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The *Hazards of Socialism*: Left Tragic Theatre in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

The *Hazards* of Socialism: Left Tragic Theatre in the Twentieth Century Kevin Lucas

Twentieth-century thinkers sought to understand the durable ideological tendencies of artistic genres. These debates, occurring within Western and Soviet Marxism, influenced major figures in political theatre. Tragedy's fatalism, irrationality, and emotionality were deemed counter-productive to fostering an empowered and informed public. This dissertation interrogates the political left's anti-tragic consensus, arguing that the hope to overcome tragedy in art and in life reflected a naïve optimism. As socialist projects confronted the inevitable challenges of political practice, the triumphalism and intellectual certainty that typified socialist art grew increasingly removed from experience. Unexpectedly, the ancient notion of the tragic became rallying point for radical figures who were troubled by the overconfidence of dominant political parties and artistic programs. The tragedies of leftwing playwrights August Strindberg, Andrei Platonov, Jean Genet, and Amiri Baraka form a neglected tradition within twentieth-century political theatre. Provoking unruly political passions and public scandal, political tragedies offered an alternative to the self-assured theatre of rational critique. Heterodox leftwing thinkers—including Lucien Goldmann, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, and Georges Bataille—likewise grappled with the tragic dimensions of political life. Affirming both the tragic catastrophes and the redemptive reversals made possible by political action, left tragic playwrights and thinkers embraced a passionate, if uncertain, political faith. In an era marked by past failures and looming catastrophes, contemporary artists and thinkers might find resources in the twentieth-century's tragic political discourses. Vulnerability, doubt, pity, and terror do not necessarily enervate political enthusiasms; in fact, affirming ambivalent emotional experiences might make pursuing change more pressing.

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Regarding this dissertation, the ambitions of the inexperienced often outstrip their abilities. With eyes bigger than my appetite, I wrote about the tragic, repressing the fear that my efforts might merge with the subject of my fascination.

My project has not been a triumph. Yet, barring catastrophe, it has also escaped the designation of tragedy. I owe this fate less to myself than to those who stood steadfast during my missteps. Foremost, I would like to thank my advisor Jill Robbins for offering me guidance, support, and stubborn patience. Her generosity gave me the most precious as well as dangerous gift: the chance to produce research that is my own, an opportunity few advisors extend to their students. Geoffrey Bennington and Mikhail Epstein guided me through French and Russian thought with ease and insight. Beyond corrected drafts and helpful criticism, I was fortunate to work with my advisors. In their classrooms, offices, and books, I have learned about the sort of intellectual rigor that forestalls narrow and comforting conclusions.

In writing this project, I explored the possibility that tragedy might be the best name for the shared lives of human beings. Although I rejected his opinion, a famous Italian thinker demands that we stop thinking of collective experience in a tragic light. Rather, with its happy resolutions, mild rebukes, and cheerful optimism, we should hope that the world approaches the comic. Comedy imagines that imperfect humanity—against all odds and expectations—gets the

happy ending it hasn't earned. Rather than tragic tears, the gap between ambition and ability results only in laughter.

I hope my dissertation about tragedy proves to be a comedy. I wish this text and those who made it with me only cheerful conclusions and the mildest of criticism. I wish us nothing but the best: the improbable happy endings that we may not deserve yet would cherish all the more for that very fact.

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We have always already wagered in advance; tragic reason obliges us to become conscious of the wager's inevitability, and to assume the risk it introduces into thought and makes inseparable from each of its moves. We must, therefore, wager: engage our certain action for something that is certainly uncertain. But for which uncertainty? God, nothingness, the fulfillment of human destiny, the classless society? We are pushed reasonably to a leap whose essence, nonetheless, is to put reason at risk. A risk that is calculated but escapes all measure.

[...]

But what is such a thought? Is it mystical? Is it dialectical? Is it tragic?

-----Maurice Blanchot's "Tragic Thought"

Introduction.

Rehearsing the Anti-Tragic Position

Political discourse is at an impasse. At the very moment when the consequences of policy are felt most acutely, a 2,500-year-old conceptual cudgel is deployed:

Don't politicize the tragedy!

Fatalism is a *deus ex machina* in public discourse: tragedy itself descends on the machine to consign human events to the mysterious will of the gods or the unalterable forces of nature. Cynical deployments of “good taste” demand the renunciation of agency precisely when its exercise is most imperative. Every time the frightened public is cowed into silence after a purported tragedy, human beings signal their willingness to perform in a drama authored from above: if not by divine design, then at least by worldly parties who benefit from tame acquiescence.

American politics offers a concrete example of this political logic. Gun control activists seize on mass shootings to bring attention to existing laws. Despite the intuitiveness of this approach, invective greets their efforts. A chorus of opponents declares *don't exploit victims for your selfish aims!* Debate founders as matters of policy descend into familiar factional strife. Discursive deadlock itself reinforces conservative political visions. Who wouldn’t want a gun within a world in which both violence and cynical attempts to make suffering useful feel inevitable; in a world where, tragically, nothing changes? Superstition, coupled with a cruel optimism, demands we not look any further at the tragic, beyond perfunctory thoughts and prayers.

One might think tragedy would appeal to the individualism of the current era. Yet the reigning economic rationality—having usurped any politics or morality worthy of their names—

advises cautious avoidance of tragic potentials. In those matters that cannot yet be mourned away, defenders of the status quo warn of the “tragedy of the commons”: the claim that any alternative to individual possession and self-interest will cause collective catastrophe. For many in the social sciences and policy, hopes for increased social cooperation, rather than competition, display a drive toward collective destruction.

Recognizing the reactionary appeals to tragedy in political discourse, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben contends “after Auschwitz, it is not possible to use a tragic paradigm in ethics” (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 97). The challenges of contemporary politics and morality demand the renunciation of tragedy’s austerity and hopelessness. It is no surprise that so many others urge a “taking leave of tragedy” as Agamben does (*The End of the Poem* 130): tragedy arrives to end political discussions that should just be beginning.

The task of replacing tragedy has been understood as a matter of great importance for internationalism. Jean-Luc Nancy’s “After Tragedy” similarly affirms that it is “incumbent upon us to find our goodbye to tragedy,” drawing on the thought of Bertolt Brecht (288). Criticisms from the left are not unfounded. Modern invocations of the tragic often work to conserve the social order’s practices. Deriving from Greek rituals of civic unity, nationalistic tragedies build and enforce consensus. Modern tragedies frequently represent the tragic downfall as a noble sacrifice that ensures the community’s security. Even worse, contemporary tragedy depicts the expulsion of social misfits as a means to restore society to health, repeating the ancient scapegoating model.¹

¹ Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper* (2014) shows the sacrificial and scapegoating tendencies of tragic art. The most lethal sniper in American history is traumatized by wartime experiences that render him unsuited to the way of life he fought to protect. His hardships are a sacrifice for national security, his death a bitter cure that returns society to normal functioning.

The left has even called into question socially-critical tragedies.² Raymond Williams argued that modern tragedies pit doomed heroes against the political ills of their times, accidentally reinforcing an individualism that forecloses collective action. Failure of the righteous yet ultimately ineffective individual sacralizes the miseries of the present. Suffering seems inevitable, gaining an aura of eternity, truth, and even something like justice. Excusing their own unwillingness to take action, audiences feel good about themselves by sympathizing with those who try and fail.

Tragedy mystifies hardship, making pain into something perversely comforting. It is no wonder that influential political playwrights and theorists Brecht and Augusto Boal condemned catharsis as politically enervating. Rather than directing indignant energies at combatable problems, audiences have a good cry about “what cannot be changed”, equating historical problems with universal conditions.

Against the conservative attempt to halt discussion, the politically unsatisfied seek to keep it open. For example, *The Onion* has reported every mass shooting in the United States since 2014 in the same way. Mocking the call not to politicize the so-called tragedy, America’s leading satirical newspaper beams a photograph of the crime scene or of distraught mourners to more than 13 million followers on Twitter and Instagram. The same headline accompanies each image:

“’No Way To Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens”

For the left and their reluctant liberal bedfellows within American politics, this riposte diagnoses a conservative blockage to transformative action. A conservative talking-point becomes

² Works such as Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* and Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*.

laughable with each successive tweet. The headline is so famous that it has become the topic of repeated headlines in other publications.³

Critiquing Critique: Towards a Theory of the Left Tragic

What America's democratic-leaning news sources do not report is that *The Onion* is making use of a strategy with deep roots in socialist thought and art. This dissertation addresses longstanding anti-tragic sentiments on the political left. This tradition of critique has challenged dominant ways of thinking that naturalize suffering and inhibit human potential. Both intellectually and politically, the anti-tragic polemic, rehearsed in the previous pages, deserves admiration.

Yet the left has also contributed to the inertia of contemporary debate. Gunfire elicits *don't politicize the tragedy* which in turn produces “*No Way To Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens*”. Progressive readers of *The Onion* gain relief at the striking of their Pavlovian bell: the comforting reminder that they have the intelligence and power to change the world, if only they were allowed to exercise it. Associating itself with good sense and virile capability, critique returns to rhetorical strategies that deny the ineradicable vulnerability of living with others and the uncertainty of the future. The confidence that opposing factions alone stand in the way of a better world is complacent and self-enamored.

The satiric newspaper opens the possibility of another reading, one richer in tragic pathos as well as political insight. Are not gun control advocates also mocked for returning time and again to the same failed rhetorical strategy? Political imaginations remain tethered to old habits, the most disappointing of all scenarios for political radicalism. The hope to escape the tragic accidentally creates a sense of futility.

³ *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, and other news sources have run articles on *The Onion's* laconic critique.

One might attribute the anti-tragic position to Karl Marx himself, who often extolled humanity's ability to overcome any obstacle thwarting collective flourishing. Yet Marx, following Hegel, associated tragedy with necessary historical changes rather than universal human suffering. Taking on positive connotations, Marx employed tragedy as a model to understand historical and economic transition. In the famous statements that open *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* — history repeats itself “first as tragedy, then as farce” (594) — tragedy is not a term of outright disrespect. Though he saw the performative zeal of France’s bourgeois revolutionaries as self-aggrandizing, Marx recognized the tragic revolution of the 1790’s as historically progressive.⁴ Rhetorically, Marx used comparisons to literary genre with relative consistency. For instance, Marx criticized G.F. Daumer for fleeing “the tragedies of history” for the “comfort in so-called nature”, viewing tragedy as a genre that meaningfully confronts “the decline of former social classes” (“Reviews from the Neue Rheinische Zeitung” 244-246). These comments contradict the later socialist polemic that associates tragedy with a flight from history into nature.

Instead, the distinct politico-aesthetic injunction against tragedy gained articulation in Western and Soviet Marxism. These two intellectual movements made great strides in theorizing the role of art and language in political life. Despite earlier leftists often denigrating the symbolic, the twentieth-century left engaged seriously with questions of artistic representation. Rather than apolitical formalism, the luminaries of Western and Soviet Marxism theorized the political preconceptions imbedded within the durable conventions of art.

⁴ His characterization of liberal revolution as the serious genre of “tragedy” and the nationalistic restoration of the Second Empire as low “farce” testify to his not wholly negative relationship to tragedy. Often using literary typographies to understand political questions, Marx employed tragedy as a term of qualified respect.

Their verdict was that tragedy's reification of suffering and minimization of human agency were inconducive to politics. For the left, tragedy's spectators are too weepy and hysterical. Enchanted by the illusion of fate, tragic spectators are unable to understand the causes of political downfall.

Instead, epic forms were held as viable instruments of ideological art. Long viewed to be a public genre, epic often depicts the origin of a political community. Epic's unifying myths strengthen the community's internal bonds. Going further, such art could foster mentalities that have the confidence necessary to weather the adventures of political life. To some, epic even has the power to create national languages and identities: Homer and Dante are often credited with speaking Greek and Italian self-awareness into being. György Lukács saw modern epic as an instrument to overcome the "homelessness" of modernity through a communist worldview that unites and shelters all people. It is no wonder Western Marxism, conceiving of politics in domestic terms, had suspicions about tragedy, a genre George Steiner believed to represent man as "an unwelcome guest in the universe" (x).

An epic theatre thus became necessary. The German playwright and director Erwin Piscator elucidated a theory of epic theatre in *The Political Theatre* (1929), setting the stage for other thinkers. Piscator associates the terms epic and political closely in a way that gives structure to politico-aesthetic thought while necessarily also bounding it.⁵ But it was Piscator's collaborators—Bertolt Brecht and leading figures in the Soviet arts— who were crucial to the spread of polemics against tragedy.

⁵ Reading Piscator's account of the violence within Weimar political culture, the desire to cultivate feelings of strength and conviction in the political left— which found itself in struggle with rising fascism, aggressive liberals, and even its own leadership— is understandable.

Through the common influence of Brechtian and Soviet aesthetics, the desire to be liberated from tragedy unites diverse thinkers and artists. Even those who often sparred within internecine leftist debates found themselves in agreement on this point. Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Roland Barthes, Peter Szondi, Leon Trotsky, Maxim Gorki, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Raymond Williams, and many others militated against the form that brought ruin to confident political leaders (Oedipus) and to wavering plotters (Hamlet) alike.

The bias against the tragic even became the topic of books from major leftist thinkers. Both Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, major figures in academic Marxism, recognized this position as a unifying heuristic for understanding the political tendencies of performance. Williams's *Modern Tragedy* (1966) and Eagleton's *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2002) sought to rehabilitate tragedy on the left. But these efforts produced backhanded compliments, again evincing elements of the anti-tragic polemic.

I recognize the power of an epic theatre designed to educate and empower; indeed, a tragic art with leftist sympathies seems contrary to political instinct. Nevertheless, in an era when the left's intuitive plans fail time and again, the anti-tragic position should be reexamined. In my view, the desire to eliminate the tragic has dovetailed with the most hypocritical tendencies of the political left: the overconfidence of a movement that has claimed rationality and agency as its exclusive *properties*. Critique has failed to disenchant liberalism's rational subject of its faux-freedom or to shatter the quasi-divine wisdom of the conservative select. In coveting the intellectual possessions (rationality and agency) of their opponents, socialist radicals appear like usurpers rather than liberators. The confident forward gaze of anti-tragic art and thought forgets an important article of faith to a leftist politics: individual property—including one's habits,

skills, and even emotions—properly belongs to the living as well as the dead generations whose labor produces each person.

Marx affirmed that to avoid farce in politics, society must revolutionize that which is inherited. Yet Marx acknowledges that creative inheritance often goes wrong:

men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past. (“The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” 103-104)

Not always consciously aware of their own motivations, human beings inherit circumstances that shape the consequences of their actions. To get somewhere new—a world without suffering and strife—Marx suggests with trepidation that they go through the old “nightmares”, tragedy included, as the text’s famous opening lines assert. Marx recognizes radical political action tries and often fails in its transformative ambitions. The subject is always indebted to its formation, liable to repeat history’s mistakes in its ambitious projects.

Rather than striding forward away from humanity’s past and inherited forms, the left must actively engage all that it considers atavistic. The young Marx himself posited the importance of working through the irrationality of spirituality to arrive at a rational future of communism. Writing to Arnold Ruge, Marx declares:

the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality. It will become evident that it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and future, but of *realising* the thoughts of the past. Lastly, it will become evident that mankind is not beginning a *new* work, but is consciously carrying into effect its old work. (“Letter to Ruge”)

Engaging the sacred dreams and tragic nightmares of human history is uncertain and dangerous, but the “new work” builds on the unconscious hopes present in the political, religious, and aesthetic works of the past.⁶

Looking to the tragic drama of controversial leftist playwrights of the twentieth century, this dissertation charts a road less-taken in politico-aesthetics. The four modern tragedians discussed in detail—August Strindberg, Andrei Platonov, Jean Genet, and Amiri Baraka—refused notions of rationality, security, human agency, and intelligibility, attracting criticisms of political irresponsibility. It is true, the tragic preoccupations of these playwrights often look reactionary, despite the authors’ personal political stances. But dialectics demand circuitous journeys.

Conservatives and liberals bemoan “the hazards of socialism”, focusing debate on the failed gambles that have plagued socialism. As it so often does, the left combats these accusations with declarations of its own moral and intellectual invulnerability. In refusing to acknowledge its own dangers, the left clings to a delusion that convinces no one, allowing conservatives and liberals to seem reasonable in comparison.

Leaving behind good taste and good sense, these playwrights affirm “the *hazards* of socialism”. Not just the dangers of socialist world-building and the reinvention of the human being, but the *hazard* of politics writ large: the daring gambles made in the name of the future.⁷

⁶ Marx’s view that a socialist revolution must disavow the “poetry of the past” for the “poetry of the future” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire* 106) conflicts with sentiments such as “it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and future” (“Letter to Ruge”). Both the epic hope to inaugurate a new future and the tragic confrontation with ancestral curses appear in Marx’s work.

⁷ This cluster of words entered European languages from the Spanish *azar* (“chance”), itself derived from the Arabic words for “dice” and “to shine”. The English *hazard*, the French *hasard*, and the Russian *азарт* combine a number of meanings. These associations highlight the close relationship between hope and danger: venture, fortuitous luck, chance, obstacle, recklessness, coincidence, randomness, passion, and to risk, guess, or gamble. The Arabic reaches back to even more ambivalent roots: some etymologists trace it to the Middle Persian word for “poison” and the Proto Indo-European for “to slay, kill, strike”. I am pushing against the univocity of the English

The political decision—which makes us as we make it—always contains the dual possibility of tragic loss and redemptive gain.

This “left tragic” has much in common with the left sacred (or impure sacred) first theorized by William Robertson Smith. Unlike the right sacred, it is not connected to disciplined adherence to ritual procedures and social consensus. Instead, the left sacred arises from transgressions that invite sinister transformations. Robert Hertz, a Durkheimian sociologist who theorized polarity in culture, suggested that the right sacred aids in the process by which “every social hierarchy claims to be founded on the nature of things [...] it thus accords itself with eternity; it escapes change and the attacks of innovators” (Hertz 89). The left sacred is its opposing force: a violation and contamination of the naturalized social convention (i.e. the taboo) that produces supernatural reversals that endanger existing hierarchies.

Rather than the disenchantment of politics, these playwrights elucidate a left sacred politics whose dangers might add to, rather than extinguish, socialism’s allure. Fighting for the historically-formed fantasies of their audiences, a feeling for the sublime remains central to political engagement in the *left tragic theatre*.

Left Tragic Theatre within the History of Political Theatre

Two factors have delayed the recognition of Strindberg, Platonov, Genet, and Baraka as political playwrights of the left. First, their tragedies were generally not performed in self-declared political theatres. Secondly, tragic sensibilities and a lack of clear messages were considered enervating to political enthusiasm.

phrase “the hazards of socialism,” focusing on both the positive and negative possibilities within the notion of chance.

Scholars have long recognized the theatre as crucial element of political life, yet the designator “political theatre” has traditionally been reserved for certain institutions. As a public practice that could only flourish with explicit or tacit government support, theatre in Europe was often instrumentalized to educate audiences into dominant identities and values.

The theatre’s embrace of role-playing had once earned it critics among certain European religious and political mentalities indebted to Plato and Augustine. But the days of viewing actors as rogues, as was the law in the England of Shakespeare’s youth, transformed quickly during European modernity. The political and aesthetic environment of Shakespeare’s maturity already allowed his company to influence the highest nobility at court as well as the urban masses at the newly constructed Globe Theatre (1599).

Each European nation followed different timelines in overcoming suspicion of the theatre. Yet eventually the allure of shaping mass opinion won out everywhere, despite temporary backslides (such as the closing of the theatres of England in 1642). France’s Comédie-Française, founded in 1680, testifies to the union between art and the rising state.

By the nineteenth century, the educational and artistic institutions envisioned to bolster Romantic nationalism had become common-sense policy. As Friedrich Schiller declared of the ununified German states, “if we could witness the birth of our own national theater, then we would truly become a nation” (Schiller). For those who believed it fostered social enlightenment and cohesion, the theatre invested the inevitable changes of historical life with shared meaning and coherence.

Proponents of the tradition of national and commercial theatres viewed them as up-building and pedagogical for large groups not reached by the other arts (whether due to illiteracy or disinclination). Ideologically policed, these institutions offered some flexibility in low

theatrical forms and musical performance, but the spoken drama demanded clear ethical or political messages. Even Eugène Scribe, who famously declared the theatre is “for relaxation and amusement, not for instruction or correction” (Kuritz 318), made moral lessons obligatory in the *pièce bien faite*. Well-made plays of Scribe, dominating state as well as commercial theatres for decades, necessarily included a *scène à faire*, or obligatory scene, that ridicules social or political vice.

Even the problem play (*pièce à these*) built from Scribe’s formulaic drama to bulwark its social thesis: moralizing was often pleasing enough for the masses and useful enough for political authorities to motivate productions. For example, Alexandre Dumas’s *La Dame aux Camélias*, among the most performed plays of the nineteenth century, was shocking in its attack on elites. However, as Stephen Stanton explains, the play and its scandalous message had been censored for two years: the first minister under Louis Napoleon only approved its release to distract attention from the French Coup of 1851 orchestrated by his faction. Political criticism within state and commercial theatres was often bounded by utilitarian concerns. Thus, the first variety of theatre that is generally recognized as “political” served a conservative role.

However, a second type of political theatre arose in the late-nineteenth century. In states with liberal political freedoms, the political theatre of critique became influential. In these theaters, liberals and socialists advanced messages deemed discomfiting to the contemporary order. At last, political contestation could reach the masses, exciting artists and thinkers of the left. Though the politically unsatisfied had long seen the theatre as an instrument to lull viewers into a stupor of self-defeating ideological assumptions, they did not question the potential of theatre to educate and shape public opinion. Different theatres, unbothered to existing powers,

were needed. Two parallel political theatre traditions existed across Europe and North America: the socially dominant theatre of reigning moralities and a theatre of critique.

