is Pirandello's subject, which therefore comes out absurd, grotesque, tragi-comic” (67). “What he comes back to again and again is the danger of being ridiculous - of his tragedy being reduced to comedy” (68).

The hero’s hubris has a lot to do with his relation to the event in Canossa, which to him has become inaccessible as world-historic event and is an occasion for self-fashioning, not political responsibility. The play opens by raising the question of the right role (which Henry? Which country? What era?) and closes by showing that those who seek to fix time seal themselves off from the rest of life. “It offers a statement about the way we live in terms of comedy, and proves it in an experience of tragedy. A deep acquaintance with time, and the knowledge that we have no control over its passage, is the driving power in the play. Its determinism gives it the complexion of classical tragedy, but its ultimate

hysterical, even farcical, pessimism is characteristic of Pirandello's touch and another sign of the spirit of the age" (Styan 1962: 156).

When questions of theatricality, of role-playing, arise, you can have a masque but not tragedy. You can have reflection on identity, not on justice; on epistemology, not ethics. "Henry's story is better viewed as a *commedia dell'arte* scenario rather than as a realistic explanation of his situation. Doctor Dionisio Genni ... resembles the *commedia* 'dottore' figure ... 'Henry' himself bears an affinity to the *commedia*'s Arlecchino ... who plays the fool but manipulates everyone" (Witt: *Metatheater and Modernity* 127).

[This is not a play about self and madness. To believe this is to agree with Henry. Neither is it a play about truth and appearance. It is about the perils of identity – what happens when all issues (social, economic, political etc.) are articulated in terms of identity. Then people may wake up in a world of simulation, a world where individuals fashion their unique life where they will not age: "Fixed in this eternity of masquerade" (116). In this private drama, Dionysus, the god of tragedy, arrives as a psychiatrist. In a world where there is nothing but illusions, where identities are roles, where people must make their own judgments, how can they establish a basis for their values? In a world dominated by social fate, what is the source of human responsibility? (Fiskin 1948)]

"As Martin Esslin has pointed out, the Pirandellian dramatic protagonist prefigured by the puppet of Orestes [reinterpreted as Hamlet in the novel *The Late Mattia Pascal* (1904)] goes a step further than Hamlet toward modernity. Not only has he become aware of the nonexistence of the gods and of an absolute moral law, he is also cognizant of himself as a *puppet*, that is, of the problematic nature of the self and its need to fashion various identities. But Esslin is wrong to conclude from this that Pirandello sensed the 'death of tragedy' and the impossibility of writing it for the modern stage. Rather, he envisions modern tragedy as writing the tragedy of the loss of the certainties presupposed by classical tragedy" (Witt: *The Search for Modern Tragedy*, 92).

"Modern tragedy is thus in part necessarily metatragic" (Witt 2001: 97). "Pirandello writes in *Henry IV* a metatragedy in which he represents a mourning for the loss of both the moral

certainties of classical tragedy and the legitimacy offered by the foundational institutions of Europe, the imperial monarchy and the church" (Witt: *Metatheater and Modernity* 123)

The play "may be seen as a modernist *Trauerspiel* - a show-tragedy mourning the demise of the institutions of church and empire that once provided Europe's foundations" (Witt: *Metatheater and Modernity* 131).

We may also say that at the end, when his private, melancholic *Trauerspiel* is exposed and in danger of turning into a ridiculous *commedia*, the sovereign kills the usurper and claims the play as a tragedy. Thus post-modern tragedy prevails (or takes revenge on) the modernist *Trauerspiel*.

The melancholic exits

So we are back where we started, with Benjamin's advocacy during the same period with that *Enrico IV*, the early 1920s, of the theory and writing of *Trauerspiel*, the drama of the tyrant under emergency. "The function of the tyrant is the restoration of order in the state of emergency: a dictatorship whose utopian goal will always be to replace the unpredictability of historical accident with the iron constitution of the laws of nature" (Benjamin 74).