The latter tendency gave birth to its own set of institutions in France and other states with some degree of free speech. Paris's *Théâtre du peuple*, founded in 1895, arose out of the German *Freie Volksbühne* movement that sought to bring intellectual development to the masses at little or no charge. No parallel institution arose in Imperial Russia, famously uncomfortable with criticism in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the bourgeois theatres of Russia quickly became sites of socially conscious productions. Across Europe and Western Europe, bourgeois theatres began staging plays with increasingly radical ideological tendencies.

The plays produced at recognizably "political theatres" were often similar in politico-aesthetic sensibilities. It was agreed that political theatre, as a matter of genre, contains messages. Even newer forms of political theatre, such as the Naturalism springing from Émile Zola's work in the 1880's, maintained fairly unambiguous political orientations, despite doing away with the well-made play's contrivances.⁸

Socially critical political theatres sought to make their ideological truth present, visible, and intelligible. The work of eminent political playwrights Romain Rolland, Maxim Gorky, and George Bernard Shaw sought to call attention to social and political ills hidden from public consciousness. Even explicitly Marxist plays that experimented radically with new forms, such as those of Piscator, viewed intelligibility as the central political and aesthetic virtue. Practitioners and critics believed that the performance, in order to be political, must communicate a message that the audience consciously or unconsciously understands. The theatre

⁸ For example, Gerhart Hauptman's *The Weavers* depicts the Silesian weavers' uprising rather than romantic intrigue, shifting focus from isolated individuals to an entire class. With sufficient ease, the audience deciphers the thesis against industrialization.

serves as a multiplier: a convincing point is amplified by the number of audience members present. Hopefully, the audience begins to think and act as one. This dream animates political theatre of different ideological characters: Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Brecht's Marxist epic theatre, Nazi thing-plays, Stalinist melodrama, and so on.

Yet the plays of Strindberg, Genet, Baraka, and Platonov refuse to communicate univocal messages, instead stoking divisive feelings within audiences. Their works accept risk and uncertainty as central to political as well as artistic practice, confusing many who might otherwise be ideologically sympathetic. Each figure participates in modern experimental theatre's controversial dispossession of meaning, delaying their recognition as political playwrights. But are playwrights who deny the audience comforting feelings of mastery necessarily destructive to transformative political ambitions? Like the tragedies they inherit, the playwrights of this dissertation pose a challenge to mentalities fixed on possession and control.

The Left Tragic in Twentieth-Century Thought

Strindberg, Platonov, Genet, and Baraka share formal and ideological similarities. Despite dominant tendencies in twentieth-century leftist aesthetics rejecting tragedy, certain twentieth-century theorists articulate tragic political sensibilities that resonate with these playwrights. This dissertation draws from the thought of Georges Bataille, Theodor Adorno, Lucien Goldmann, and Jacques Derrida.

Georges Bataille (1897-1962) emphasized the possibility to reenchant politics despite the left's long aims at demystification. Participating in the Collège de Sociologie, a group of far-left intellectuals that came together in France in the 1930's, Bataille and his collaborators drew upon their extensive knowledge of sociology of religion to understand contemporary events. They noticed the skill with which the political right utilized notions of sacrality and myth. To combat

fascism, the left would need to develop their own aestheticized political strategies capable of moving the public ecstatically as faith once had. That is to say, to be moved beyond existing identities (personal, national, ideological, religious, or sexual).

The thinkers associated with the Collège de Sociologie sought to create modern forms of the *left sacred*. The left sacred, a social fact created through collective belief, stimulates desires for loss of self and chance. It is capable of competing with fascism's appeal to the *right sacred*. The right sacred, possessing aesthetic beauty, taps into hopes for the stable identities, secure communities, and ordered destinies that tradition promises. The hope to compete with the right at their own politico-theological game of holy sacrifice was not without risks, offering none of the good conscience of contemporaneous communist parties.⁹ Bataille attempted to reclaim Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking of tragedy for the left, putting emphasis on the disruptive dimensions of the Dionysian against fascism's embrace of the Apollonian.

Bataille was unafraid of mimetic representation and emotionality, viewing literature and performance as rituals capable of producing the social fact of the sacred. In Bataille's theory of sacrifice, the act is a theatrical ruse. Participants form a bond of sympathetic identification with the victim, experiencing something of the dissolution of their own bourgeois subjectivity at the moment of the deathblow. This fleeting moment of *communication* between self and other, in which rationality and its utilitarian projects cease, is the sacred yet unstable grounds for a more consuming *communism*. The ritual aims to sacrifice reason's fantasies of utility and teleology, believing them to lead back to capitalism and individualism. This experience has political force, though whether reactionary or radical cannot be guaranteed beforehand. As Bataille writes in *Sur*

⁹ See Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's "A Left Sacred or a Sacred Left: The Collège de Sociologie, Fascism, and Political Culture in Interwar France" and Alexander T. Riley's "'Renegade' Durkheimianism' and the Transgressive Left Sacred".

Nietzsche: Volonté de chance [*On Nietzsche: The Will to Chance*], community “can’t take place without wounding or tainting our humanity [...] it itself is guilty” (18). Communication demands that the security of sovereign individuals be disavowed: community “cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked* [*mis en jeu*]” (*On Nietzsche* 19, *Oeuvres complètes* VI 44).¹⁰

Bataille’s risk-taking thought opposes scientistic socialisms that proudly declare their “absence of myth” (“The Absence of Myth” 48-49). Since even André Breton’s bohemian surrealists, who otherwise praised chance and the unconscious, justified discipline to the PCF as their objective destiny, Bataille’s hope that the left would embrace emotionally powerful fictions and rituals seemed untimely. Though many radical thinkers have chastised Bataille’s celebration of tragedy and sacrifice,¹¹ Bataille’s treatment of these notions provides an alternative account. Bataille signals a way in which the “limit experiences” traditionally associated with religious mysticism can realize leftist injunctions to move beyond the bourgeois subject and capitalist economic rationalities.¹²

Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) also engaged with contemporary politics through sociological and philosophical approaches. Associated with the Frankfurt School, Adorno was central to the tradition of Western Marxism, the incubator of the “critical theory” popular in academic discourse. For Adorno, the social, political, and economic orders have primacy over the individual, molding the latter’s thoughts, feelings, and identity. His verdict was certain:

¹⁰ Derrida notes “*mettre en jeu* is one of Bataille’s most fundamental and used expression” (*Writing and Difference* 254).

¹¹ Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben speak critically of tragedy, sacrifice, and the sacred, believing these entwined notions to be complicit in politically undesirable projects. For both thinkers, Bataille is the image of a leftist gone wrong, embracing the very things socialism must defeat. See Nancy’s “The Unsacrificable,” “After Tragedy,” and *The Inoperative Community*.

¹² Bataille discusses the importance of tragic experience to his notion of community across various works. For Bataille, the tragic is always comic as well. The destruction of the subject at its moment of realization is laughable as well as horrifying to onlookers; its affect is “gay anguish” (“Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” 25).

contemporary human beings are *damaged life*, unable to realize personal and collective freedom. Life under capitalism inculcated dispositions inimical to fostering human reason. Contemporary forms of art, education, and labor convince the human being to accept passively its alienation and exploitation as desirable.

Adorno felt that Enlightenment models of subjectivity (prizing means-ends rationality, individuality, and calculative reason) reinforce dominant consumerist mentalities, making alternatives to capitalism seem like mere fancy. *Negative Dialectics* promises to turn subjectivity against its current historical forms. In Adorno's appraisal, only one who uses "his own strength, which he owes to identity, to cast off the façade of identity—would truly be a subject" (*Negative Dialectics* 277).

But philosophy does not engage in the critique of contemporary reason alone. For Adorno, thought takes direction from contemporary art. Adorno contested the epic politico-aesthetics of other major Western Marxists. As scholars have noted, tragic form possesses a privileged position in Adorno's oeuvre.¹³ In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno argues that what looks like progress—such as the European embrace of secularity, technology, and rational agency—is a return to barbarism. Attacking the bourgeois character of epic form, Adorno contends that every sacrifice that Odysseus makes is a calculated decision to increase his own and, by extension, Greece's wealth and prestige. Unlike the tragic which approaches "non-identity", epic reinforces existing identities (such as Greek and barbarian, master and slave) that naturalize violence and exploitation. Greek epic leaves long catalogues of dead enemies,

¹³ See Christopher Rocco, Karoline Gritzner, Samir Gandesha, and Markku Nivalainen for accounts of Adorno's tragic tastes.

soldiers, and servants: Soviet epic, which Lukács had helped formulate,¹⁴ is likewise implicated in the ills of the twentieth century.

Adorno believed that the confusing experiences of tragedy offered a greater chance for political change. Preferring the polysemy of Samuel Beckett to the didactic songs of Brecht, Adorno saw art as politically valuable only if it was difficult to consume; only if it forced the viewer or reader to attempt to understand something beyond inherited concepts. Existing categories are always in danger of a reifying contemporary conditions and thus retarding historical development. Like Bataille, Adorno argued art must seek uselessness to have political worth: only then can it accidentally approach that which does not serve existing regimes. Adorno avows mimesis in a way that does not reify existing identities as the realist theatre might. Instead, the work of art performs a *negative mimesis* that attempts yet ultimately fails to “recoil” from history. Readers and viewers are forced to confront political and economic conditions in a distorted fashion that engages their intelligence. Adorno demonstrates how philippics against subjectivity, intelligibility, reason, and epic might serve the left.

French-Romanian sociologist Lucien Goldmann (1913-1970) took steps to articulate a tragic Marxism. His work inspired political thinkers as diverse as the French Trotskyist Daniel Bensaïd and the Scottish Left Catholic Alasdair MacIntyre. Though also writing traditional works of social science, Goldmann often sought to think through political questions indirectly

¹⁴ Adorno argues that calls for epic, strength, and vitality make the left complicit in atrocities. Adorno writes that Lukács’s criticism of formalist art “brings with it all the horrors of persecution and extermination, and not only in Russia. The term ‘decadence’ belongs to the vocabulary of conservatism [...] The idea of decadence can scarcely be entertained in the absence of its positive counterpart: the image of nature in all its vigour and abundance. The categories of nature are smuggled illicitly into the meditations of society, the very practice against which the tenor of Marx’s and Engels’ critique of ideology was directed” (“Reconciliation under Duress” 154-155). Lukács will be discussed in detail in Chapter One as an exemplar of anti-tragic aesthetics and politics.

via examples theatrical history. Unlike many sociologists of art, Goldmann showed a taste for creative productions that lacked clear political meanings.

The young Goldmann took his direction from Lukács. Lukács began his career as sociological commentator on theatre and tragedy before renouncing his earlier interests upon joining of the Communist Party. He began to militate for epic forms of art, hoping they could provide a uniting worldview for international socialism. Lukács's Marxist works were the "overcoming of tragedy" in Goldman's initially positive assessment (Goldman xv). But Goldmann grew increasingly alarmed with the attitudes of the communist parties of Europe for whom Lukacs provided ideological service.

Goldmann's *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine* (1956) attempts to reclaim the tragic and political theology for the left, seeing tragic mentalities as an antidote to the utilitarian exploitation and dangerous certainty of international socialism. As Michael Löwy explains, Goldmann's motivated gesture obliquely targeted two of the most significant Communist thinkers (Lukács and Henri Lefebvre). Lefebvre, in his 1954 *Pascal*, declared the tragic and its ghosts "outdated" regarding the rational present era, not dissimilarly to Lukács confidence.

Goldmann sought to grapple with the tragic, finding its most powerful examples in the thought of Pascal and the drama of Racine. Goldmann argues that "many forms of religious and revolutionary consciousness have insisted upon the incompatibility [...] between values and reality" (50). In the "tragic world vision", individuals perceive that they live simultaneously in two worlds whose differences cannot be resolved: an "invisible" world of unrealized transcendental values (reason, community, justice) and a "visible" realm of radical insufficiency

(human vanity, error, and illusion).¹⁵ In the ambiguity of historical existence, thirsts to materialize unambiguous ideals lead tragic man to a gamble. For Pascal, it is a wager on the existence of the “hidden god” and an intelligible existence after death. For Goldmann, the wager is on a different hidden god: that history’s telos is a socialist community in which human beings realize their rational and moral capacities. Goldmann asserts transformative action must alter human beings and their shared world in ways that cannot be calculated in advance. The wager is neither rational nor irrational in itself. Marx’s call for the educator to educate himself is an invigorating yet potentially catastrophic path in Goldmann’s socialism. The difference between tragic thought and dialectical thought—if there is one—will reveal itself only in the future. If revolutionary action fails to transform existing forms of life, then Marxism will be said to be a tragic philosophy. Its greatness will be measured by the magnitude of its failure.

Derrida was in uneasy relation with his contemporary French left, contesting Enlightenment ideals in a way that struck many as reactionary. Derrida expressed misgivings with the “tyrannical” influence of the PCF which stifled self-critical leftist perspectives (“Politics and Friendship” 187). Though Derrida’s political thought differs from Goldmann’s socialist humanism, both thinkers situate political decisions in an unclear zone between rationality and irrationality. Derrida makes his strongest statements about politics and decision-making through a reading of Pascal, imbuing deconstructive political thought with traces of Pascal’s tragic and risk-taking philosophy.¹⁶ Derrida’s “passive decision” (*Rogues* 152) is made under conditions of urgency and inadequate knowledge. For Derrida, the decision gambles on the realization of

¹⁵ Pascal avows that the human being is torn between “beast and angel”. Goldmann takes this motif, explaining that this divided nature is a historical condition: man’s fallen state is the result of economic conditions that make even human reason suspect (akin to Adorno’s notion of damage).

¹⁶ See “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundations of Authority’”. Notably, Derrida does not explicitly address Pascal’s wager.

justice yet never knows if instead it commits injustice. Such is the undecidable nature of moral and political investment, a domain of bad conscience that might make some wish apoliticism were possible.

Derrida reacted to the same attitudes common among mid-century leftists that troubled Adorno and Bataille. Though it is a matter of speculation, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993) perhaps responded to the same comments by Lefebvre that aroused Goldmann's criticism. Lefebvre's second volume on Pascal ends with a statement of anti-tragic confidence:

History moves forward, in the horizon of an era growing distant [...] The violent interest aroused by his [Pascal's] tragedy aroused its critical response. The anguish of Pascalian alienation becomes increasingly foreign to us. It grows distant as a metaphysical anguish: the ghosts of Hamlet and Pascal make us shiver, but we no longer believe in ghosts. For us, this anxiety is now dated. (240)

Yet alienation and anxiety—whether Pascalian, Shakespearean, or capitalist—remain relevant for Derrida. We still believe in that which does not have true foundations. Specters from the past still haunt the present in Derrida's view: the contemporary polis cannot purge itself of tragedy. This realization might undermine scientific Marxism, but it grants force to another leftism. The ghost of Marx “remains an immigrant *chez nous*, a glorious, sacred, accursed but still clandestine immigrant as he was all his life. He belongs [...] to that ‘time out of joint’ in which is inaugurated, laboriously, painfully, tragically, a new thinking of borders, a new experience of the house, the home, and the economy” (*Specters of Marx* 174). A quasi-sacred Marxism might provoke the tragically painful yet necessary interrogation of identity and possession.

Resistant to Marxists assured of their own good conscience, Derrida probes the confluence of the tragic and Marxism. He develops a thinking of the “specter”—an untimely figure that troubles temporal and spatial categories—that has unknown political force. Derrida's

work celebrates Marxism now that the mythology of its objectivity was shattered by the Soviet Union's collapse. Yet communism's failure to predict the future does not prohibit its potential to continue changing it. In an age of neoliberal capitalism, anachronistic encounters with the left disrupt political habits that are already known to fall short of justice. Derrida warns that existing regimes forestall the event through the naturalization of customs and vocabularies. Describing what Marxists call reification, Derrida attacks those who deny the "mystical foundations of authority" (borrowing from Pascal). The mechanical repetition of existing structures and identities that liberal capitalism hopes for would be the end of political life.

As the paradigmatic political actor, Hamlet must "redress [...] the wrong of history" that he inherits but does not fully understand (*Specters of Marx* 24). His ill-fated responsibility resonates with the general demand to right socio-historical injustices as we "fantasize" them—often along Marxist lines. Derrida explains:

There is tragedy, there is the essence of the tragic only on the condition of this originarity, more precisely of this pre-originarity and properly spectral anteriority of the crime—the crime of the other, a misdeed, whose even and reality, whose truth can never *present themselves* in flesh and blood, but can only allow themselves to be presumed, reconstructed, fantasized. One does not, for all that, bear any less of a responsibility, beginning at birth, even if it is only the responsibility to repair an [...] If right and law stems from vengeance, as Hamlet seems to complain that it does [...] can one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance?" (24-25).

Crimes are shared by all and committed by none in particular. The call to rectify injustice falls to everyone in deconstructive ethics, though all attempts invite tragic catastrophe. Just as Hamlet's encounter with his dead father's ghost motivates his political coup, the ghosts of socialism can still cause unforeseen historical peripeteias. Despite often representing the future as

predetermined, the closure of tragic form and Marxist thought allow for creative inheritances with potential political value.¹⁷

This other leftism would not be a matter of epic confidence but the tragic conjunction of impossibility and necessity, the locus of Derrida's career-long re-inscription of transcendental as well as messianic thought. Though it is unclear what tragic man gains other than an impossible burden, Blanchot writes "what he loses is evident: ease, forgetfulness, tranquil malaise, dull pleasures, and an almost agreeable nausea" ("Tragic Thought" 99). Following Blanchot, Derrida describes the call of politics as a tragic condition more torturous than the "almost agreeable nausea" fashionable among strident French Marxists.¹⁸ Hamlet and Antigone, sensing that their bodies are penetrated by the crimes of others, feel an urgent and painful need to restore justice to their political communities and rectitude to their own bodies; these tragic heroes become exemplars of the contemporary political subject for Derrida. Derrida identifies "the bottomless wound; the irreparable tragedy" (*Specters of Marx* 25) that haunts political actors, moving them to take dangerous risks.

What Blanchot calls "tragic thought" unites Bataille, Adorno, Goldmann, and Derrida. Not believing in the unmediated access to political realities, each approach social questions through the lens of tragic form. Attention to how art, madness, and faith shape political consciousness permeates their work. All viewed incremental progress toward Enlightenment ideals as complacent self-satisfaction. Utilitarian political programs view actions as well-

¹⁷ In "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation", Derrida suggests that the closure of inherited forms does not foreclose futurity or difference: representation's closure might also create a "*playing space*" without beginning or end (*Writing and Difference* 250). Implying that tragedy might have a positive valence, the essay concludes "to think the closure of representation is to think the tragic: not as the representation of fate, but as the fate of representation. [...] And it is to think why it is *fatal* that, in its closure, representation continues" (250). Derrida sees the tragic and its playful cruelty as positing "the unity of necessity and chance", exposing this conventional opposition that forestalls new developments to the "gratuitous and baseless necessity" of its own failure (250).

¹⁸ Nausea was Jean-Paul Sartre's favored metaphor for the demands of moral and political duty.

calculated maneuvers, forgetting the sacrificial and hazardous fantasies that motivate political gambles.

Adorno and Goldmann indicate that rational subjectivity and community might be achieved through labor, resonating with Strindberg, Platonov, and Baraka. Derrida and Bataille better contextualize Genet, sharing a suspicion of forms of politics that attempt to instantiate conventional moral virtues. Differences notwithstanding, these playwrights and thinkers show that the tragic served as a rallying-point for twentieth-century leftists who experienced discomfort with epic Marxism. The Bible pledged to enslave slavery, take captivity captive, and to annul the law by law. Socialism aims to fulfill the promises that religion failed to realize, inviting tragic and redemptive reversals alike.

Political Theatre: Educating the Educators

Chapter One interrogates the conventional opposition of Brecht and Lukács. The contemporary left often pits experimentalism (Brecht's "formalism") favorably against conservatism (Lukacs's realism). Yet I argue Brecht's influential epic theatre follows Lukács's anti-tragic aesthetic and political thought. For both figures, the goal of political art is to cultivate "epic" clarity, confidence, and unity. In Brechtian aesthetics, the political tableau highlights the intellectualist disposition that unites Brecht with Lukács. The visible becomes saturated with intelligible political meaning that audiences decode together. Among Brecht's theoretical followers, notably Roland Barthes and Peter Szondi who assert their distance from Lukács's Stalinist program, advocacy for the political image became a leftist truism.

Chapters Two (Strindberg), Three (Genet), and Four (Baraka) offer a genealogical counter-history of political theatre. This minor tradition aims to arouse the passions rather than embracing political pedagogy. Though associated with the political left, these playwrights have

not earned a status within the history of leftist political theatre. Produced in high aesthetic theatres, these modern tragedies challenge many of the conventional tenets (rationality, action, recognition, community) of responsible political engagement. For Strindberg, Genet, and Baraka, political and aesthetic intervention was never as simple as unmasking the truth. Theatricality and appearances were too central to political life to ever be done away with in a triumphant *anagnorisis*.

According to Freddie Rokem, Strindberg's major contributions to modern theatre are “the forms of sensitivity that made it possible to rethink the notion of [...] public consciousness” (164). Though Rokem does not explore either figure, I argue Genet and Baraka follow Strindberg in showing the “public dimension” of “the individual’s inner thoughts and feelings” (164). Strindberg, Genet, and Baraka represent conflicts between figures coded as master and servant, drawing upon both the stage’s long history of such pairs. The age-old theatrical convention—which is, after all, also the most powerful mythologeme of leftist thought—is reinscribed within a passionate political imaginary. Peripeteias and coups de théâtre show how quickly social hierarchies, rooted in fiction, experience reversals. Their theatres reject the stability of the theatrical tableau, a convention persistently identified as the vehicle of intelligible meaning in political aesthetic thought. Formal traits challenge logics of possession and free rationality, making the mastery that capitalism promises seem fated for catastrophe.

Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* shows how sexually attraction between an aristocrat and servant is culturally mediated, arising from economic considerations. *Creditors* depicts both friendship and romance within capitalism as systems of exchange. Credits and debts typify economic and intimate life for bourgeois subjects, depriving individuals of the security that capital (economic

and cultural) once provided. Each character hopelessly defines themselves by what they do not actually possess.

Genet's *The Maids* and *Deathwatch* show that the stability of mastery is possible only in death. *Coups de théâtre, coups d'état, and coups de dés* typify his Dionysian theatrical world that does not abolish chance. Control of oneself and others, promised by existing regimes, is a fiction vulnerable to reversal.

Baraka's *Dutchman* and *The Slave* show romantic and domestic life offer only momentary refuge from historical antagonisms of gender and race. The future cannot be sought through unifications or comedy's marriages, but instead call for what he calls a tragic "splitting up" (*The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* 186). Baraka's tragedies, advocating for "bad taste" performances ("The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" 126), show a risky desire for catastrophe. Contemporary identities meet in destructive clashes, possibly opening the space for a different political future.

Chapter Five tackles Platonov's post-revolutionary works. Crucially, they do not conceive of mastery as freedom from work as bourgeois cultural products do. Instead, Platonov's dramas frame Soviet Marxism's central conceptions. The Soviet virtue of mastery, reaching its most extreme formulations under Stalin, viewed freedom as the result of labor. Eradicating passivity, transformative work makes one more intelligent and capable.

The "right to a job" enshrined in the 1936 Soviet Constitution ostensibly sought to transform all citizens into free and rational agents. But in his Soviet workplace tragedies, Platonov shows awareness that tragic and dialectical reversals travel in unexpected directions. The right to labor swerves, sometimes appearing as a sacred gift and at other times as meaningless enslavement. It is never being quite clear if the reforming labor of the collective

farms (*The Hurdy-Gurdy*) and factories (*High Voltage*) is, in fact, deforming: Platonov casts doubt on the founding principles of the GULAG. Platonov's dramas do not dismiss Soviet attempts at cultivating human mastery but instead suggest they are hazardous political gambles.

Taken together, the *left tragic theatre* conceives of socialism as a calling that finds its origins in the aesthetic and theological imagination. These politico-aesthetic projects differ from the anti-irrationality of Brechtian theatre and the postdramatic theatre's aversion to form and valorization of spontaneity. They represent a third path in twentieth-century political performance that continues the heightened emotionality and proscenium stage of the European theatrical tradition. Left tragedies affirm a sense of the risks (miscommunication, miscalculation, and even misanthropy) of politics.

The Paradox of the Political Theatre: Who Educates the Educator?

Marx diagnosed the illusion of consistency, self-possession, and free rationality as the bourgeoisie's most powerful fiction.¹⁹ This misconceived belief in mastery underpins conservative justifications for the rule of the select as well as liberal social visions based on rational decision makers. Yet most leftist political theatre, in its pedagogical pretensions, seems to force practitioners to adopt a pose of mastery as well.

Rather than educating audiences, Strindberg, Platonov, Genet, and Baraka take seriously the third of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, signaling a different form of political art:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that men themselves change circumstances and that the educator himself must be educated. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, of which one is superior to society [...] The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity

¹⁹ Marx threatened the bourgeoisie: "the selfish misconception that induces you to transform into eternal laws of nature and of reason, the social forms springing from your present mode of production and form of property—historical relations that rise and disappear [...] this misconception you share with every ruling class that has preceded you" ("Communist Manifesto" 187).

[*Selbstveränderung*] can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice. (“Theses on Feuerbach” 144)

Marx’s thesis sounds empowering: we all educate ourselves through action. But this conception of education has little to do with epic art’s form of instruction. First, “educators” who stand “superior to society” such as pedagogical art posits are anathema to Marx. Currently all are equally shaped by circumstances and upbringing, liable to repeat the mistakes of the past and without fool-proof knowledge. The theatre must participate in the process in which practitioners and audiences change themselves. In a sense, political art must teach what it does not yet know.

Of all thinkers on the left, Jacques Rancière best understands this problem. His book, *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008), arises from his theory of pedagogy. Focusing on Joseph Jacotot’s theories, Rancière suggests teachers and playwrights should not place their own intelligence above their audience’s. The interaction between teacher and student or theatrical worker and audience member must allow all parties to grow beyond the limits historical circumstances have imposed on them. Rancière argues that the teacher or artist does “not teach *his* pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified” (*The Emancipated Spectator* 11). Educators must point to something they do not yet see. Each historically-situated individual finds the path to liberation for herself without didactic instruction.

Rancière’s attitude should be commended. Few desire to escape hand-holding in politics or aesthetics. Yet the leftist tragedians of this dissertation offer a different understanding of “educating the educators”. Just as ancient paradox alerts us to the difficulties of learning what one does not already know, teaching the unknown is precarious. Strindberg, Platonov, Genet, and Baraka bring into view the aporia of political cultivation: the educator must begin teaching

before being certain in his or her lessons. Teaching what one does not know might be a hazardous gamble, despite the promise of eventual empowerment.

Goldmann's political faith confesses that the tragic might transform into the dialectical. The quasi-pedagogy of political theatre will be tragic until the day when it provokes results better than it could ever engineer. For Blanchot, we are “pushed reasonably to a leap whose essence, nonetheless, is to put reason at risk” (“Tragic Thought” 103). Fascination with what remains imagined yet unseen—the “hidden God” or the “classless society” among his examples—motivates this passionate wager (102). Would not the *left tragic theatre* be the site of such a leap of faith? Might Blanchot once again ask “is it mystical? Is it dialectical? Is it tragic?” (105).²⁰

Left tragedy accustoms audiences to feelings of confusion and incapacity. Audiences might experience an attraction to a leftist politics less convinced of its own strength and righteousness than of the fragility of its opponents' claims. The imperfect compass of political affect, enflamed by a confrontational theatre, moves audiences towards a future that is irreducible to prediction.²¹

Too sober to view revolution as the result of a theatrical performance, the *left tragic theatre* creates a space for viewers to feel the emotions that motivate ideological positions. This method is as powerful as many directly political theatres. As Adorno reminds, “artworks exercise

²⁰ As Blanchot asks about Goldmann's socialism in “Tragic Thought”, celebrating the ambiguities of Goldmann's thinking as superior to Lukács's.

²¹ Drawing upon the “affective turn,” I assume the intellectual and the emotive to be entangled, formed within historical circumstances and endowed with political significance. Following Ruth Leys's powerful critique, I reject the anti-historical scientism of leftist affect theorists like Brian Massumi. Yet Leys's redoubled commitment to intentionality and rationality seems hasty.

Queer and feminist theory offer a less rigid way to discuss affect. I follow the approach outlined in the collected volume *Political Emotions* edited by Janet Staiger, Ann Reynolds, and Ann Cvetkovich (2010), using the language of feeling and affect broadly to refer to experiences and conditions believed to be deleterious to reason and political life.

practical effect, if they do so at all, not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness" (*Aesthetic Theory*). Theories of politico-aesthetics overstate art's immediate political effects, while ignoring the importance of fantasy and affective states within political consciousness. To recognize the worth of left tragedies requires reconsidering the possibility as well as the desirability of a dispassionate politics.

Chapter I.

Overcoming Tragedy: The Epic Aesthetics of the Left

“So people say that epic relates to decent spectators, who have no need of gestures, but the tragic relates to inferior ones. Therefore, if it [tragedy] is vulgar, clearly it would be worse [than epic].”

----- Aristotle's *Poetics*

“Not the least of the weaknesses of the debate on commitment is that it ignores the effect produced by works whose own formal laws pay no heed to coherent effects. So long as it fails to understand what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate, the whole dispute resembles shadow-boxing.”

----- Theodor Adorno's “Commitment,” critiquing the engaged art of Brecht and Sartre

Conventional wisdom downplays questions of representation in a desire to uncover political meanings “behind the text” and its construction. Reacting against popular ignorance, the intellectual left does not view genres as neutral containers. Instead, unique formal characteristics predispose forms to communicate certain political messages effectively. This materialist approach, pioneered in the twentieth century, represented a marked improvement over longstanding idealist methods of interpretation.

Yet opposing both naïve and critical orientations, this dissertation argues for the importance of formal prescriptions as well as their political flexibility. Genre shapes the politics of an artwork, but the relation between an artistic form and its rhetorical force is less rigidly

predetermined than many in leftist politico-aesthetics have presumed. Conventions take on new and often unexpected ideological orientations through deployment in different contexts.²²

Regarding tragic theatre, my concerns are two-fold: have dominant assumptions about genre led critics to fail to recognize a substantial tradition of leftist tragedies in twentieth-century theatre? And does the desire to repress the tragic and its associations with human finitude demonstrate shortcomings of socialist political thought and art? To interrogate the refusal to consider radical deployments of tragic form, this chapter addresses four rigorous politico-aesthetic thinkers of the European left; Gyorgi Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Peter Szondi, and Roland Barthes.

Tragedy: Genre or Ideology?

Common sense asserts that a theatrical genre can communicate any number of contents. A political message—such as the preferability of the existing political order to the uncertainty of revolution—could be shared with audiences through any performance genre. A tragedy might show the punishment of a corrupt king who attempts to alter the traditions of his realm or, just as easily, a comedy might offer domestic rewards to those who learn to play their social roles: both plays lead audiences to believe that the political order is worthy of obedience. Genres and their historically-rooted conventions have long been considered secondary to the artist's message that derives either from divine inspiration or human reflection. In both cases, an idea takes precedence over the method by which it is formulated and communicated.

This manner of reasoning still abounds in politico-aesthetic matters, particularly evident when the general public and popular press debate art. Often, belief in a shared message or

²² I follow Viktor Shklovsky, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida who all argued that the inherited strictures of form are productive rather than exclusively limiting. The dynamic interactions between formal conventions as they are instantiated in new contexts and combinations produce novel images and thoughts, irreducible to pre-existing structures and vocabularies.

common affective response subsumes differences in form. For example, the 1994 GLAAD Media Awards bestowed honors on cultural products as diverse as television sitcom *Seinfeld*, Tony Kushner's Brechtian *Angels in America*, and the blockbuster film *Philadelphia* starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington. All were honored for their common political advocacy—whether intended or merely perceived—for gay and lesbian causes. Those who do not interpret art as part of their career or personal calling are unlikely to dwell with questions of form. Semiotician Roman Jakobson might say to value art exclusively for its communicative function renders the works no longer artistic, making the theatrical performances no different from the articulations we make to order a taxi or to buy a drink during intermission.²³ Nevertheless, something like a communicative function does exist, making lay interpreters of art not entirely wrong. Instead, they are only partially attuned to the complexities of representation.

Though this manner of thinking about art persists and likely always will, artists and scholars have sought to trouble the form-content distinction. Rather than denigrating artistic forms as trivial products of historical accident, many trends in the interpretation of cultural artifacts began to stress the importance of the conventional. It would be the ambition of a far larger project to ascertain why this shift occurred; nevertheless, one can connect this tendency to a variety of other changes within Western thought.²⁴ No longer viewing forms as empty containers, major trends in twentieth-century aesthetics understood genres as possessing unique traits developed within specific socio-economic histories.

The durable conventions of form, from this perspective, exercise a determining force on which messages or affects can be transmitted to audiences. For example, the marriage plot of

²³ See "Linguistics and Poetics".

²⁴ G.F.W. Hegel championed the historical objectivity of custom and convention against romanticism, a shift that played a major role in art's conventions being considered noteworthy products of historical forces. The rise of materialist ideologies in Hegel's wake further shifted emphasis toward the social dimensions and materiality of art.

modern romantic comedies provides a solution to conflict through a wedding. As a genre, it has been widely understood as conservative as it suggests that a contemporary cultural practice (marriage) remedies the ills that arise within the political and economic environment.²⁵ This approach represents a return to rhetoric. It engages the “how” in addition to the “what” of communication. Tropes are acknowledged to shape what can be thought and expressed, and social persuasion is examined with a critical eye. This renewed commitment to classical rigor restored criticism’s textual and social awareness after a romantic century.

In twentieth-century Europe, the most influential theories about the relationship between artistic form and political content arose from leftist sources. Notably, the artistic experimentalism of the Soviet Avant-garde, the philosophical tradition of Western Marxism, and the energies of the radical French left led to significant works in politico-aesthetics. The abundance of socialist positions within debates was far from accidental. Since liberal and conservative thinkers often regard art as an escape from the historical into the private, the left claims that its reflections on the relationship between art, history, and politics are more nuanced. Speaking with pride of this tradition, Perry Anderson, a prominent figure of the New Left, explains:

The cultural and ideological focus of Western Marxism has remained uniformly predominant from first to last. Aesthetics, since the Enlightenment the closest bridge of philosophy to the concrete world, has attracted an especial and constant attraction for its theorists. The great wealth and corpus of writing produced in this domain, far richer and subtler than anything within the classical heritage of historical materialism, may in the end prove the most permanent collective gain of this tradition. (*Considerations on Western Marxism* 78)

Seeing art as a product of human labor, leftist thinkers performed grounded research. Proponents of critique sought to neither romanticize nor idealize art in the manner of other interpreters,

²⁵ The *pièce bien faite* of the bourgeois nineteenth-century is considered a form fit to a specific environment. The genre’s avoidance of moral and intellectual complexity and its crowd-pleasing formula encourage viewers to conceive of products of human labor, including art, as commodities fit for predictable consumption.

viewing cultural products as a “bridge” to important questions of political economy. Marxists, importantly those who did not find themselves in the Eastern bloc, also noted the relative lack of opportunities for direct revolutionary action. Yearning for the promised reconciliation of theory and practice that seemed perpetually deferred, art became the domain in which the dichotomy between reflection and action felt less acute.

An example of such thinking is Roland Barthes’s rallying call “the responsibility of forms”. Because they are politically active, forms must be judged according to the ethical standard of responsibility that is normally reserved for human agents. Genres ceased to be morally indifferent containers playing a secondary role. Marxian intellectuals could engage in a resistance by critiquing reactionary cultural productions while artists could join the struggle to change political perceptions among the public. Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (1971), popularizing Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernst Bloch, Gyorgi Lukács, Herbert Marcuse and others, was crucial to install this tradition of critique in the North American academy.

One must not minimize the diversity that existed within twentieth-century Marxian aesthetics. The achievements of the Frankfurt School differed from those of the British New Left; the French generation of ’68 made claims that would appear wholly strange to Soviet ideologues; the Russian avant-garde would seem more decadent to Western Marxists than the latter’s bourgeois adversaries. Even within these groups, assuming significant continuity between respective members is often mistaken. Extending the discussion to Marxian movements beyond Europe would introduce further intellectual diversity.

Nevertheless, a tendency to reject tragedy as incompatible to leftist political struggle was entrenched as received wisdom. Even well-meaning attempts to rethink the anti-tragic polemic

fell short. Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy* (1966) reaffirms tragedy against leftist consensus on the humanist grounds that it shows insight into the hardships of political struggle. But ultimately, Williams suggests a highly qualified role for tragedy within political development.²⁶ Terry Eagleton's *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003) argues that rejection of the tragic is based primarily on the genre's focus on the high-born that feels unduly respectful to society's masters. For Eagleton, the tragic might also venerate the suffering of different groups, becoming a tool within liberatory struggle.²⁷ Such a position does not respond to the complexity of the theoretical explorations that Eagleton dismisses as excessively intellectual, disembodied, and totalizing. Those debates, occurring within Western Marxist circles, demand careful attention to understand their powerful impact.

Yet Eagleton shows valuable insight on one matter: the systems of socialist aesthetics that renounce the tragic show excessive faith in "fantasies of self-fashioning and endless pliability" (288), resembling the liberal ideologies they claim to combat. However, I suggest that the value of tragedy to revolutionary politics is not in "the idea of the tragic", which is Eagleton's notion that tragic suffering, as the body experiences it, is universal, providing a political orientation that can unite people across cultural boundaries. Rather, the genre's conventions, as they were instantiated in the twentieth-century's experimental theatres, dispossess audiences of the notions of mastery, identity, and possession that ballast existing regimes. Tragedy contains resources for those who fantasize of momentous change.

²⁶ His *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968) posits Brechtian epic theatre as the telos of modern drama, revealing William's preference for the intellectual theatre of critique.

²⁷ On similar grounds, Eagleton attempts to redeem sacrifice against its leftist critiques in *Radical Sacrifice* (2018).

Major Figures in Marxist Aesthetics: Lukács Versus Brecht

Hungarian-born philosopher Gyorgi Lukács (1885-1971) and German playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) have long appeared as opposing figures within the pantheon of Marxist aesthetic thinkers. Indeed, the pair's acrimonious debates highlight their differences. Frederic Jameson summarizes their intellectual rivalry:

The Brecht-Lukács debate alone is one of those rare confrontations in which both adversaries are of equal stature, both of incomparable significance for the development of contemporary Marxism, the one a major artist and probably the greatest literary figure to have been produced by the Communist movement, the other a central philosopher of the age and heir to the whole German philosophical tradition. ("Reflections in Conclusion" 199)

Characterizing the two theorists as foils is frequent. However, this section will argue that despite apparent dissimilarities, both figures played pivotal roles in the rejection of tragedy and the enshrinement of epic as the favored mode of political art. The enthusiasm for epic accompanied assumptions that consensus and clear rationality are paramount to a political community. The emotional and divisive effects attributed to tragic conflicts were viewed as politically unsuitable.

Lukács has aged less well in the eyes of many, remembered increasingly for his focus on the notions of totality and understanding. These concepts connect him to apolitical currents in nineteenth-century philosophy at best and to political totalitarianism at worst. Lukács's embrace of the novel has made him approachable to certain academic readers interested in genre studies and realism, but his influence on the contemporary left is less apparent.

If Lukács serves as an example of the reactionary elements that lurk in leftist thought—such as apologies for authoritarianism and socialist realism—Bertolt Brecht's status is rarely questioned. Daring and provocative, Brecht's plays and theoretical writings became a touchstone for generations of the politically-engaged. The sheer number of studies authored on Brecht's

influence on various playwrights is testament to his status as the foremost political playwright of the twentieth century.²⁸ Stanton B. Garner Jr. writes with little exaggeration:

Bertolt Brecht's death in 1956 inaugurated a period in modern political theatre whose theoretical and dramaturgical parameters are yet to be defined. [...] Much of the political drama since Brecht's death has been written and performed with his formidable theoretical example in view and even those dramatists who have refused Brecht's political aesthetic have done so in the wake of its radical reconfigurations of theatre art. (145-146).

Martin Esslin similarly argues that Brecht's position as a "cultural status symbol" changed theatre forever, inaugurating a "Brecht era" that the theorist of the absurd regards with some impatience (Esslin 63). Such an influence was felt across Europe and beyond.²⁹

Residing in the Soviet Union, Lukács and Brecht did not come to each other's aid amidst the terror that threatened them both. Instead, they were at loggerheads during the realism and expressionism debates of 1937 and 1938. Lukács defended the literary classics as models for socialist literature, denouncing the experimentation of "decadent" and "deviationist" modernist compositions. Lukács affirms that certain literary forms, such as the realist novel, serve for the modern era as epic did for the ancients: they are popular because they provide a sense of organic wholeness that renders experience intelligible. Lukács insists on the importance of "totality" to the project of human understanding. Without the assumption of a whole that subsumes the multifarious dimensions of historical life, human experience appears disordered and senseless.

The novel initiates readers into a worldview, offering lasting appeal according to Lukács. Nevertheless, this capacity belongs only to specific genres within each era of history. The epic

²⁸ Selected studies include Andy Stafford's "Constructing a Radical Popular Theatre: Barthes, Brecht, and Théâtre populaire", Janelle G. Reinelt's *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre*, Edith Kern's "Brecht's Epic Theatre and the French Stage", Elin Diamond's "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism", and Baz Kershaw *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*.

²⁹ Experiments as diverse as Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka's adaptations of Yoruba rituals, Italian provocateur Dario Fo's improvisational renditions of low theatrical forms, and English feminist Caryl Churchill's wide-ranging experiments credit Brecht as an important influence.

poetry of Greece, the bourgeois novels of the nineteenth century, and the epic literature of the Soviet Union differ in exact formal conventions, but they all belong to the same epic mode. A degree of universality unites peoples across cultures and time-periods for Lukács: common psychosocial needs for coherence and community are assuaged by each era's epic literature. Defining the device capacious, Lukács attributes great rhetorical power to diegesis. Narration from a single point of views arranges the motley events of lived experience into an ordered, understandable horizon that orients individuals and unites communities.

Lukács argues that the bourgeois novel should be adapted to spread socialist worldviews. Bourgeois forms can be successfully repurposed to create a sense of understanding for those living within historical transition. Lukács, siding with Socialist Realist orthodoxy, likely arrived at such a conclusion due to a confluence of long-held beliefs and immediate political expediencies. Ignoring his complicity with Stalinism's imperial imposition of unity upon diverse populations, Lukács's arguments have a degree of commonsense appeal. If the bourgeois novel provided readers with a deeply felt sense of understanding and acceptance, why should not socialist societies offer it to their own citizens who need to make sense of the post-revolutionary flux? Lukács gave art a central place in socialism's political community, offering a path to those who believe super-structural activities are far from frivolous.