Pirandello's Henry is a tyrant-turned-martyr (12 years) turned-intriguer (8 years). This "tragic emperor" refuses to mourn and overcome the incident of his memory loss. He keeps it alive by living in it historically as a martyr-turned-intriguer.

He is a tyrant who cannot decide on the emergency, when he recovers his memory, and withdraws/exits by going mad/playing martyr,

and turns the exception of his insanity into a permanent masquerade.

He stops/exits time and attaches himself melancholically to history.

[“With the breakdown of a general morality, we have been offered the *consciously* dishonest man as a type of virtue” (Williams 1966: 150). Henry is a virtuoso of the melancholic ethics of aesthetic narcissism.]

The melancholic intriguer (who has exited the tragedy of the king and the martyr-play of the prince) is a farcical figure. [He renounces alienation, which he sees as the true human fate, and chooses to live outside mainstream reality as an outcast.] I would like to conclude by suggesting that he also resonates with several figures of

post-revolutionary refusal, not just the left melancholics but also the virtuosos of destituent power.

First, the messianic suspension, the one closest to Benjamin. Agamben, in "The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin" ([1998] *Potentialities*, 1999) draws on Benjamin's Messianism in his "Critique of Violence" (1921) and calls the real state of exception "The Messianic Kingdom." The task of contemporary political action is to challenge the permanent state of exception in which people live with a more radical state of exception where the law is made meaningless. The challenge comes from people who fulfill the Messianic task by refusing to take a position and thus they challenge the content of the law: Kafka's man from the country who spends his life waiting outside the door of the law asking for a permission to enter that is never given him yet he does not walk away, and Melville's Bartleby who "would prefer not to" yet refrains from walking out of his Wall Street office. They both represent a potentiality to act that that does not compromise itself in acting, and remains suspended in the sheer possibility of acting. They destroy the force of the law by restoring the law to its meaningless potentiality; they overcome the nature of sovereign power by embracing divine violence, violence as pure means without ends. One might conceivably say the same thing about the nameless person who continues to perform the role of the German Emperor even though he could walk out of it in a second.

[Writing on "destituent power" (2013), which he later called "destituent potential" ([2014] *The Use of Bodies*, 2017), Agamben warns that every constituted power knocked down by a constituent revolution resurges in a different form. He advocates a destituent potential that deactivates this dominant system, renders it inoperative, and liberates forces that cannot gel back into constituent power. Drawing on St. Paul's Romans, he specifies that it is the messianic faith that renders inoperative the law without abolishing it. "The law that is 'held firm' is a law rendered destitute of its power to command, that is to say, it is no longer a law of commands/*entolon* and works/*ergon* ... but of faith/*pisteos*" (273-74).]

Apart from destituent potential, there has been a great variety of refusals stemming out of left defeat and/or melancholic disengagement. Some notions have similar theological overtones, such as Simone Weil's "decreation," Adorno's "resignation," Derrida's "unpower," *Tiqqun's* "desertion," Toni Negri's "exodus." Others have a post-Marxist basis, such as the *Parallax* issue on "Mourning Revolution," Scott McCracken's "the mood of defeat," Robyn Marasco's "the highway of despair," *Salvage's* motto "the desolated left," and discussions for absenteeism going back to class for refusal to work. Others have a racial identity, such as Frank Wilderson's "Afro-Pessimism" (which sees black existence as an ontological absence) or a queer orientation, such as Lee Edelman's "no future," Jack Halberstam's "the queer art of failure," and Mari Ruti's *The Ethics of Opting Out* (2017). Some of them invoke tragedy explicitly, such as David Scott's "tragic post-coloniality," T.J. Clark's and Alberto Toscano's "left politics in a tragic key." Last I will mention calls to become barbarians (Crisso & Odoteo: *Barbarians*, 2006) by rejecting the dialectic of recognition, refusing to speak the language of the polis, and acting in uncivil and disorderly ways.

Depending on the theatrical genre we assign to Pirandello's play, we may determine accordingly the political role and agency we attribute to its hero.

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