In response to Lukács's denouncement of modernism as "embarrassing business", Brecht speaks in favor the new and the bold. Brecht refused to champion realism on intellectual grounds. Realism's inherited popularity from bourgeois society reveals that insidious values lurk within its conventions. Instead of making art that is understandable to old audiences, Brecht affirmed experimentation. This new drama would become popular among future audiences, who themselves grow dialectically through their experiences with art and labor. Echoing Hegel's

denunciation of Kant, Brecht condemns Lukács's neo-Kantian positions as ahistorical and formalist. Brecht writes "reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change" ("Against Georg Lukács" 82). The world progresses, people grow further from their intellectual infancy, and the signs capable of capturing contemporary experience advance. Within the laboratory of post-revolutionary life, artists experiment in order to direct intellectual and social development.

Brecht's historical dialectics are likely to appeal to the contemporary left. He implies that the older thinker's affirmation of timeless popularity has complicity with nationalism, a growing force after Joseph Stalin's "socialism in one country". He argues that Lukács's view is naïve: realism cannot be popular due to quasi-natural reasons as Lukács sometimes implies. Lukács's notion that the masses deserve "a faithful image of life from art" ("Against Georg Lukács" 80) ignores the fact one generation's faithful image is a lie to the following. Brecht shows enthusiasm for audiences growing to appreciate new things, a central goal of socialism's program to create a new sort of human being. The playwright affirms:

The concept of popularity itself is not particularly popular. It is not realistic to believe that it is. There is a whole series of abstract nouns ending in 'ity' which must be viewed with caution. Think of utility, sovereignty, sanctity; and we know that the concept of nationality has a quite particular, sacramental, pompous and suspicious connotation, which we dare not overlook. [...] They endow the people with unchanging characteristics, hallowed traditions, art forms, habits and customs, religiosity, hereditary enemies, invincible power and so on. (80)

Lukács projects his own "superstition" (80) that human beings are limited to their existing forms. Lukács imposes the idealization ("abstract noun") of popularity on the masses, limiting them within bourgeois notions of "nationality," "sovereignty," "utility," and "sanctity". Brecht argues that Lukács is complicit in a reactionary politics and aesthetics, implying possible skepticism about the Stalinist synthesis of socialism and nationalism.

But Lukács's positions were more complex than they might seem. His notions of epic and the popular were not purely ahistorical as Brecht asserts. Lukács argues at length that the epic sense of the ancient world was naïve—as if immediately given through collectively shared symbols and moral values—while the modern epic sense is an active principle in which the artist attempts overcomes the angst of the modern subject. Brecht's accusation of Lukács's complicity with nationalism seems hasty.³⁰ Lukács hoped for a universalist and humanist communism to assuage feelings of alienation that threaten all peoples of the world: a heroic political vision with obvious shortcomings but not those of an ethnically chauvinistic nature.³¹

The debate lacked generosity. Not without reason, Eugene Lunn defines the two thinkers as representing the opposing paths available to Marxists during the interwar period. He writes:

At the core of Lukács's Marxist aesthetics is a traditional ethical humanism, drawn in patrician and idealist tones, and deeply committed to the continuity of European classical culture. Brecht, on the other hand, attempted to apply notions of scientific experimentation and economic production in a search for a modernist aesthetic attuned to the technical and collectivist twentieth century. (12)

Though not as important to political history as other feuds, the Lukács-Brecht debate has been recognized as a battle for the soul of Marxism.

Against seeing Lukács and Brecht as opposing forces, I would like to direct readers back to their decisive argument over popularity. After his critique of Lukács's suspicious acceptance of an abstract standard as quasi-natural and universal, Brecht reaffirms his own notion of popularity:

³⁰ Though the insightful Viktor Shklovsky also compared Lukács's generic and psychologistic universalism with racism. Shklovsky played a major role in the Soviet censorship of Lukács's *The Historical Novel*; a commission given to him as part of a campaign against Lukács. Still loyal to “making strange” and genre as the transgression of genre, he relied on formalist principles to criticize Lukács universalizing account of art even when working as a hatchet man. See Galin Tihanov's “Viktor Shklovskii and Georg Lukács in the 1930's”.

³¹ Going further, Brecht's criticisms overlook Lukács's itinerant life: Hungarian-born and educated, a central player in German intellectual life, and a resident of the Soviet Union, Lukács showed little concern for blood and soil, sometimes inviting hostility from his increasingly nationalist Soviet keepers.

Our concept of what is popular refers to a people who not only play a full part in historical development but actively usurp it, force its pace, determine its direction. We have a people in mind who make history, change the world and themselves. We have in mind a fighting people and therefore an aggressive concept of what is popular. Popular means: intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression / assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it / representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well / relating to traditions and developing them. (81)

Lukács's notion of popular understanding affirms it as a universal political and intellectual good. Crucially, Brecht does not attack intelligibility. In fact, he seeks the “aggressive concept of what is popular” that creates new models of understandability. This popularity belongs to those who “play a full part in historical development [...] actively usurp it, force its pace, determine its direction” (81). The playwright affirms “popular means: intelligible” to the most progressive of the proletariat and the cultural elites who together serve as the motor of history. Brecht insists that he too wants art to produce “faithful image of life”, but he insists that this politically effective image be “thoroughly cleansed” of traits associated with previous classes (80).

The debate between the two thinkers was not about whether clarity is an aesthetic and political virtue, as those with avant-garde tastes often presume. The conservative Lukács wishes for art that is intelligible to human reason as it is currently while the experimental Brecht affirms art that is intelligible to human reason in its most developed form. This debate, reminiscent of Plato and Aristotle as well as Kant and Hegel, occurs between two faithful adherents to philosophical reason who place differing importance on the role of history in rationality’s development. Brecht, influenced by the Soviet avant-garde, cares little for the common complaint “ordinary people do not understand that” (“Against Georg Lukács” 84). He believes art should provoke the rational development of ordinary people so they too can understand the world from the most “scientific” of perspectives; that of the intellectual vanguard. Lukács’s goals

might be more cautious, but popular intelligibility—current or projected—unites the two opposing giants of Marxist aesthetics with Aristotle's injunction that art should intelligible.

Brecht argues his challenging and unconventional art is one of the “steps” necessary to producing the “intelligibility of the new today” (85).

Amidst the suspicion of the purges, Brecht and Lukács were unable to find potential agreement. Both affirm pleasure and popularity, but this pleasure results from intellectual judgment. Objects and people are sources of delight only so long as they are understood, Western Marxism often suggests. Art is once again a tool of the philosophical pursuit of knowledge and the political pursuit of justice, domains regarded as most important since the time of Athens.

Rejecting Tragedy: Lukács as Founder of the Epic Cult

The suggestion that Lukács and Brecht share important similarities is not without precedent. David Pike's *Lukács and Brecht* argues both were united in “intellectual obsession with rational dogmas” despite certain disagreements (1). Following Bela Kiralyfavi's explorations,³² I suggest their feud was over whether Brecht's experimental style was clear enough to be understood. Understanding the similarity between the thinkers demands going to the theatre, the domain in which Lukács's influence on Brecht can be seen most readily.

Lukács plays a central role in inaugurating the epic Marxist aesthetics that unites the socialist realist and avant-garde wings of leftist art. Though his contributions to the relation between epic and the novel are more famed, his dissertation-turned-book *Evolutionary History of Modern Drama* (1912) as well as *The Sociology of Modern Drama* (1914) are springboards for debates about the politics of theatrical form. In these early texts, Lukács associates dominant

³² Kiralyfavi argues that there are important similarities between the thinkers in “The Aesthetic Effect: A Search for Common Ground between Lukács and Brecht” and “Lukács or Brecht?”.

bourgeois ideology with tragedy: both assert that there is a nature as determining as ancient fate that guides human beings and society. Naturalized economic laws lead people to accept capitalist modernity as inevitable due to its accordance with human nature. His thinking then turns to prose in *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (1916), identifying the unifying perspective of epic novels as suited to contemporary sociological, psychological, and political needs.

What he later referred to as “realism” in his debates with Brecht, Lukács described as “epic” literature at this earlier stage of his career. *Theory of the Novel* formulated epic in various ways, notably the following famous definition: “great epic writing gives form to the extensive totality of life, drama to the intensive totality of essence” (46). Using the terms drama and tragedy nearly interchangeably since his dissertation, Lukács makes the opposition between epic and tragic literature central to his argument. Epic provides order to a sense of “life” as it is lived in its empirical richness. Lukács’s thought builds upon thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey who see life as free, vital, and changing, while the human mind creates unity and coherence. Writing a modern epic novel for Lukács is to read the world. Epic gives a form that the reader can understand and share with others, creating a sense that one’s society is a “organic unity,” “home,” and “complete in meaning” (29). Though Lukács would later call these earlier neo-Kantian dispositions regrettable “right-wing epistemology”, Paul de Man notes that Lukács continued to extoll unity later, particularly regarding questions of temporality (de Man 532, 534).³³

³³ Paul de Man’s “Gyorgi Lukács’s Theory of the Novel” posits a continuity between Lukács’s early, transitionally-Marxist work on the novel with his later, much-maligned defense of socialist realism. As de Man notes, some seek to protect Lukács’s early work by overstating its differences from his Stalinism.

“The world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers” (*Theory of the Novel* 29) to those with an epic sense of life. Since all details of social existence are teleologically ordered through diegetic narration, “everything is new and yet familiar”: epic shows adventures and experiences that are never wholly unintelligible, even if they are unusual (29). For example, Odysseus loses his home, his wife, and the security of dry land during his voyage. Nevertheless, he never loses his sense of what home is: it remains an ever-present reality to be regained at the end of the narrative. Modern novels have less certainty that home, family, and social communion are attainable within life’s unexpected changes. Yet Lukács affirms that the novel remains committed to the notion that belonging and understanding can be achieved once again.

Formally, a sense of order results as if inevitably from diegesis. Practitioners of the experimental novel often find that attempts to convey disorderliness acquire a tidy appearance. Lukács views life as chaotic and rich: “epic” and “popular” literature are ways that masses of people make their world intelligible. Literature, no longer merely aesthetic, is the philosophy of the masses, an enterprise both intellectual and emotional. Knowledge and feeling together create the notion of “sense” his argument hinges upon. Lukács sees this sense of unity as a result of the “extensive totality of life” that the novel takes as its object: unlike the totality of abstraction, the novel has “rounded” architecture (*Theory of the Novel* 25, 33, 55, 60, 100) that does not intentionally exclude anything. When a “form giving” epic subject encounters something previously unaccounted for, it is prepared to absorb the new into their existing representations. Epistemologically as well as politically, it attempts to “heal the rift between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’” (29). Novels help potentially alienated individuals recognize themselves and their circumstances within posited totalities.

The genres that oppose epic literature are tragedy and drama. These genres give form to the “intensive totality of essence” (29). Though the supple prose of Lukács mimics the flexibility of “rounded” epic, this opposition becomes central to the logic of his text. Avoiding explicit definition, Lukács explains his opposition between epic’s “extensive totality of life” and tragedy’s “intensive totality of essence”. Life is repeatedly associated the chaotic richness of “empirical” and “historical” experience of people: essence is associated with “abstraction” that is “situated outside and beyond all life” (42). Destiny, fate, and heroism are abstract essences that rely on notions of complete separateness and individuation. Lukács sees the desire to make things separate as ideal rather than empirical. It encourages “sharp edges” rather than rounded contours of worldly experience (125, 130).

Everything becomes so clearly separate that the hero, whoever stands in his way, and the destiny that hovers above both are remote from one another. They cannot communicate and understand each other. Their interaction is limited to collision, conflict, and catastrophe.³⁴ Opposition is mimicked on all formal levels:

tragic verse is sharp and hard, it isolates, it creates distance. It clothes heroes in the full depth of their solitude, which is born in the form itself; it does not allow any relationships between them except those of struggle and annihilation. [...] a purely human understanding between the tragic characters’ souls will never break through. (*Theory of the Novel* 56)

The comfort of home and family is not present in tragedy. The world is not one of intimate familiarity and intelligibility. Fate’s “tangle of blind happenings” (87) is beyond human understanding. Sublime mysteries do not reveal themselves; tragic characters remain strangers to one another (recognition coming at the cost of death). Close struggle with other men does not translate into intimacy.

³⁴ The influence of Hegel’s thinking of tragedy on Lukács is apparent.

Both the epic novel and modern tragic form are “means qualitatively quite heterogeneous from the others, of giving form to the world” (128). But epic’s form-giving is superior socially. Lukács declares that the individual’s soul, always awaiting the loneliness of death, is the home of tragedy and drama. Life and community are the home of epic:

The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community. And rightly so, for the completeness, the roundness of the value system, which determines the epic cosmos creates a whole which is too organic for any part to become enclosed with itself, so dependent upon itself, as to find itself as an interiority—i.e. to become a personality. (*Theory of the Novel* 66)

Epic constructs a world without “interiority”. Community and communication are “organic”: the destinies of individuals and their environments are naturally entwined, rendering alienation and homelessness temporary conditions. Epic is communistic, even the most personal experiences of the individual are never inaccessibly “enclosed”. Individuality and the community are one in the same. For Lukács, the body politic should share a resemblance to an organic whole in which individual members sense no division. Soviet socialism’s turn to epic form in the 1930’s offered a solution to subjective feelings of confusion among those not recognizing the revolution’s necessity. Lukács argued for the rise of a new epic literary form under Communism, drawing criticism from both Shklovsky and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Lukács contrasts the intelligibly of collective destiny in epic with the sublime inaccessibility of individual fate in tragedy:

What is a symbol in tragedy becomes a reality in epic: the weight of the bonds linking an individual destiny to a totality. World destiny, which in tragedy is merely the number of naught that have to be added to transform it into a million, is actually gives the events of the epic their content; the epic hero, as bearer of his destiny, is not lonely, for this destiny connects him by indissoluble threads to the community whose fate is crystallized in his own. As for the community, it is organic—and therefore intrinsically meaningful—concrete totality” (67)

Lukács wades into strange territory. His earlier claims that epic is empirical while tragedy is ideal do not hold up. Here, he idealizes epic as a meaningful totality that is superior to tragedy's empirical sum of individual destinies. On other grounds, his thinking is consistent. Together in epic art, people can know the world in similar, if not necessarily truthful, ways. If the fates cut the threads that tie the tragic hero to his fellow man, epic "connects him by indissoluble threads to a community".

Lukács denies the collective dimensions of tragic performance in *Theory of the Novel*. However, *The Sociology of Modern Drama* clarifies his position. Lukács defines the tragic following Hegel: "the material of drama consists of the interrelatedness of ethical systems, and the dramatic structure which arises from this relationship is aesthetic-formal" (450). Hegel argued that tragedy depicts the collision of competing ethical systems that developed in specific historical circumstances. For example, Antigone's choice to bury her brother against the king's orders is not a personal choice: she represents the law of the family that once held tribal systems together in its conflict against the law of the polis. The drama, in which characters hurl words at one another, formally shows this collision. Yet Lukács claims that tragedy was not disorienting to earlier communities because the audience shared moral judgments:

More simply so long as tragedy did not become ethically problematic, either inwardly or outwardly, the pure aesthetics of structure functioned quite naturally: from a given beginning only a single given result can follow, since the ethical structure is a given precondition known to the poet and public alike. But when ethics cease to be a given, the ethical knotting within the drama – thus, its aesthetics—has to be created; whereupon ethics, as the cornerstone of the artistic composition, move necessarily into the vital center of motivation. In this way the great and spontaneous unity of ethics and aesthetics, with the tragic experience, commences to be a problem." (*The Sociology of Modern Drama* 450)

From a shared perspective, the colliding systems on stage could only resolve themselves in a single way. Narration was not yet needed to produce consensus and clarity for audience

members. For example, Antigone's lack of respect for the laws of the state demands her downfall as the Athenian audience cannot tolerate such a position. But so too must Creon fall for his tyrannical rule which shows no respect for family bonds and religion.

Modern European theatregoers no longer have an ethical system as “a given precondition known to poet and public alike”. The diegesis of epic, on the other hand, is a way for a common perspective to be forged immanent to the modern novel. Lukács sees the emotional and intellectual disorder of modern tragic heroes, who feel competing ethical claims within them, as unable to offer modern audiences a form to understand experience. Coming to a judgment of Hamlet is difficult since his ethical orientation is built on wavering between ethical orientations. Lukács writes “there are, that is, no longer any absolute, overriding, external, easily discerned criteria by which one judges whether a given man and a given destiny are tragic. The tragic becomes strictly a matter of viewpoint” (*The Sociology of Modern Drama* 447). For Lukács, the tragedy of modern tragedies is that we no longer can agree on what is tragic. Once used to propagate sacred values, tragedy has lost its social purpose.

Lukács's style favors mood to explicitly delineated principles, suggesting more than declaring in his aesthetic reflections. One tendency in his anti-tragic attack is particularly important due to its legacy in Brecht's work. Tragedy, which models freedom and necessity in a complex fashion, enervates the “virile” (*Theory of the Novel* 71, 85, 88) form-giving activities of the novel's epic narrator. One can infer that tragedy saps the revolutionary of the power to act.

Regarding the structures that move the hero, Lukács asks a series of questions: “to what extent is modern man enactor of his actions? In his actions man elaborates his entire being, he arrives at himself in them: how much are they really his? How much is the vital center of man really deep within him? [...] how does man achieve a tragic action? Is it indeed he who achieves

it?" (*The Sociology of Modern Drama* 428). Modern drama and tragedy show that human beings do not author their own fates. If tragedy and drama are supposed to show man in his essence, these forms fail since they make people question "how much is the vital center of man really deep within him?". The tragic individual is not autonomous, moved instead by the exterior forces of economics, psychology, and biology.

Structural thinking—which deemphasizes the importance of individual freedom—attracted Hegel and Marx to tragedy, making it a privileged genre for dialectical thought. But Lukács shudders at such considerations. In a sequence of inspired writing, Lukács criticizes modern tragedy. Yet he may also accidentally have written tragedy's most beautiful leftist defense:

This is the dramatic conflict: man is merely the intersection of great forces and his deeds not even his own. Instead something independent of himself mixes in, a hostile system which he senses as forever indifferent to him, thus shattering his will. And the why of his acts is likewise never wholly his own, and what he senses as his inner motivating energy also partakes of an aspect of the complex that directs him toward a fall. The dialectical force comes to reside more exclusively in the idea, in the abstract. Men are but pawns, their will is but their possible moves, and it is what remains forever alien to them (*the abstractum*) which moves them. Man's significance consists only of this, that the game cannot be played without him, that men are the only possible hieroglyphs with which the mysterious inscription may be composed. (430)

Tragedy makes the human being alien to himself, demystifying the reigning liberal individualism. The individual is a pawn whose will and feelings are not his own: his actions are moved by a sublime "dialectical force". Yet Lukács disavows the "mysterious inscriptions" and "hieroglyphs" of tragedy, leaving them unread in his transition from young theorist of the theatre to mature champion of the novel. Despite the beauty of his early writings, Lukács thought his entry into politics depended on forgetting his earlier tragic tastes. The scheme he articulates in

Theory of the Novel, in which the tragic or dramatic is opposed to the epic, becomes a lynchpin within his politico-aesthetic program.³⁵

Nothing Tragic: Brecht's Epic Theatre

Brecht's debt to Lukács relates to the latter's thinking of epic and the power of diegesis. Brecht's epic theatre attempts to conceive of an anti-tragic form of performance that would be suited to the founding of a new political order. Lukács made "worldview" and "perspective" visual metaphors for the unity that he sought in verbal art. Brecht's theatre introduces diegetic elements that offer a unified interpretation to audiences, yet he also went one step further: his theatre creates intelligible tableaus that make the audience see the stage and their political world from (almost) the same perspective. The competing moral systems will not succumb to relativism according to Brecht, as his epic theatre introduces both a shared narrative and physical position from which the audience judges the dramatic scenes. However, Lukács saw Brecht's scenes tied together with placards, didactic songs, and other forms of narration as insufficient. He claimed that they did not give sense to the totality of social processes (Carlson 387), as Brecht favored thematic to plot-based unity.

Lukács elevated the novel to the status of the practical philosophy of the masses. Brecht famously affirmed pleasure as a goal of the theatre, showing little fear that cabaret song and dance would trivialize his political performances. Nevertheless, both thinkers favored the clarity of epic, shirking tragedy's emotionality. Lukács added feeling to understanding in his account of "sense," but this sense was rooted in intellectual priorities.³⁶ Similarly, Brecht dismissed the

³⁵ Lukács showed confidence in its persuasiveness and political legitimacy, invoking the tragic-epic scheme as the foundation the second chapter of *The Historical Novel* (1937). Despite his efforts, a severe censorship environment and rising anti-German sentiment prohibited the text's publication in the Soviet Union for decades.

³⁶ Lukács acknowledges that while the novel "tries to come close as possible to being an organic relationship, [it] is in fact a *conceptual* relationship, not a truly organic one" (*Theory of the Novel* 532). Artifice passes itself as nature

bourgeois false dichotomy between “theatre for pleasure” and “theatre for instruction,” but his logocentrism likewise views the acquisition of knowledge as the truly pleasurable.

Brecht explains that “the contrast between learning and amusing oneself is not laid down by divine rule; it is not one that has always been and must continue to be” (*Brecht on Theatre* 72). Contemporary schools and professional instruction have made “tedious learning” the norm. These institutions and practices operate under capitalism’s division of labor; therefore, they do not offer “generalized knowledge” that stimulates the human being’s rational nature (72). Instead, in teaching specific technical skills, schools make education alienating. Alienated learning prepares the student for a lifetime of labor in which they will be used as a tool of other men. People do not naturally find learning unpleasurable, but they have developed this association within contemporary institutions that teach mechanical obedience. Brecht’s epic theatre attempts to do what Lukács’s epic novels did: to provide unity which is in itself pleasing to humanity’s intellectual nature.³⁷

Brecht contrasts his epic theatre and learning plays (interchangeable terms initially) with tragic theatre. The former genres please by providing intellectual stimulation, while the latter are narcotic, histrionic, and hypnotic. In “The German Drama: pre-Hitler,” Brecht condemns Aristotelian drama and tragedy as irrational due to its emotional pleasures. He explains in a representative passage:

the Aristotelian play is essentially static; its task is to show the world as it is. The learning-play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed). It is a common truism among the producers and writers of the former type of play that the audience, once in the theatre, is not a number of individuals but a collective individual, a mob, which must be and can be reached only through the emotions; that it has the mental immaturity and the high emotional suggestibility of a mob. [...] The latter theatre holds that the

in a non-realist account of realism. De Man celebrates these moments of “irony”, stating “Lukács comes very close, in statements of this kind, to reaching a point in which a genuine hermeneutic of the novel could start” (532).

³⁷ Only Brecht’s late “Short Organum for the Theatre” attempts to address these intellectualist biases.

audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and reasoning; of making judgments even in the theatre. (79)

Tragic theatre is for the immature. Its pleasure is a cheap thrill that sells well to the mob within the liberal world's false democracies. Brecht's Marxist theater treats people as individuals capable of "thinking and reasoning," activities that are pleasurable when separate from wage-earning. Brecht continues:

with the learning-play, then, the stage begins to be didactic. (A word which I, as a man with many years of experience in the theatre, am not afraid.) The theatre becomes a place for philosophers, and for such philosophers as not only wish to explain the world but wish to change it. (80)

Reworking Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach,"³⁸ Brecht declares that theatre is a form of philosophy. It prepares the audience to make free decisions that transform their environment. This "entertaining learning" speaks to that which is most essential to the human being: knowledge, understanding, participation in politics, and freedom from slavery to the emotions. Brecht's theatre evinces the biases of Western philosophy and political theory. He wishes for a theatre that even Plato could endorse. The poets can come back to the polis on the condition that they address the intellect rather than inciting the appetites of the brutish mob.

Tragedy makes suffering seem natural and unavoidable. For Brecht, this naturalization of historical conditions is an abandonment of human reason. His famed *Verfremdungseffekt* (referred to as the alienation-effect, A-effect, V-effect, distancing effect, or estranging effect in English translations) is the means of contesting naturalized social customs. Alienation "is necessary to all understanding. When something seems 'like the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world had been given up" (*Brecht on Theatre* 71).

³⁸ Marx famously wrote "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" ("Theses on Feuerbach").

For example, the tragic actor performs as if their feelings are natural, inviting the audience to identify pain and suffering as inevitable off-stage as well. Tragic mimesis abandons the hope to diagnose and correct the reasons for suffering. Brecht's actors, who show a smirking distance from their characters, instead remind that the human being always has the choice to act in ways different than the role foisted on her. By making people and things unfamiliar again, the V-effect is not a mere avant-garde provocation. It is a pedagogical method.

The V-effect transforms people and things “from something ordinary, familiar, and immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend” (144). The experimental qualities of Brecht’s work make things “incomprehensible” only as a brief stage in making them “easier to comprehend” through the lens of a Marxist interpretation of history. Brecht follows Lukács (and even his nemesis Aristotle) in making intelligibility the goal of his theatre.³⁹

For Brecht, the illusionist theatre was an instrument of oppression. Tragedy, which makes one take histrionic pleasure in the faux-inevitability of hardship, makes suffering seem natural and even spiritually-ordained:

The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that to -- Just like me -- It’s only natural – It’ll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That’s great art; it all seems like the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it – That’s not the way – That’s extraordinary, hardly believable – It’s got to stop – The sufferings of this

³⁹ Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe insightfully recounts “I came across people who worked in theatre who were Brechtian in origin, the young generation educated by Roland Barthes. So I read Brecht, if only to be able to communicate with them, and I realised that there is a strange contradiction in Brecht’s work: while he wanted to oppose Aristotle, I believe that of all the major authors of our time he was the most faithful to Aristotle [...] he did not write his didactic plays by chance. He thought that theatre was bound up with intelligence. And that is perfectly Aristotelian” (61).

man appall me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it" (71).

Great art must not be "obvious," asserts Brecht's savvier epic spectator. Rather than hysterical weeping in response to fallen women and sacrificed young men in battle, the spectator feels moral indignation. Both the theatre and the world it aims to represent could be different: it is the epic theatre's job to teach people this lesson.

A question cannot be suppressed. If the spectators have been shepherded to a conclusion by the epic elements that formally privilege a certain perspective, to what extent is Brechtian unobviousness obvious? Brecht makes the familiar unfamiliar, producing a temporarily vulnerable audience. Nevertheless, didacticism offers a life-raft to confused spectators. Promising to make the stage and the world intelligible, Brecht's epic theatre aims at totality, unity, and understanding in the same manner as Lukács's epic novels. Though Lukács and Brecht viewed themselves as representing competing programs, Adorno justifiably rejected both on similar grounds.

A Case Study: Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*

This section will further explain Brecht's theories with specific reference to *The Threepenny Opera*. Special attention is directed at social hierarchy and conflict, particularly through the figure of cannibalism. This interpretative framework is not arbitrary: the plays of August Strindberg, Jean Genet, Amiri Baraka, and Andrei Platonov highlight social antagonism through the figures of mastery, servitude, and cannibalism within tragedy. Crucially, while Brecht views socialism as means to rectify the cannibalism of capitalism, the tragedians view cannibalism through the lens of a leftist political theology that asserts the risks as well as the rewards of sacrifice.

The Threepenny Opera was the first mature piece of epic theatre in Brecht's estimation, combining his literary talents with the musical abilities of German composer Kurt Weil. If traditional Aristotelian drama—the declared enemy of Brecht's writings—seeks unity through the representation of a single completed action,⁴⁰ Brecht's operetta disavows linear development. Instead, Brecht's play consists of relatively autonomous scenes that progress “in curves” and “jumps” (“The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre” 37). Between scenes, didactic songs, placards, and other diegetic elements interrupt mimesis with narration.

Brecht explains this method in “The Literarization of the Theatre (notes on the *Threepenny Opera*)”. Brecht's uses the term *literarization* to designate performative practices that, at first glance, might seem quite dissimilar to the literary. For example, Brecht calls for “literarizing” the theatre by adding song, dance, fourth wall breaking, signs, projected text, and other distinctly theatrical dimensions. For Brecht, to make the theatre literary means to make the theatre epic by adding diegetic elements. These devices elevate a single voice and perspective above the heteroglossia of dramatic dialogue and mimesis. Brecht explains “literarizing theatre entails punctuating ‘representation’ with ‘formulation’” (43). Brecht hopes to puncture the representations of dramatic scenes, always possibly reifying that which they depict, with signs and songs that break the illusionistic spell with “‘formulation’”. “As he reads the projections on screen the spectator adopts an attitude of smoking-and-watching,” Brecht wishing to inculcate masculine intellectual detachment in audiences (44). The “formulation” written on a prominently displayed placard should describe the scene in an intellectual manner. *The Threepenny Opera*'s “curves” do not bewilder audiences: the diegetic elements organize scenes into themes and messages that the audience might otherwise miss.

⁴⁰ See Book VI of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Even songs possess intellectual “formulation” rather than emotional intensification. “What Keeps Mankind Alive?,” the second finale of *The Threepenny Opera*, contains the following lyrics:

MACHEATH: You gentlemen who think you have a mission
to purge us of the seven deadly sins,
should first sort out the basic food position,
then start your preaching! That's where it begins.
You lot who preach restraint and watch your waist as well,
should learn, for once, the way the world is run:
However much you twist, whatever lies you tell,
food is the first thing, morals follow on.
So first make sure that those who now are starving
get proper helpings when we all start carving.

VOICE OFF-STAGE: What keeps mankind alive?

MACHEATH: What keeps mankind alive? The fact that millions
are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed.
Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance
in keeping its humanity repressed.
CHORUS: For once you must try not to shirk the facts:
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts. (55)

The Threepenny Opera's chorus sings the memorable earworm “mankind is kept alive by bestial acts”. More than a few audience members leave the theatre reciting its politically charged lyrics. It is no mystery which bestial act is primary: cannibalism serves as an extended metaphor throughout the play to describe how people under capitalism relate to each other. No one is free from dog-eat-dog conditions. The audience, judging the play from a position of emotional distance, is later to recognize the dramatic irony when the roguish Macheath tells his cronies “*You'll never make businessmen. Cannibals— but never businessmen!*” (13): the play persistently erases the differences between these two categories.

Parents exploit their children, lovers consume and throw each other away, police devour those they are sworn to protect, and the fraternity of gang-life is fratricidal. Cannibalism does not

occur outside the law: cannibalism is the law within Brecht's play. The opening line of "The Ballad of Mac the Knife" sings of the protagonist's shark-like, flesh-tearing teeth. Even radio listeners will learn of capitalism's cannibalism through the popular covers of Bobby Darin and Louis Armstrong. Brecht explains "the musical items [...] were of a reflective and moralizing nature. The play showed the close relationship between the emotional life of the bourgeois and the criminal world" (85). Gluttonous and selfish, the audience takes pleasure in the humorous jokes and catchy songs, while ruminating on a message that they would otherwise avoid. Specifically, the bourgeois order from which spectators have benefited—at least enough to be able to enjoy a night in the theatre—is built on a criminal appetites.

The scenes of criminals have considerable dramatic charm, even if Brechtian acting principles demand the actors to signal their artificialness. Brecht explains that the songs, full of Marxist social theory, are intended to restore the audience's emotional distance. He writes "in *The Threepenny Opera* the educative elements were so to speak *built in*. They were not an organic consequence of the whole, but stood in contradiction to it; they broke up the flow of the play and its incidents; they prevented empathy; they acted as a cold douche for those whose sympathies were becoming involved" (132). Overturning the long connection between music and the passions, Brecht hopes to use music to interrupt emotionality. The "cold douche", the play's instructive ideological message, disrupts reifying acts of identification.

In "The Modern Theatre is Epic Theatre," Brecht constructs a chart to make this communicative, intellectual function of the songs apparent (38):

The Dramatic Opera	The Epic Opera
The music dishes up	The music communicates
music heightens the text	music which sets forth the text

music which proclaims the text	music which takes the text for granted
music which illustrates	music which takes a position
music which paints the psychological situation	which gives attitude

The epic opera does not heighten emotionality, but instead “communicates” a message. It “takes a position” from which it is possible for the audience to judge the characters’ struggles. Brecht explains that though the diegetic elements interrupt mimesis, the two elements work together to achieve the desired “indirect impact” and are thus “organic” parts of the work (58). Diegesis provides a secure perspective from which to judge the dramatic events, guiding the audience to see the socially critical themes that unify the production.⁴¹

Overturning Aristotle’s focus on plot, the play constructs series of tableaus that each represent exploitative relationships. The characters of the play, forced into bestial behaviors for survival, lack the requisite freedom to choose their actions. In consequence, Brecht transforms dramatic form, built on the notion of decision, into a series of paintings. These paintings, which are not always connected from the perspective of plot, are summarized from an outside ideological position. It does not matter if a minor character appears in the play but lacks a definitive role in the plot’s structure. Brecht dismisses truisms of dramatic craftsmanship, instead demanding that all characters and events are explained through the single thesis. Overturning the focus on plot in Aristotle’s treatment of drama and Lukács’s analysis of the novel, Brecht nonetheless remains faithful to the foundational aesthetic virtue that unites him with his foils: intelligibility.

⁴¹ The “swerves” are not sign of disorganization but rather of productive contradiction; a notion central to Brecht’s dialectics.

According to the ambitions of Brecht's theoretical writings, it is the spectators, not the hero, who will take action. They will take back their "repressed humanity"— as the song calls it (55)— through the revolutionary remaking of their world. Outlawing cannibalism, this community will achieve grandeur rather than tragic failure. Epic theatre prepares people to build an epic society, one that turns away from the stupefying fatalism of tragedy in art as well as in politics. Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* begins with a song that summarizes this demand for the audience to embrace its capacity for action: "We particularly ask you-- / when a thing continually occurs-- / Not on that account to find it natural / In an age of bloody confusion / Ordered disorder, planned caprice, And dehumanized humanity, lest all things / Be held unalterable" (111). Brecht sought to create a theatrical form capable of producing an audience that would determine its own political future.

The Threepenny Opera continues the anti-tragic polemic of epic Marxist aesthetics. Macheath, after escaping punishment for his crimes so many times, sits in jail awaiting execution. The anti-hero, an aristocrat of the criminal underworld, is destined for tragic memorialization. Mack the Knife elegizes himself to the audience:

Ladies and gentlemen. You see before you a declining representative of a declining social group. We lower middle-class artisans who toil with our humble jemmies on small shopkeepers' cash registers are being swallowed up by big corporations backed by the banks. What's a jemmy compared with a share certificate? What's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank? What's murdering a man compared with employing a man? Fellow citizens, I hereby take my leave of you. [...] It is proof positive that the world never changes. A concatenation of several unfortunate circumstances has brought about my fall. So be it – I fall. (76)

The gang-leader Macheath feels entitled to the respect due to any small business owner. His sort, now "being swallowed up by big corporations", is on the precipice of a tragic "fall". The big eat the small: criminals have little defense against those who use the law to punish upstart

competitors for the very same cannibalism they themselves practice. “What’s murdering a man compared to employing him?”, Macheath pointedly asks, becoming a mouthpiece for critique. However, against Marx, Macheath continues to espouse the conservative viewpoint that Brecht most frequently militates against: that defeat “is proof positive that the world never changes”. Macheath expresses the resigned defeatism of a tragic hero.

As Macheath mounts the gallows, the scoundrel Peachum seizes control of the performance. Previously enemies, as Macheath has seduced his daughter and competed for the city’s ill-gotten profits, Peachum addresses the audience to reveal the artificiality of the performance:

And you're the people we can't risk offending/ We thought we'd better do without this scene/ And substitute instead a different ending. / Since this is opera, not life, you'll see/ Justice give way before humanity. / So now, to stop our story in its course/ Enter the royal official on his horse. (78).

Peachum’s business enterprise costumes people to appear homeless and deformed. He and his wife coach them to act pitifully and to elicit sympathy, assigning each a street-corner at which to beg; a veritable franchise business. The parallel between Peachum and the sort of liberal bourgeois theatre director that Brecht detests is apparent. Both sanitize suffering to flatter the audience, offering an outlet for self-congratulation through cheap philanthropy and fraudulent empathy.

Peachum introduces a “messenger on a horse” to offer a fraudulent artistic resolution to intractable political problems, a skill Peachum and directors alike hone in their dishonest professions. The words “Appearance of The Deus Ex Machina” are projected onto a screen as the messenger announces that Macheath’s sentences has been commuted. Peachum’s wife exclaims “How nice and easy would everything be if you could always reckon with saviors on horseback” (79). In the final dialogue, Peachum declares that the play had shown “the poorest of

the poor”, but “in real life the fates that they meet can only be grim” rather than ameliorated through contrivance (79). By “laying bare the device” as the Russian Formalists might say, Brecht demystifies the bourgeois theatre that substitutes hackneyed surprises for intellectual pleasure.

Brecht concludes his play with a clever lesson. In theatre, the *deus ex machina* so often concludes a tragic performance to give it sense of fated necessity. Speaking through Peachum, the master of manipulating the sympathies of the bourgeoisie, Brecht accuses the audience of immorality and poor taste in being satisfied with shallow symbolic compensation. You accept the fiction that tragic suffering is natural both in the theatre and in the polis, even as it so often can only be justified through theatrical contrivance, *The Threepenny Opera* shouts. Plays can be otherwise, and so too can the world that houses the theatre. You, the audience, refuse to acknowledge that you, like playwrights, have the power to choose a momentous political “swerve”. Rather than pacifying one with theatrical contrivances, why not choose the coup of revolutionary action?

Didactically and with a certain aggression, the performance forces the audience to confront the *truth* that tragic downfalls and redemptive reversals do not occur in real life. Instead of the final scene culminating the performance, it shows that if it were not for ideological and artistic mystifications, the circularity of human exploitation and suffering could be recognized. The reversal of this state of things cannot happen in art alone, though the audience might perform a revolutionary act that liberates human beings after an instructive performance.

Time, plot, and rhythm lose their importance. Concerned with the consistency of his worldview, Brecht turns away from the variability of time. He writes of the epic theatre’s pictorial quality, what is widely known as the Brecht’s theory of the *social gest*:

The opposite of natural disorder is aimed at: natural order. This order is determined from a social-historical point of view. The point of view to be adopted by the production can be made more generally intelligible, though not properly characterized, if we call it the genre of the painter and the historian. (*Brecht on Theatre* 58)

Each scene, which shows a similar image of human relations, has stable consistency similar to the “genre of the painter”. For example, to show the exploitative relations of capitalism, Brecht conceives of a scene that has the quality of a still life: each character repeatedly shows their greed. Like a statue, they are immortalized making a single selfish gesture for all eternity.

Mother Courage bites a coin, signifying the rapacious greed of the capitalist. The theatre director, akin to a painter and historian, puts forward successive tableaux that teach the audience.

To understand this appeal to painting, one must look at Brecht's model for revolutionary theatre. Judging leftist revolutionary art as insufficiently instructive, Brecht cites an unlikely influence:

Bourgeois revolutionary aesthetics, founded by such great figures of the Enlightenment as *Diderot* and *Lessing*, defines the theatre as a place of entertainment and instruction. During the Enlightenment, a period which saw the start of a tremendous upsurge of the European theater there was no conflict between these two things. Pure amusement, provoked even by tragedy, struck men like Diderot as utterly hollow and unworthy unless it added something to the spectator's knowledge" (*Brecht on Theatre* 131).

Liberal philosopher, playwright, and theorist of painting Denis Diderot provides a model despite Brecht's opposing political convictions. Brecht will follow Diderot in defining political theatre as a theatre of intelligibility and the ascendance of a single point of view in matters ethical and political.⁴² Normally conscious of the ideological valences of forms, Brecht thinks effective political theatre possesses certain formal traits regardless of the ideological message. Brecht

⁴² Though many have noted that Brecht's and Diderot's drama subverted the explicit ideals of their theoretical writings (and often for the best).

views tragedy's emotional pleasure as "utterly hollow" unless it is in service of "the spectator's knowledge," as Diderot also did according Brecht's strategic characterization.

Brecht, like Lukács, has interest in Diderot's political theatre. However, Brecht's engagement is more substantial: Brecht repeats Diderot in ascribing greater truth and persuasive force to the painterly tableau. Notably the *coup de théâtre*, whether it comes in the form of a tragic reversal or a *deus ex machina*, is conceived as merely theatrical in comparison. Like Diderot, Brecht avoids the sublime reversals of tragedy.

Brecht's epic theatre would not merely repeat Diderot's theory of *drame bourgeois*—dialectical thought assumes that no old form could straightforwardly communicate a different ideological message—but important commonalities remain. Two of Brecht's influential defenders, Peter Szondi and Roland Barthes, tackled the relationship between Diderot and Brecht. Szondi and Barthes were wide-ranging intellectuals with significant contributions to the study of literature and culture. Despite their Marxian commitments, not even political foes would accuse either of philosophical naiveté. Why, then, did both men conform to the Western tradition's view that theater is an especially political art? How did they view political theatre as having several particularly "correct" traits that could be found in Diderot and Brecht, despite the ideological differences of their messages?

Tableau versus Coup de Théâtre: Epic Marxism against the Temporality of Tragedy

"In the essays I have written, which concern literature and not the theater, I have often struggled against the limitation of a textual reading to one definite meaning. But as soon as a dramatic spectacle is involved, I require a strong, unique meaning, some moral or social responsibility. Because I am still faithful to the ideas of Brecht, so important to me when I was a theater critic."

-----Roland Barthes in a 1978 interview ("A Few Words to Let in Doubt" 318)

Szondi's "Tableau and Coup de Théâtre: On the Social Psychology of Diderot's Bourgeois Tragedy" and Barthes's "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein" show a faithfulness to Brecht.⁴³ Influenced by epic aesthetics, both critics see in Diderot's tableau and Brecht's *social gestus* a particularly political task: making the visible intelligible through avoiding the chance reversals of tragic theatre.

In *Discourse on Dramatic Poetry*, Diderot focuses on theatre as a means to spread political and ethical virtue. Diderot's genres aim to educate one into the sentiments of the bourgeoisie. Szondi correctly asserts that the *drame bourgeois*—in both its *comédie sérieuse* and the *tragédie bourgeoise* subgenres—does not mimetically represent the conflict between two classes, correcting Lukács's less accurate characterization. Indeed, *Le Fils naturel* and *Le Père de famille* depict aristocratic households: competing classes are not pitted in conflict explicitly. Instead, Szondi argues the conflict is between the "true" image of the painterly tableau against the arbitrary *coup de théâtre*. Szondi explains:

In Diderot's dramatic theory the counterpart of the tableau is the coup de théâtre, the "dramatic" turn of events. It is defined in the *Entretiens* as "an unforeseen event [incident imprévu] which finds expression in the action and which suddenly alters the circumstances of the characters." Scorning the *coup de théâtre*, Diderot and Dorval advocate the tableau, the scenic picture, defined as "a disposition of the characters on stage which is so natural and so authentic [vraie] that it would please me if it were faithfully rendered on canvas by a painter." A greater degree of truth is attributed to the tableau than to the incident imprevu, which is termed a coup de théâtre precisely because it is perceived as untrue, as merely theatrical [...] But it must be borne in mind that the tableau is accorded this status not because it participates in the truth as such, in some suprahistorical realm, but because the unforeseen really was proscribed in the middle-class society of the eighteenth century. The rational conduct of life, which Max Weber analyzed [...] aimed at the elimination of chance" ("Tableau" 323).

⁴³ Szondi, an influential commentator on Strindberg, will appear again in Chapter Two. Discussion of Genet continues in Chapter Three.

The identification of Diderot's opinion with that of his character Dorval perhaps should not so easily be made; nevertheless, Szondi explains a significant strain of Diderot's thought. Bourgeois ideology sees the family and domestic virtues as truer, more stable, and more natural than the chances that characterize historical existence. Depicting the private sphere of aristocrats as predictable, tableaus reinforce belief that nature reveals itself within the home; a significant dimension of the liberal capitalist worldview. The means to perceive this revelation is not hearing—for words deceive more than the allegedly natural language of gesture—but rather sight, the sense long crowned as the closest to pure intellection. Szondi later explains that Diderot "turned the *tragédie domestique et bourgeoise* into a depiction and glorification of the middle-class nuclear family, portraying it as a real utopia" (335). Szondi indicates that the no-place of utopia represents itself through the tableau's negation of time and change. Political drama, thus, arises from the imitation of inaction—that which is conceived as eternal, essential, and uncorrupted by chance—rather than Aristotle's focus on the imitation of an action. Modes of representation rather than the depiction of social conflict determine whether art is political. Rhetoric's "how" is more important than semantics' "what" is the orientation of political art.

Political meanings are made intelligible and public. In this case, the timeless virtue of the home allows human nature to express and secure itself. Szondi writes that for the bourgeois audiences "the coups de théâtre belong to the world of the court and mirror the fickleness of princely moods and the inconstancy of alliances in a situation where everyone is hunting for power, favor, and happiness: *homo homini lupus*" ("Tableau" 329). The bourgeois theatre represents the dominant monarchic legal order as one of emotion, *incidents imprevus*, and lupine cannibalism; in short, as a law under which the use of force is lawless. The tragic reversals arbitrarily chosen by authors and authorities are objects of fear and resentment. Public life and

the whims of sovereigns are as unnecessary as poorly deployed theatrical devices. Yet the tableau possesses a truth that exerts influence on politics.

Szondi concludes that the conflict between bourgeois tableau and sovereign coup de théâtre makes tragedy remain a non-revolutionary form, including Diderot's bourgeois tragedy that minimized reversals. The drama's unfolding destroys the desired timelessness that the tableau achieves on stage. Szondi writes:

this much is certain: as long as the middle-class spectator wants to feel pity in the theater, the model hero of bourgeois tragedy will be the helpless victim of an absolute ruler's arbitrary power, his sphere of influence being limited strictly to his own family. Or, conversely, as long as the bourgeois does not revolt against absolutism and make a bid for power, it will live solely for its emotions, bewailing in the theater its own misery, which is inflicted upon it, as Diderot observed, as much by men as the misery of the heroes of Attic tragedy was inflicted upon them by fate. For the drama, the revolt of the middle class spells the end of sentimentality, the end of compassion and emotion as the purpose of tragedy. ("Tableau" 340)

Bourgeois tragedy contained the ideological form and content of its class, but this genre was not yet one of revolution. The eighteenth-century tragedy was solace and therapy for a rising class that lives "solely for its emotion": the audience feels sympathy for aristocrats, insofar as that in their homes, aristocrats are not dissimilar to the bourgeoisie. This overvaluation of the private—both in terms of personal emotions as well as property—has political ramifications. The bourgeois class will later reshape the political world to resemble the domestic sphere it cherishes.⁴⁴ Yet he credits Lessing and Lenz for realizing that so long as the tableau—which contain the utopian suggestion a group can together bear witness to the truthful and permanent—disintegrates in contact with the coup de théâtre, the audience feels helpless and politically-paralyzing feelings of pity and terror. Tragedy takes perverse pleasure in the temporal corrupting

⁴⁴ This line of argument is so ubiquitous among mid-century German intellectuals that Szondi can invoke it through brief mention of Jurgen Habermas.

utopian visions. Tragic resignation makes the bourgeoisie concerned only with what “is inflicted upon it,” rather than what it could inflict on others. Tragedy must give way to epic.

Szondi speaks from the oldest biases in Western politico-aesthetic thought. First, the notion that a proper politics depends on intellectual decisions that occur after “end of compassion and emotion” (“Tableau” 340). Second, the belief that, in a healthy political order, a collective or audience functions as if it is an individual; the *body politic*. The tragic *coup de théâtre* might bear relation to the power-hungry machinations and bestial madness of a *coup d’etat*, but never would it resemble a just revolution. Brecht, Szondi’s work implies, places primary focus on tableaus, concluding that the pictorial and political have a special relation.

The hope to meld the visible and the intelligible, thereby creating a common perspective that restructures the political world, does not belong only to Szondi. One might look to Jacques Rancière’s “rearrangement of the visible” and his call for emancipated spectatorship; to Alain Badiou’s “eternal figures” of “theatre-ideas”;⁴⁵ to Walter Benjamin’s “dialectical image”; to Lukács, to Raymond Williams, to Sergei Eisenstein; to all the intellectuals of the left who have seen political action at its root dependent on theatregoers—or some other collective—viewing and feeling the world together. The *political image* coheres, saturated in meaning, becoming a favorite of leftist aesthetic thinkers. For reasons never explained, this intelligible image is beyond the critiques that the same thinkers insightfully levy against ideality. The left still hopes

⁴⁵ Badiou writes about the shortcoming of modern political theater in “The Political Destiny of the Theatre Yesterday and Today”: leftist political theatre has failed “in creating lasting or even eternal figures such as the Slave (Sosie) or the Valet (Scapin), and as someone like the Proletarian deserves to be” (121). Badiou criticizes twentieth-century political theater, including Brecht, for failing to create a lasting and intelligible *image* of the proletariat, such as the “eternal figures” of stage history’s famous slaves and valets. Badiou elsewhere writes the stage should be “an invention that would communicate, through theatre-ideas, everything of which a people’s science is *capable*. We want a theater of capacity, not incapacity” (*Handbook of Inaesthetics* 74-75), stressing the focus on communication and unified strength.

for the assimilation of the visible and the intelligible as well as of theatre and theory; the dreams of the West since the spectatorialism of Greek thought.⁴⁶ Art once again becomes a tool in the service of man's highest callings: politics and philosophy.

The First Meaning: Barthes on Brechtian Political Theatre

Few theorists are more closely associated with the pleasure afforded by art and its formal construction than Roland Barthes. The “pleasure of the text,” “the death of the author,” and other formulations became rallying calls for those who championed multiplicity in meaning and aesthetic perception. His thinking of the photographic image hinges on the “third meaning,” the “punctum,” and the “obtuse meaning”. These terms all suggest that though artistic images often hope to communicate a message, it is only their accidental incoherence that inspires bliss (*jouissance*).

However, Barthes viewed political theatre as dependent on the “first” meaning; on the denotation that otherwise interested him very little. Why did Barthes adopt a different stance to theater?⁴⁷ He is one of many who doubt notions of intent, responsibility, and meaning, only to make an exception for politics. Similarly, Szondi authored the erudite monograph *Essay on the Tragic* that celebrates the internal challenge that tragedy poses to the foundational categories of Western thought, only to disavow the genre regarding contemporary political struggle. Barthes and Szondi return to the comforts of reason and clarity in politics despite otherwise favoring the

⁴⁶ Interestingly, the renunciation of temporality in favor of the tableau's spatiality is not so different from Aristotle. Though Aristotle favored the dramatic reversal, he repeatedly calls the poet an image-maker or portrait artist. The well-constructed plot, an intelligible whole bound by links of necessity and probability, has none of the openness of futurity or chance; it is like a well-made image according to Aristotle.

⁴⁷ Brecht's “Putting on the Greeks” shows his high esteem for ancient tragedy. Yet he disavowed tragedy in modern theatre on political grounds, seeing the ancient form's modern corollary in the reactionary fantasies of fake wrestling. See “The World of Wrestling” from Barthes's *Mythologies*.

irrational and obscure. Barthes valorizes the sublime's troubling relation to rationality but dismisses contemporary tragedy as politically undesirable.

Barthes is a particularly rich figure: he avows his contradictory allegiances. His reflections are full of wild swings that demand careful reading. In "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," the French thinker explains how the liberal Diderot and Marxists Brecht and Eisenstein view theatre as a succession of tableaux. These scenes make the visible nearly perfectly legible (70,72). "Tableau is intellectual, it has something to say (something moral, social)" affirms Barthes: the image speaks to the intellect rather than exciting the senses. Notably, Barthes describes the "repression" of the Pythagorean connection between mathematics and acoustics (and perhaps mystical, truthful hearing). It was replaced by the Platonic connection of geometrical reason and vision; of *theoria* and *theatron* (69). Through visual semiotics of theatre, tableau communicates a "tangible, intellectually visible" and "ideal" meaning that the audience members unconsciously decipher. People feel greater immediacy when viewing instead of reading; texts make the absence of the message sender keenly felt (75,74). The ease of decoding visual signs makes us forget that a sob on stage is a sign in a conventional language of gesture rather than something naturally meaningful.

Representation belongs in its most functioning mode to image-based models of theatre. Here, audiences who arrive and leave separately feel as if they see things from a single perspective. This type of theatre's political efficaciousness has a direct relationship to its deceitfulness:

In the theatre, in the cinema, in traditional literature, things are always seen *from somewhere*. Here we have the geometrical foundation of representation: a fetishistic subject is required to cut out the tableau. This point of meaning is always the Law: law of society, law of struggle, law of meaning. Thus all militant art cannot but be representational, legal. In order for representation to be really bereft of origin and exceed its geometrical nature without ceasing to be

representation, the price that must be paid is enormous—no less than death [...] the spectator can no longer take up any position, for he cannot identify his eye with the closed eyes of the dead man; the tableau has no point of departure, no support, it gapes open. Everything that goes on before this limit is reached (and this is the case of the work of Brecht and Eisenstein) can only be legal: in the long run, it is the Law of the Party which cuts out the epic scene [...] Once again Eisenstein and Brecht rejoin Diderot (promoter of the bourgeois tragedy, as his two successors were the promoters of a socialist art) [...] How could art, in a society that has not yet found peace, cease to be metaphysical? That is, significant, readable, representational? fetishist? When are we to have music, the Text? ("Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein" 77).

The theatre posits a single perspective, according to Barthes, from which their audience can see. This worldview is geometrical, representational, political, and militant: the viewer can either accept the perspective or be metaphorically executed as no other vantage point is made available. To attempt to see with the "eyes of a dead man" is dangerous but also pleasurable in the sense that death, loss of self, and orgasm are connected in Barthes's psychoanalytically-influenced attitudes. Indeed, Barthes's readings of "text" and "music" attempt to see and hear as a blind or dead man; to miss the metaphysical meanings in hopes of pleasure. But his relation to theatre is that of one who wants to live under the protection of the "law of the party". Barthes aspires to be *faithful* to the Brechtian left and the "law of meaning".

Language of the sovereign coup abounds across the essay. It is associated with tableau which "cuts" a moment out of time and space—and the various alternative perspectives the expanse of time and space suppose—to present a single perspective on an "Italian curtain stage" ("Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein" 71). Rather than objective, the political message is thus the result of a sovereign act of decision. This decisive coup creates a picture of the world that weaponizes "objectivity". Barthes's suggests that although faith that the visible and intelligible can unify harmoniously in full presence is metaphysical and fetishistic, he still hopes for a meaning that could be shared among the political community as if without mediation. This spiritualist hope

motivates Barthes to interpret theatre according to more conventional standards. “The law of the party cuts out the epic scene” (77): the coup occurs off-stage when the political artist chooses which perspective will reign.

Barthes deconstructs political theatre while affirming it within a world in which people still believe in it. The idealized image is a fetishism committed in the name of ending capitalism’s more destructive fetishisms. Yet despite advocating for a metaphysical theatrical politico-aesthetics, Barthes demystifies the mechanics by which the tableau creates the illusion of totemic force. The various parts of the tableau appear to manifest a unified and immediate meaning to the viewers who forget they are decoding signs: “the full fetishistic load [...] becomes the sublime substitute for meaning: it is meaning that is fetishized” (“Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein” 71-72). The work of art and the body politic are fetishized: worshipped for a unifying idealization that artistic tricks conjure but never truly realize. Materiality, particularity, and internal differences constitute the stage performance as well as the audience, but they go unnoticed.

The law is arbitrary and any competing platform from the left will also be so. Yet since we lack peace, Barthes suggests we embrace the idealism of socialist epic art. Barthes recognizes that the desire for a “irreversible and incorruptible” meaning is just that—a desire rather than rational conviction—that compromises dispassionate objectivity (70). But for Barthes, this desire need not be a tragic flaw. If buoyed by epic excitement, humanity might overcome its divisions through constructing common meaning.

Barthes’s position is sophisticated. At moments, he articulates attitudes close to the twentieth-century’s left tragedians. For instance, Barthes gestures towards a different stance in a provocative parenthetical that he quickly abandons:

(Doubtless there would be no difficulty in finding in post-Brechtian theatre and post-Eisenstein cinema *mises en scène* marked by the dispersion of the tableau, the pulling to pieces of the ‘composition’, the setting in movement of the ‘partial organs’ of the human figure, in short, the holding in check of the metaphysical meaning of the work—then also of its political meaning; or, at least, the carrying over this meaning towards *another* politics) (“Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein” 72)

Barthes wonders if those theatres that hinder the tableau, meaning, and unifying perspectives might have political worth. Could devices that produce obscurity and ambiguity serve the political theatre of *another*, not yet known politics? He leaves the suggestion with no further comment. Indeed, teasing the possibility seems wiser than pursuing it.

Though Barthes’s caution is well-founded, I ask if this political theatre that sets “in movement of the ‘partial organs’ of the human figure” might be tragic theatre? The tragic tradition has long been fascinated with tearing apart the image of human wholeness to confront the bestial, the fragile, and the finite that audiences refuse to see. Of course, this would not be a post-metaphysical politics and theatre. But so too would it not be a theatre of existing political masters and the eternal justifications—whether by natural law or divine right—of their propriety and authority. Tragedy tolerates no human being’s claim to possess mastery or to foresee all *incidents imprevu*. Could some version of tragedy “pull to pieces” (72) the body politic?

The following four chapters will attempt to answer this question, elucidating the tragic forms and sensibilities of politically radical twentieth-century playwrights.

Chapter II.

Mastery's Catastrophe: August Strindberg's Political Peripeteias

*“Whereas other more knowledgeable people, with greater experience, are still searching for the truth, searching fanatically at the risk of having to abandon the whole of their previous work, you and your friends have already got it all worked out, and irrespective of your many promises not to formulate a programme, you already have your dogma and ritual. Are you yourself really certain that industrial socialism isn’t merely the latest offshoot of the idealism which miscarried in the French Revolution? Do you credit the current socialist programme with a real enough foundation in **human nature (or culture, if you prefer)** for it to be realizable? This programme was put together by the ultra-romantic Saint-Simon, recast by the lunatic Enfantin, and corrected by August Comte, a realist who still kept one foot in the mush of idealism. Can you swear that the mind of Karl Marx, who was born in 1818, really bore no trace of this, and that a hothead like Lasalle (born 1824) could see people for what they really are? Unfortunately, one can’t help fearing that people from the same period share the delusions of that period, and that **their minds must bear the imprint** of the time in which they live.*

*I believe in a revolution with beneficial consequences, but I’ve no time for an industrial state which regulates production and consumption. **Knowing human nature as it is, and the way it’s going, I don’t believe the other social classes would participate in an organized idea state of that kind, perhaps not even the workers themselves when it comes to it.**”*

-----Letter to Hjalmar Branting, 6 December 1886 (*Strindberg’s Letters* 219-220)⁴⁸

Writing to the future first socialist prime minister of Sweden, August Strindberg (1849-1912) makes what seems like a break with his long socialist-firebrand past. Greater venom at existing socialist parties, the influence of Darwinian language, and an unexpected surge of misogyny produce a conception that Strindberg abandoned the left in the mid-1880’s.

Strindberg’s “battles of the brains”, including *Miss Julie* (1888) and *Creditors* (1889), arise within this transitional context. Having been persecuted for blasphemy in 1884 for advocating gender egalitarianism, the works of this period disgusted former allies like Branting. Scandalous dialogue— Jean yelling “Lackey’s whore, servant’s slut” (*Miss Julie* 91) after sleeping with the daughter of his master— caused gender politics to overshadow class themes for many theatregoers.

⁴⁸ I have bolded certain phrases for emphasis. Elements of this and subsequent chapters are published as “August Strindberg, Amiri Baraka, and the Radicalization of Domestic Tragedy” (Lucas 2019).

Turmoil within Strindberg's political identity coincided with commitment to a new genre: "naturalistic tragedies" about contemporary society. Beginning with 1887's *The Father*, these works brought Strindberg new levels of notoriety. Some leftist readers identify this tragic turn, offering political pathologies. They allege that Strindberg had recanted the Marxist doctrine that humanity alters itself within history, succumbing to the fatalism of an ahistorical sense of human nature. In *Modern Tragedy*, Raymond Williams advocates this popular view: "This, certainly, is a kind of naturalism, of the type popularized by the false analogy of biological evolution to the struggles of classes and individuals. The 'survival of the fittest' was translated as the victory or the strongest type" (138).⁴⁹ In response to the leftist self-analysis that Strindberg's "Preface to Miss Julie" enacts, Williams counters "the portrait is vigorous and the analysis is social. But in practice Strindberg could not sustain this alternative view. The class element in the affair of Julie and Jean is important, certainly, but behind it rages a different pattern" (138).

The pattern, for Williams, was natural selection extended into social arrangements. Human relations are depicted to be as inherently competitive as capitalist ideology falsely declares them. In Strindberg's work, constructive politics and healthy sociality are not possible "not only because isolated beings cannot combine, can only collide and damage each other; but also because the brief experiences of physical union, whether in sexual love or infancy, are inevitably destructive" (*Modern Tragedy* 179). Strindberg's characters tragically compete in a zero-sum game that none end up winning.

⁴⁹ Many believe Strindberg embraced a Darwinian social imagination following his divorce. He often bemoaned how previously less powerful social groups gain power. Margaretha Falhgren contends that Strindberg's "battle of the brains" dramas enact gender essentialism based on bad biology and wounded masculinity, comporting with a reactionary overvaluation of nature.

I hope to offer a more complex picture of Strindberg's politics and aesthetics, both of which problematize common conceptions of coming together; whether in sexual union, the theatre, or political action. The letter to Branting, at the start of this chapter, can be read as the most banal platitude of the right: the belief that socialism is incompatible with a timeless human nature. However, other explanations better account for Strindberg's thought.

Strindberg moves beyond the nature/culture dichotomy to arrive at a discourse that is in tension with certain socialisms. "Human nature (or culture, if you prefer)" (*Strindberg's Letters* 219) may not be a declaration of imperishable egoism but an assertion that culture and nature possess a complex relation. "Human nature as it is, and the way it's going" again emphasizes this sort of thinking: human beings may be determined in various way by cultural and natural factors, but their natures are still developing within changing circumstances. While Williams sees Strindberg's focus on sexual, psychological, and domestic desires as an attempt to escape history, Strindberg's domestic tragedies show that "private" feelings cannot be separated from the history that produces them or the future they will shape.

Two consistent aspects of Strindberg's thought up until his religious conversion were his belief in the tentative, culturally-specific aspect of human understanding and the lack of telos—whether divinely authored or immanent within nature itself—in historical change.⁵⁰ Drawing from readings in Henry Thomas Buckle, Herbert Spencer, and G.W. F. Hegel, Strindberg distrusted all attempts to hypostasize knowledge. Whether it was evolutionary thought, Hegelian idealism, or Marxist materialism, Strindberg took interest in intellectual systems that argue for the historical production of human beings. Nevertheless, he faults these systems for balking at their discovery, carving out self-exceptions to claim objectivity and finality for their own

⁵⁰ As Harry V.E. Palmlad explains in *Strindberg's Conception of History*.

conclusions. The disappointing return of “mushy idealism” cuts a static image out of the flux of history. Tableaus have little appeal to Strindberg nor do conventional characters, his “naturalist” dramaturgy rejecting both as unnatural within a world characterized by change.

Strindberg believes that history largely determines thought: “Unfortunately, one can’t help fearing that people from the same period share the delusions of that period, and that their minds must bear the imprint of the time in which they live” (*Strindberg’s Letters* 220). From this Marxian position he assaults Marx. Some imply Strindberg views his own beliefs as objective or scientific; as escaping the “imprint” of circumstances that guide it. However, his persistent declarations that his intellectual experimentation could never be completed complicate such criticism. Strindberg avows character as little other than what one absorbs from social-biological-historical circumstances, indicating that his rejection of many mainstream socialists was the result of his unusual strong commitment to materialism. In positing the continued unfolding of history, Strindberg suggests the images forecasted by contemporary socialist programs are “rationalist” fancy akin to the fantasy of static identity. Nonetheless, his letter affirms an allegiance to revolution so long as it does not seek a managerial industrial state.

The claim that Strindberg broke with socio-historical analysis and radical politics is overstated. In a letter of the following year, Strindberg states his perception that Branting’s and his own “instincts and opinions coincide” on most points (*Strindberg’s Letters* 269). Strindberg proposes starting a socialist paper in which the forces of reaction will be a constant target and liberals occasional electoral allies, much as *The Communist Manifesto* advises. Nevertheless, Strindberg writes:

My position most closely resembles anarchism, unproclaimed, however, since it’s against the law. I’ve broken with socialism, which is a post-romantic doctrine, or idealistic philosophy, with an undercurrent of rationalism, because socialism

wants to ‘make’ a new society, that is, restrict freedom, whilst keeping the theory of evolution, anarchism only wishes to act negatively. (269)

Readers fix on the professed break with socialism, seeing Strindberg as turning toward a rightwing anarchism. But this letter, written in hopes of creating a socialist journal, makes a straight-forward reading strained. Strindberg shows a faithfulness to the left in his betrayal of its idealist iterations, maintaining a relation to its origins in negativity. Strindberg desires “to act negatively”; “to clear away and pull down”.⁵¹ If the Marxian left arose from a radicalized reading of Hegelian negativity, Strindberg belongs within its tradition even if he attempts to reconcile socialism with contemporary scientific vocabularies. Strindberg’s affirmation of “evolution” over idealist forms of socialism need not necessarily align him with the political right. His notion of evolution did not posit human reason, as it exists within modern European forms of life, as the telos of nature’s development. Conservative political action would have little worthwhile to safeguard. Yet Strindberg is not totally aligned with the contemporary Swedish left either. He opposes industrial socialism for its confidence that the future can be calculated. Aligning himself with revolutionary groups, Strindberg hopes for a future different from the past, viewing destructive passions as the means to pursue change.

Strindberg experienced a shift towards mysticism and religion in the mid-1890’s, but his socialist views remained consistent. The famous “Strindberg Feud” that raged in the years before his 1912 death pitted the writer against the forces of conservatism, including the liberals who Strindberg believed complicit in the rise of nationalism and militarism (Martin 31). The polemical battle has been called the largest societal-cultural debate in Swedish history, containing approximately a thousand newspaper articles and satirical drawings in eighty

⁵¹ An earlier letter to Edvard Brandes declares “I’m a socialist, a nihilist, a republican, anything that opposes the reactionaries! [...] it must all be burned down, so we can start afresh!” (77).

newspapers (Riegert and Roosvall 92). The playwright did not need a stage to make a scene, inciting political emotions with his leftwing views until his final exit.

Though Strindberg's personal views do not prove that his theatre enacts a leftist politico-aesthetics, a dismissal of notions of reason and identity unite his art and politics. Strindberg's depiction of conflict—the acts of negation he posits as producing human beings—has been too often understood as evidence of a Darwinian, capitalistic imagination. It is the contention of this chapter that Strindberg's language of nature and determinism is, despite first appearances, not a flight from political radicalism. Strindberg's work evinces a concern that the left had drifted towards idealist notions of freedom and agency for which tragic form is a timely intervention.

Strindberg's Aesthetics and Reception

Scholars divide Strindberg's theatrical career into two aesthetic phases. The first, lasting until the mid-1890's, participated in theatrical realism. Strindberg's professed "greater naturalism" embraced the mimesis of contemporary social types and conflicts. However, his naturalism reserved artistic license, scorning competing programs that believed in a photographic reproduction of reality.⁵²

The second lasted from his "inferno" of spiritual trial in the mid-1890's until his death. These works were multifarious, bound together by a will to experimentation previously unprecedented in Western theatre. *To Damascus* (1898), *A Dream Play* (1901), and *The Ghost Sonata* (1908) pushed the European stage to interrogate its foundational conventions, pioneering expressionist techniques within the performing arts. Though many viewed his aesthetic shifts as proof of Strindberg's madness, others recognized his importance. In 1918, critic Pär Lagerkvist

⁵² Even Strindberg's experimental painting and photography, subject of renewed interest, disavowed the desirability of a naïve mimesis. See *August Strindberg and Visual Culture: The Emergence of Optical Modernity in Image, Text, and Theatre* (2019).

summarized: “It is from him and through him that naturalism received the critical blow even if, moreover, it is also Strindberg who gave naturalism its most dramatic works” (20).

The two one-act tragedies discussed in this chapter, *Miss Julie* and *Creditors*, fall within the category of realism. However, with hindsight, one can see expressionism breaking through. Intense emotionality, wild reversals, and overt theatricality all make Strindberg’s variation of realism unique. Far from disavowing stage artifice, Strindberg instead defined his naturalism by its concern with sociological and natural scientific thought. His work of the late-1880’s attempted to bring insights from these fields to art and artistic technique to the sciences (such as employing his literary gifts in the ethnography *Among French Peasants*).

Though banned from the commercial theatre, *Miss Julie* premiered in a private performance at the University of Copenhagen. Strindberg’s iconoclasm scandalized both liberals and conservatives, inciting fierce polemical battles. But for much of the twentieth-century, Strindberg’s plays were reduced to a crude Social Darwinist interpretation of a strong “natural” man who triumphs over an overly cultured woman. First associated with Stanislavskian acting and a high aesthetic mistrust of politics, Strindberg’s tragedies later became classics in the character-based repertoire of realist theatres.

Following the contributions of activist scholar Jan Myrdal and radical playwright Peter Weiss in the 1960’s, it became possible to speak of *Miss Julie* in relation to Strindberg’s leftwing politics. Myrdal’s research, unearthing numerous leftist political essays, shows that even the Christian Strindberg maintained anti-aristocratic attitudes, aggression against bourgeois liberalism, and prescient antagonism towards rising ethnonationalisms.⁵³ In specialist scholarship, the recontextualization of Strindberg as a political radical has gained widespread

⁵³ Myrdal anthologized Strindberg’s political essays. The Swedish author continued to change scholarship, publishing many leftist interpretations of Strindberg’s works.

support. A 2012 special issue of *Scandinavian Studies* titled “Strindberg and Radicalism—Strindberg and the Avant-garde: A Hundred Year Legacy” testifies to the re-evaluation.

Emphasizing socio-economic themes within Strindberg’s pre-expressionist drama has become more common, though many have maintained the old view. The legacy of Strindberg is now bifurcated: numerous adaptations employ strong political dynamics while others appeal to the timeless passions. Anne-Charlotte Hanes Harvey summarizes Strindberg’s divided legacy: “‘Strindberg’ is a kaleidoscope of many [...] born of, accompanied and confirmed by theatre criticism, academic dogma and debate, translations, stage productions, films, and ‘public opinion’ (98).

Despite the ease of appropriating Strindberg, major tendencies in politically committed scholarship have spurned him. For many leftist critics both preceding and following Williams, Strindberg’s naturalist tragedies risk stupefying audiences and reifying contemporary social types. Ulf Olson’s “Strindberg Goes to Frankfurt: Critical Theory and the Reactionary Writer” diagnoses this unique situation in which a socialist author became known as “reactionary writer” par excellence. The luminaries of Western Marxism found fault even in *Miss Julie*, an incendiary fantasy about a servant bringing about the downfall of an aristocratic house.

The influence of critical theory looms large in the international academy. The sophistication of critical theory’s politico-aesthetic thought must be considered: its claims take genre and representation so seriously that it disavows “messages” that appear ideologically sympathetic. Not seeing form as a mere container but instead as determining what concepts might be communicated, Western Marxism’s critiques of Strindberg demand attention. The

following section addresses critique's most creative response to Strindberg: Peter Szondi's *Theory of Modern Drama* (1956).⁵⁴

Szondi Casts Strindberg in a Double-Role: Epic and Tragic

Chapter One introduced Szondi as representative of a larger bias: the desire for faithfulness and truth in political art among those who otherwise show suspicion toward traditional virtues in matters of representation. Szondi makes an interesting case study. He was an admirer of Strindberg, praising the playwright that many leftists polemicized against.

However, it was not Strindberg's tragedies, so often charged with radical themes, which excited Szondi. Instead, it was Strindberg's ostensibly apolitical expressionist drama that Szondi calls a "tentative solution" to modern theatre's difficulties.⁵⁵ If Williams's reading takes tragic fatalism to task, Szondi's analysis looks closely at what W.B. Worthen calls the "rhetoric of the theatre": the type of perspective that the conventions of different dramatic forms cultivate in audiences. For Szondi, Strindberg's expressionism introduces a diegetic dimension from epic into the theatre. Diegesis creates a unifying voice or tendentious perspective that is essential for theatre's continued relevance in an era when tragic mimesis only reifies existing forms of life.

Primarily, Szondi's describes the "crisis of modern drama": an irruption between content and form present in many prominent playwrights of the late nineteenth century. The crisis comes after a period of stability in which the content of European drama and its form had little friction;

⁵⁴ Szondi set a high standard for Marxian interpretation, even if *Theory of Modern Drama* contains no explicit political orientation. Despite being structured as chronological overview theatrical development, Szondi's title indicates that theory— literary and social— animates the work.

⁵⁵ Szondi was not alone in having political reverence for Strindberg's expressionist plays. Erwin Piscator, the first practitioner of "epic theatre", praised the play's latent politics in his wartime New York drama workshop. Two of his students, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, would take his advice, later staging Strindberg's expressionist work with The Living Theatre.

a time when the distance between word and thing, a motif in Szondi's work, was not felt as absence or falsehood. Szondi opens his book:

The Drama of modernity came into being in the Renaissance. It was the result of a bold intellectual effort made by a newly self-conscious being who, after the collapse of a medieval worldview, sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone. [...] The sphere of the "between" seemed to be the essential part of his being; freedom and obligation, will and decision the most important of his attributes. The "place" at which he achieved dramatic realization was in an act of decision and disclosure. By deciding to disclose himself to his contemporary world, man transformed his internal being into a palpable dramatic presence. (*Theory 7*)

Drama once enacted a humanist paradigm. Everything one need know about the world could be shown though "interpersonal relationships alone". Personality and character determined the course of individual and collective lives. Though he does not articulate it directly, Szondi's premise is that dramatic art had been a great vehicle for bourgeois ideology until the difficulties of the nineteenth century. This crisis, in which liberal programs gained increasing detractors, signaled the start of a transformation of bourgeois culture into something else.

The Drama makes dialogue absolute, conversations alone allow characters to "fix and mirror" themselves in relation to others (*Theory 7*). But in the late-nineteenth century, the artistic theatre began to doubt whether the self-conscious individual could manifest its "true" self. Living in false consciousness, classical ethics and politics—the sphere of "freedom and obligation, will and decision"—are jeopardized. Condemned to remain partially hidden, theatrical character does not disclose itself. Mimetic forms of drama are no longer possible because interiority and silence, so crucial to contemporary experience, hide so much. For an artform designed to display, the contents of modern European life spell disaster.

Szondi explains the formal mechanism that brought character into relief: exclusion of all elements of experience that contradict bourgeois assumptions about personhood. Dramatic

presence reveals itself through hiding “accidents” that impinge on personality determining an individual’s fate (*Theory* 10). So too must “the world of objects” be repressed, props, or properties, existing to provide characterization (7). Character is fate for the drama: the accidental and the material express individuality rather than shape it. Szondi concludes “the Drama is only possible when dialogue is possible” (10). The ability of characters to gain recognition defines the drama, linking it with capitalist assumptions about the primacy of the individual. Historical and economic relations are occluded for both ideological and formal reasons. They are difficult to render intelligible through gesture and dialogue on stage as well as inconvenient to bourgeois assumptions. Notions of love, disloyalty, and revenge dominate, obscuring the environmental conditions that allow feelings to arise.

The artistic drama of the late-nineteenth century no longer had such faith in dialogue or in the timelessness of the passions. Heartfelt conversations that lead to self-discovery stopped engaging collective fantasies. A rupture between content and form occurred. European society began to suspect community and communication as realms of inauthenticity while the drama still relied on dialogue and mutual recognition. Political and familial communities vanish in the absence of communication and the sentiments.

For Szondi, this crisis precipitated a return of the contents excluded from Absolute Drama. Szondi states that these elements include history, the unconscious, and self-consciousness of representation. Drama is the artistic form for depicting the always present, interpersonal, event (*Theory* 45). The focus on presence distorts both history and past trauma, both of which Europeans were increasingly unwilling to diminish in importance. The playwrights credited for bringing new themes onto the stage include Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, and Anton Chekhov.

Yet their plays introduced new contents that ill fit the old forms. For a critic with Hegelian sensibilities, the crisis of these playwrights is proof not of an inadequacy, but rather of a transitional nature. They exposed the contents of the future theatre demand new techniques.⁵⁶ Szondi introduces a dialectic that operates in many leftist critiques of modern theater. In prioritizing character increasingly, modern dramatists made characters with so much interiority that communication became impossible. Ethics and politics disappear on stage as characters seemingly lose the capability of free decision. The fixed nature of character, shaped by private losses and incommunicable passions, becomes a determining fate that moves characters like automatons. The drama had become bourgeois tragedy in which fetishized notions of character endowed the theatre with a tragic fatalism as strong as that of the ancients. Now fate is not spun by higher beings but by a belief in a similarly mystical force: the notion of a character's fixed essence.

In his narrative about the development of forms, Szondi oddly casts Strindberg in a triple-role: he is a “cause,” a “rescue attempt,” and finally a “tentative solution” to drama’s difficulties. He deems Strindberg’s tragedies part of the crisis of drama. He looks favorably on the expressionist works of Strindberg’s, finding what he calls “I dramaturgy” or “epic dramaturgy” that creates a unifying perspective for audiences. This solution should be familiar to readers of Lukacs and Brecht.

Beneath the dry crispness of his scholarly opinion, Szondi performs an act of intellectual showmanship. Strindberg’s tragedies, depicting contemporary class and social conflict, have less

⁵⁶ Ibsen places focus on distant events and traumas that are difficult to present on the bourgeois stage, though epic novels and theatres accommodate these modern themes. Chekhov’s characters remain unknown to themselves and to others, social alienation threatening meaningful communication. Szondi asserts Chekhov points indirectly toward a new epic that would make use of narration rather than endless dialogue.

value as a model for political theatre than his apolitical works, written after his reconceptualization of art as spiritual trial.⁵⁷ Theatre, in Szondi's view, must prioritize the mode of representation over the message to have social relevance. Typical of the left, he elevates values of unity and intelligibility, omitting Strindberg's tragedies from the canon of political art.

For Szondi, Strindberg created a theatre that could have a future only once he abandoned his materialist worldview. A phrase of Walter Benjamin is appropriate: "don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones" (*Understanding Brecht* 121). In order to be an important innovator, Strindberg's good old socialism gave way to bad new theatre. Epic stages all moments of *mimesis* within the organized structure of its *diegesis*. Strindberg's later work provides a model for Brecht's epic theatre. It provides a sense of wholeness through a single, albeit disordered, perspective. For Szondi, the successes of modern drama share epic formal characteristics. Brecht's rallying call becomes the basic criterion to judge drama.

For Western Marxism, the theatre must follow the novel in reassembling an epic sense of wholeness or totality. Listening to Homer, the Greeks felt life was an intelligible unity, but modern Europeans, alienated from one another and their histories, have lost their sense of meaning and purpose. Schlegel's interpretation of epic as creating a sense of unity and objectivity through *diegesis* now reappears in a new aesthetic form.⁵⁸ Epic theatre assimilates the mess of history and of disordered psyches into a coherent worldview, regardless if the solution is spiritualism (late Strindberg) or internally coherent Marxism (mature Brecht). Overcoming tragic conflict and excessive interiority makes communication possible again.

⁵⁷ From the mid-1890's onward, Strindberg's theatre appeared to renounce historical life. Strindberg's quest for an "intimate theatre" suggests a turn away from the political mob to address sophisticated audiences.

⁵⁸ As Szondi gestures in "Friedrich Schlegel's Theory of Poetical Genres: A Reconstruction from the Posthumous Fragments".

According to Szondi, epic can inaugurate communities through producing a shared origin or viewpoint. Szondi's logocentric reflections as well as Brecht's re-instantiate much of a tradition that they hope to unsettle. Szondi tellingly contrasts traditional drama to Brecht's epic theatre:

Dramatic form rests on the interpersonal relation; the thematic of the Drama is constituted by the conflicts generated by this relation. Here [in Brecht's theatre], on the other hand, the interpersonal relation becomes entirely thematic and is removed from the certainty of form to the uncertainty of content. And the new formal principle consists of a pointed distance between the individual and what has become questionable; the epic subject-object opposition appears in a scientific-pedagogical modality in Brecht's epic theatre. (73).

The left levels many justified complaints against tragedy. The liberal theatre's focus on character, dialogue, and familial relationships often flatters viewers who believe they possess private character earned through hard work alone. However, is the "epic subject-object opposition" that is reinstated in the name of education, knowledge, and the political a superior alternative to tragedy? Does political theatre indeed demand repression of the tragic? Strindberg's drama suggests otherwise.

Strindberg's Hunger: The Dispossession of Character

I will focus on Strindberg's conception of character in the 1880's. The critique that tragedy and mimetic theatre reify character as romantic possession or a biological necessity does not address the sense of identity that Strindberg advances. Attacking the conventions of bourgeois character, Strindberg's work depicts personhood as a domain of roles assigned by politics and economics.

Strindberg's fiction informs his radical conception of theatrical character. In 1886, Strindberg released the first installment of his four-part autobiographical novel *The Son of a*

Servant: The Growth of a Soul. The presence of the word “soul” does not signify romantic organicism. The soul is shown to grow through socio-historical circumstance.

Marx’s concern with the demystification of the bourgeois fetish of personality makes up a dominant portion of the text: moments of individualism and self-realization arises like a discordant illusion. For example, in discussing his own early foray into theatre, it becomes clear that the role of the artist is achieved through performance rather than bestowed by nature:

Every city dweller has probably some time in his life felt the urge to step forward as an actor. What is supposedly at work then is a cultural desire to magnify oneself, ‘to stand out’ and identify with greater fictional characters. To Johan who was a romantic it was also a question of stepping forth to address the people. For he thought he would get to choose his parts and he knew which ones. Like everyone else he believed he had the necessary talent. (*Strindberg on Drama and Theatre* 38-39)

Far from supporting the romantic metaphysics of selfhood, Strindberg frequently diagnoses it as a “cultural desire” that leads people like his younger self to bourgeois individualism. We are all actors, stepping out on stage and foolishly believing we have authored our own lines. It is as if the actor or artist cannot become the subject of artistic creation without the illusion of selfhood. Strindberg can no longer endorse such idealism aside from moments of frenzied self-assertion.

I will dwell with the socio-historical tendency of the text rather than the momentary tolerances of selfhood.⁵⁹ The author-narrator writes of Johan, the character who bears much resemblance to Strindberg’s younger self:

If he had really been able to view himself objectively, he would have found that most of the words he used were borrowed from books or from schoolmates, his

⁵⁹ Stounbjerg explains of the text “The paradigm of understanding is [...] historical. The subtitle ‘the Growth of a Human Soul’ regards Johan as the product of his own history, which is specified as a series of determinations arising from ‘heredity, upbringing, temperament... influenced by external events and intellectual currents of the historical epoch’ [...] The unity of this frame of reference is challenged by the introduction of another master plot resting on idealist ideas of entelechy.” (“Between Realism and Modernism” 51). The critic calls this “aggravating” construction an “aesthetics of instability” (51): a plot that demystifies idealist conceptions is itself disrupted by a subplot featuring romantic understandings. Reading the prose of the 1886-1889 period shows the radicalism of Strindberg’s sociological and historical notion of character developed more unambiguously in his dramatic work.

gestures from teachers or friends, his facial expressions from relatives, his temperament from his mother and wet nurse, his tastes and inclinations from his father, perhaps from his grandfather. (...) What did he possess, then, that was in and for himself? Nothing. (*The Son of a Servant* 243).

Character as a personal endowment has disappeared. The inside is just an empty space or “nothing” to be filled with content from the outside. Unaware of it, the young Strindberg is a cannibal: he is a force of negativity with little identity of his own.

Stounbjerg provides the most insightful reading of Strindberg’s cannibalistic metaphors. The critic argues that in Strindberg “the subject is dissolved into a series of reflections of the other that remain undigested with no organic unity to absorb them”: “like society, it [character] has no core at all” (“To Eat or Be Eaten—That is the Question” 137). Cannibalism helps Strindberg represent subjectivity as “open-ended and without boundaries,” shaped by outside circumstances and other people (138). Strindbergian cannibalism participates in the left’s deconstruction of subjectivity rather than in natural selection.

Marxian sensibilities—the emphasis on nothingness rather than universal instincts—overshadow biologism. The subject performs within structures that exercise greatly determining power. The language of Hegel’s typological characters of master and servant is invoked but altered. Unlike the master, he is not in himself. Unlike the bondsman, he is not destined to one day become both in and for himself. This son of a servant is alienated, existing for others. He too exists as an “other”, having no character of his own.

Johan wonders “had he come perhaps too early and incomplete into the world? [...] the fact remained: he never became himself, was never liberated, never a complete individuality. He remained, as it were, a mistletoe, which could never grow except upon a tree; he was a climbing plant that must seek support” (*The Son of a Servant* 28). Rather than achieving self-realization, the soul grows like a plant or any other material thing. Whether it is by appropriating their words

or imitating their interests, Strindberg's psyche grows within cultural environment marked by dependence and social difference.

Master and servant are the figures employed to address social division. Mastery and servility, existing for oneself and existing for others, are Strindberg's fascinations. His titles hint at an obsession: *Master Olaf*, *The Servant*, *The Son of the Servant*, *The Servant Girl*, and *Miss Julie*. The son of aristocrat-turned-businessman and his servant, Strindberg reflects about his divided upbringing in which the values of a falling aristocratic class mix with those of their former domestic staff. His own household and body are the result of a socially unsavory mésalliance between the class of the past and the class of the future. Therefore, he understands himself as on the forefront of larger trends.

Strindberg's thought was attuned to the affects, moods, and inclinations that arise around political notions such a mastery and servitude. Strindberg begins his text:

In the third story of a large house near the Clara Church in Stockholm, the son of the shipping agent and the servant maid awoke to self-consciousness. The child's first impressions were, as he remembered afterwards, fear and hunger. He feared the darkness and blows, he feared to fall, to knock himself against something, or to go in the streets, he feared the fists of his brothers, the roughness of the servant-girl, the scolding of his grandmother, the rod of his mother, and his father's cane. He was afraid of the general's manservant, who lived on the ground-floor, with his skull-cap and large hedge-scissors; he feared the landlord's deputy, when he played in the courtyard and the dust-bin; he feared the landlord, who was a magistrate. Above him loomed a hierarchy of authorities wielding various rights, from the right of seniority of his brothers to the supreme tribunal of his father. And yet above his father was the deputy-landlord, who always threatened him to the landlord. This last one was generally invisible. Because he lived in the country, and perhaps, for that reason, was the most feared of all. But again, above all, even above the manservant with the skull-cap, was the general, especially when he sallied forth in uniform wearing a three-cornered hat. The child did not know what a king looked like, but he knew that the general went to the King. The servant maids also used to tell stories of the King, and showed the child his picture. His mother generally prayed to God in the evening, but the child could form no distinct idea of God, except that He must certainly be higher than the king. (*The Son of a Servant* 9)

The opening paragraph explores political theology as it is deeply felt. Imagining his first impressions, Strindberg provides little about himself other than the forces that instilled in him emotions of fragility. The narrator imagines a network rising from lowest servant to God himself in which each authority is repeatedly revealed to be yet another servant. This mythology binds father-king-god into an image of mastery. This sovereignty can be represented, incompletely, by a photograph of a king or a general's uniform. The sublime image of the master inculcates deep fear within the child, though the ultimate guarantor of authority remains absent. Earthly authorities, who are all but servants to higher masters, have terrifying force based on a mandate from a spiritual entity that likely does not exist. Politics precedes the personal according to Strindberg's recreation of childhood. The primal emotions of the human being are the result of a cultural context that does not break its mold after casting any single person.

The chapter recreates Strindberg's youth from the perspective of class conflict: his father's fall in class, his mother's rise, the different mores that made up the household, and the presence of servants subservient to the young boy. Strindberg's Johan comes to the painful knowledge of the déclassé status that separates him and his immediate family from their friends. The bourgeois myth of a domestic realm free of the market does not appear in Strindberg: the narrator writes "the family is a very imperfect arrangement. It is properly an institution for eating, washing, and ironing and a very uneconomical one" (*The Son of a Servant* 5). The son is just another servant in the world's hierarchical arrangements, who "heard only of his duties" and was thus forged as having "no will of his own, and so the foundation of a weak character is laid" (5).

The first chapter is punctuated with episodes of conflict between servants and authorities. Father imposes punishments, only to be punished by the courts for a mistake of his servant; his

mother displays authority over servants but loses it when her similar manners cause them to forge too close of bonds. Every secure position quickly reveals itself to be yet another position of powerlessness. The concluding paragraphs of the first chapter end exactly where it began: the chain of relations that makes everyone servile to someone.

In the striking episode, the narrator recounts a formative period in his development. The first event occurs when he looks towards a castle and sees a dinner party, full of pageantry, at which the King is eating. Strindberg writes “he caught glimpse of the highest form of authority—higher than his brother, his father, his deputy-landlord, the landlord, the general with the plumed hat, and the police” (*The Son of a Servant* 18). This brush with sovereignty fills him with shame and terror. Mastery was momentarily glimpsed from the distance amid the symbols of its authority.

However, the next memory was transformative, producing an idyllic remembrance that temporarily reversed the feeling of lowliness. Young Johan meets the Crown Prince upon a walk in the park and the royal acknowledges his family. Johan felt “elevated, and at the same time more confident in himself” (18). Seeing that elites know his family has a strong effect. He realizes that he himself is as if king to those beneath him. Strindberg writes:

The Crown Prince has spoken with him, and his father calls the chamberlain “thou”. Now he understands the gorgeous lackeys are of inferior social rank to him, especially when he hears that the cook goes for walks with of them in the evenings. He discovers that he is, at any rate, not on the lowest stair in the social scale. (19)

The compensation for feeling vulnerable in comparison to some is to feel “not the lowest stair on the social scale” regarding others. The feeling of mastery arises in relations with lackeys, though this elevation quickly collapses in the presence of superiors. Strindberg, in imagining his early

life, conceives a drama of masters, servants, and cannibals. A set of tropes central to leftist political philosophy fills the absences of childhood memory

But the episode is short-lived, immediately revealing itself to be an illusion:

Before he has had time to realize it, the fairy-tale is over. [...] The boy has seen the splendour of upper classes from the distance. He longs after it, as if for a home, but the menial blood he has from his mother rebels against it. From instinct he reveres the upper classes, thinks too much of them ever to be able to hope to reach them. He feels he belongs neither to them nor to the menial class. That becomes one of the struggles of his life. (*The Son of a Servant* 19)

Conspicuously, the mastery that is supposedly part of a divinely endorsed natural order could only be glimpsed in a “fairy-tale” scene. Strindberg imagines his future materialism, socialism, and eventual anarchism as central to his personhood. It is not mother’s breast and the safety of home that inform the imagined sense of former security and oneness;⁶⁰ rather, Strindberg finds security in fellow-feeling with the aristocracy.

Strindberg posits his own body as a site of cannibalistic battle between historical classes. “Blood” and “instinct” have long been understood as genetic determinism, but the text provides more reason to view them as metaphors for inculcated attitudes. The young boy is deprived of the unity of identity—a feeling of “home,” property, and propriety—that he can imagine but not experience.

Mastery, never present but constantly represented in social role-playing, offers the mirage of safety. Strindberg’s autobiographical writings introduce the Marxist unmasking of the social grounding of authority. Nevertheless, this demystification is not enough to disabuse on the desire to feel like something rather than “nothing”.

⁶⁰ His mother’s death profoundly affected him (as detailed in “August Strindberg on Himself”). However, Strindberg affirms that what hurt him was that his father married their domestic servant without observing the obligatory year of mourning. The death of the mother signifies not the loss of presence and unity but rather the lawlessness of the fatherly law that makes exceptions for itself.

The “Fear and Hunger” of the chapter title moves one to consume the outside while resenting the penetration of others. Strindberg wonders whether we can deny the appetite for mastery within a society that endows it with so much allure; a society that not only shapes what one can think but also what one feels. The existence of mastery outside aesthetic imagination and social fantasy might be suspect, but social life, in which all are means to ends outside themselves, makes servitude acutely suffered. Strindberg’s work interrogates the affective dimensions of the mastery that modern political programs promise.

“The Battle of the Brains”: *To adopt him, devour him and make him my vassal*

The short story “The Battle of the Brains” from the collection *Vivisections* (1887) supports the view that Strindbergian conflicts are historical rather than exclusively biological. The story details the adversarial friendship between a young man, an ardent socialist and man of science, and an older, heterodox leftist. A past scandal, in which the older man had embroiled the younger man’s mother, leads the older narrator to question whether relationship with the younger man might not be as friendly as both men insist. The title of the piece—“The Battle of the Brains”—has contributed to the term being used among scholars as a designation for Strindberg’s one-act plays.

Both the drama and the prose depict interlocutors who attempt to master each other. The weapon of choice is a torrent of words and ideas that aims to replace the intellectual independence of the other person—the notion of the psychic murder explained in Strindberg’s essay “Soul Murder (apropos of Rosmersholm)”. These conflicts unfold similarly in Strindberg’s various works. The less vocal character is filled with the stronger’s words, weakens under the hectoring outside force, and loses his or her individuality. But in a surprise of the dialectic, the

passive character incorporates the stronger character's selfhood through its submission to penetration. This incorporation leads to a reversal that makes the weaker character the master.

But even cannibal-like consumption of the other provides only temporary respite: it merely restarts the dialectic. Who is master and who is slave continually reverse within the action. The audience must decide who has the upper hand. The one-act monologue *The Stronger*, in which only one of the two characters speaks, shows the device most clearly. The audience leaves the theater arguing whether the woman who attempts to humiliate her friend has asserted control or made herself more vulnerable.

While these battles for dominance have generally been regarded as Darwinian survival of the fittest, I argue that this obsession with conflict is deeply related to the Hegelian and Marxist imagination. First, the victory desired is not to eliminate the inferior party or to use him exclusively as a tool: the hunger for recognition is central. This psychosocial need grants power to the "servile" party as he or she possesses something necessary to the master. Secondly, rather than as atomistic individuals, Strindberg depicts characters whose interaction leads to their disappearance into each other. The master-servant become enmeshed.

In "The Battle of the Brains," the young man reintroduces himself to the narrator after an eight-year absence. The young man is "a 'modern' spirit nourished by the doctrine of evolution and by socialism" who planned to come to the continent to defend the older man's "fallen celebrity" (*Selected essays* 26). The older narrator reports with perturbation that the young man found the older man's "political radicalism antiquated and devoted three pages to preaching the gospel of socialism, as if I had never heard of socialism before" (27). The two begin a period of cohabitation in which the younger man lectures his older friend, overpowering him with "Marx, Darwin, and Bebel in a continuous stream" (28). The older man views himself as stronger and

more informed. However, the force of the younger man's monologues leaves him exhausted and devoured: "it seemed as if I was waiting to see him stretch out his long throat, coil himself about me and gulp me down. All resistance on my part was impossible" (28). He notes "each and every milieu exerts an incredible influence on me" (31).

When alone, the narrator questions why the younger man sought to devour him. He plans a "campaign with the intention of annihilating him, and of studying him" (*Selected Essays* 29). The narrator creates a tragicomically titled "campaign journal" in which he documents his attempts to reverse their power dynamic by arguing contrarian positions. Some of his arguments are in good faith and others in self-consciously bad faith. Both terrible and comedic, the battle for mastery leaves both men enslaved to each other. The narrator records "but I can no longer work, for I am obsessed by him as he is by me" (36). The narrator questions "have I devoured his self?". In any case, he declares "he certainly confirms my philosophical conception of a *tabula rasa*, and now that he is newly washed clean, I have a powerful desire to cover his tablet with my handwriting. My soul wants to adopt him, devour him and make him my vassal" (36). Both characters are malleable; little more than tablets to be written upon. Their attempts to make the other property backfire. The one written upon repeats words of the "stronger", who grows more dependent on the weaker's recognition, enslaving both in a vicious cycle.

The older man attempts to prove that Marx, Chernyshevsky, and Darwin were wrong to uproot the young man's sense of self. The narrator weaponizes arguments Strindberg might embrace, such as Marx being a secret idealist, and others, such as pro-capitalist arguments about the value of thrift, in bad faith (*Selected Essays* 32-33).

I want to draw attention to one specific episode. The narrator writes that after four hours of lecture and "dialectical snares", he "got him by the throat" (*Selected Essays* 40):

I proved to him that our belief in Revolution was just as religious as our earlier belief in the Trinity.

I continued by asking him if he read Hegel.

‘No, but I detest him’, He replied.

I then told him that Hegel was a proto-Darwinist. That he maintained the right of the objective powers against subjective enthusiasm, new Romanticism and private liberalism. ‘He overthrew God and made the whole of creation into this eternal process that you are always going on about, and it was he who discovered the development of language and thought in history, in which the individual is only a passing moment. [...]

He stared at me in surprise, and asked:

‘Are you a Hegelian?’

‘Naturally, as all educated people are nowadays.’ (40-41)

Hegel is invoked as means to fight “new Romanticism and private liberalism”. Though this argument is made to win a feud, a certain affection for a philosophy “in which the individual is just a passing moment” arises throughout the story.

The men eventually part after several reversals. The young man wishes to “liberate himself”; the older man loses the invigorating power he had sucked from the younger (*Selected Essays* 44). The final paragraphs depict both men confused. Rather than a definite resolution, the younger man declares in parting only that the older is “suspicious” (46). Similarly, the narrator in the final paragraphs wonders if the relations were not as hostile as he had thought. Though the Strindbergian narrator seems to consider himself the victor in some minor sense, no empowering sense of mastery occurs. The final sentences are telling:

What was this young man? I don’t know, for I saw him change character as circumstances changed, as other people do, until they grow rigid with age and stable circumstances. He was young and had still not been able to secure upon his role in life; therefore he was more flexible and easier to study, and therefore, perhaps, I could bend him until he became conscious, or maybe it was just because my brain was the stronger! (46).

Despite triumphant egoism, the general account identifies both men as changing with circumstances and social interaction. The narrator’s quest to vivisect, study, and devour the

younger man does not bring him closer. The question of what the younger man is remains unanswered: the younger man is never appropriated to the older's understandings. If anything, the older man's obsession led to the impossibility of regarding them as separate. The subject-object relationship collapses into intersubjectivity, fascination, and loss of selfhood.

These characters do not become animals in a reversion to nature. Rather, they merely fail to be self-mastered subjects capable of mutual recognition within society. "The Battle of the Brains" shows that brains possess only what they acquire, a demystified take on selfhood.

Strindberg's Paradox of the Actor: How to Imitate Nothing?

Strindberg's famous "Preface" to *Miss Julie* has long been understood as central to the bourgeois theatre's cult of the self. Strindberg himself attests to minimizing plot in favor of character.⁶¹ Theater historians position Strindberg as pivotal to the enthronement of character-based drama in the West. Yet Strindberg develops numerous motives for his characters, conceiving multiplicity as proof of the individual's malleable lack rather than the three-dimensional depth.

Strindberg writes that he has "made his characters 'characterless'", explaining:

Over the years the word 'character' has taken on many meanings [...] Later it became the middle-class expression for an automaton, so that an individual whose nature had once and for all set firm or adapted to a certain role in life, who had stopped growing, in short, was called a character [...] This bourgeois concept of the immobility of the soul was transferred to the stage, which has always been dominated by the bourgeoisie. There a character was fixed and set. ("Preface" 58-59)

Strindberg's refutes the "bourgeois concept of the immutability of the soul". The role one has played within capitalism must not be mistaken for something timeless. Such thinking supports the mystical authority of masters whose superior traits are presented as the result of natural

⁶¹ This sentiment is expressed clearly in "On Modern Drama and Modern Theatre".

inequalities. Strindberg explains that to be “characterless” is the fate of all in contemporary society (59).

The leftist critique that the stage reifies a bourgeois understanding of character fails to account for the fact that Strindberg constructs characters according to a different axiomatic—one that assumes “nothing” within individuals. Strindberg writes:

My souls (characters) are conglomerates of past and present stages of culture, bits out of books and newspapers, scraps of humanity, torn shreds of once fine clothing now turned to rags, exactly as the human soul is patched together, and I have also provided a little evolutionary history by letting the weaker repeat the words stolen from the stronger, and allowed these souls to get ‘ideas’, or suggestions as they are called, from one another, from the milieu (the death of the siskin), and from objects (the razor). (“Preface” 60)

The human soul is “patched together” from the “rags” inherited from history. *Bildung* is not a path towards self-determination, but an act of repetitive imitation in which the individual repeats “stolen” words. Rather than rising towards subjectivity, these characters are dependent on the chances of material circumstances, such as the presence of certain “objects” or object-like ““ideas”” (60). Strindberg puts ““ideas”” in scare-quotes, depriving them of their ethereal loftiness. Strindberg’s plays view historical process not as a teleology, but a “hodgepodge” (*konglomerat*). This term describes both character and the events of history in his writings. A later essay “Character as Role?” continues the notion that each person is a “hotchpotch” (*konglomerat*) that “does not merit the term ‘character’” (*Selected Essays* 112). Strindberg’s tragedies are not based on the legible coherence of Aristotle’s “constantly inconstant” (*Poetics* Book X) characters. Rather, their incoherence is produced by an absence of essence, which historical and material diversity fill with happenstance details. Placing actors on stage to imitate characterlessness is thus Strindberg’s basic claim to greater naturalism.

Yet nothing, by definition, cannot be shown: it can only be suggested by form. Strindberg explains “I have used three art forms that belong to the drama, namely monologue, mime, and

ballet, all of which were part of classical tragedy" ("Preface" 64): he does not offer unmediated access to reality but instead a tragic lens. Of *Miss Julie* Strindberg writes "in the following play I have not tried to accomplish anything new, for that is impossible, but merely to modernize the form according to what I believe are the demands of a modern audience" ("Preface" 56).

Strindberg composes within a modified tragic tradition, creatively inheriting a long tradition.

Strindberg's thinking of human finitude resonates with ancient tragedy as well as leftist materialism. The ancient hero takes bold action with unforeseen results due to inculcated dispositions; much like the revolutionary proletariat. This tragic model has a relation to dominant trends in nineteenth-century socialism that diminish the importance of individual subjectivity without displacing humanity from the center of earth's affairs.

His "greater naturalism" leads many to assume Strindberg turned his eyes away from art and sought inspiration in an extra-literary reality. However, Strindberg prefigures arguments that realism is merely defined by a rejection of dominant artistic practices. In 1889's "On Modern Drama and Modern Theatre", Strindberg writes with scorn of naturalism and realism that attempts to replicate reality: "this is photography which includes everything, even the speck of dust on the camera lens [...] this is the kind of misconceived Naturalism which believed that art simply consisted in copying a piece of nature" (78). Strindberg's denigration of the notion that art should replicate reality is persistent. His occasional claims of being a scientist of letters meant only that he sought rigor. He viewed himself as "a Seeker, who experiments with different points of view" and "doubter" (*Strindberg's Letters* 335). His literary works were preliminary experiments. He closes his preface by saying "perhaps a new drama" will arise after *Miss Julie*, but perhaps not: "if it fails, there will surely be time to try again!" (68). Naturalism was thus a

rhetorical signal that his art had legitimacy despite its departures from reigning realist conventions.

Imitating nature was never straight-forward for Strindberg's drama. Instead, his plays imitated other plays.⁶² The mediation of theatricality and convention are a constitutive part of Strindberg's naturalism. When sending a copy of *Creditors* to a publisher, he declares "I am sending for your perusal a drama which is finer than *Miss Julie*, and where the new formula is taken still further" (*Strindberg on Drama and Theatre* 74). Strindberg often quips about his "new formula": "three characters, a table and two chairs, and no sunrise" (73).

Strindberg's mimetic claims are thus two-fold. The first is that his characters imitate the nothing at the core of the human being. The second is that contemporary social transitions are represented through the mediation of forms inherited from the past. Leftist critiques unconvincingly address Strindberg's naturalism which does not naturalize the status quo but reinterprets it through an ideological lens.

Ni dieu ni maître: *Miss Julie's* Politics and Aesthetics

Though the play has grown familiar to audiences, Ross Shideler explains the extent of *Miss Julie's* enduring ability to provoke:

Public responses to *Miss Julie* have always been complicated; its shocking subject matter and dialogue made it difficult to stage in its own time, though these elements surprise the modern reader less. Yet the play confronts issues that are as current now as they were when the play was written: class conflict, gender stereotypes and a degree of sexuality that ranges from the seductive to the sadomasochistic. (58)

⁶² For his naturalistic tragedies, Strindberg copied previous artistic models rather than nature. For example, Strindberg referred to *The Father* as "highly theatrical," repeatedly claiming *Othello* as his template (*Strindberg's Letters* 263). Regarding *The Pariah*, Strindberg reports he is adapting Ola Hansson's short story through the lens of Swedish plays *Miss Elisabeth* and *Master's Delights* (292). In speaking of *Miss Julie*, Strindberg asks Georg Brandes if he "had read my *Umwertung* of the servant Figaro," suggesting that his play transvalues Pierre Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, the liberal play often credited as the spark of the French Revolution. The Master-Servant plot is a constant touchstone.

Banned from the Swedish stage for sixteen years, the play scandalized Strindberg's contemporaries after its private premiere (1889) and first commercial run at the Théâtre Libre in Paris (1893). Its publication alone created a public stir, Strindberg's one-act drama running afoul of contemporary standards of decency.

Jan Myrdal's "Speaking of Ranskan Jussi" argues the play was a deliberate gesture to incense more than just reactionaries. Myrdal shows how contemporary liberals took the harsh depiction of Jean's ambition to advance in the world as an attack on bourgeois values. I will continue Myrdal's case for a political Strindberg, arguing Strindberg's tragedy initiates audiences into radical fantasies. Sexual, political, and economic investments are indivisible in this play that rejects the boundary between public and private.

Strindberg attempts to articulate his strange relationship to a pedagogical theatre, the dominant form of socially conscious performance. The "Preface" of *Miss Julie* scornfully discusses the bourgeois theatre as a "*Biblia pauperum*": a picture Bible that teaches through the help of images. Strindberg jokes that in this model of theatre "the dramatist [is] a lay preacher who peddles the ideas of the day in a popular form" (56) to a middle-class audience. Nevertheless, Strindberg shows ambivalence. He mocks the theatre's educational role while also accepting a reduced version of pedagogy as a practical necessity. As he summarizes it in intellectual terms, Strindberg's play can appear to be a living picture book. The "ideas of the day" that Strindberg chooses to peddle are those of socialism. The gratuitous and wasteful displays of the aristocratic magnanimity are unsuited to capitalism which rewards the discipline and practicality of the servant class. Julie, the image of an aristocrat unsuited to capitalism, falls to Jean, the image of a rapacious proto-bourgeois.

Despite this quasi-pedagogy, Strindberg does not put full faith in the possibility of transmitting a message to audiences. His “Preface” mocks audience members who will all project their own interpretations based on egocentric considerations.⁶³ Strindberg explains how “party differences” have helped create passions that make a liberal theatre of debate impossible: “pure, dispassionate enjoyment has become impossible in a situation where [...] an applauding or whistling majority has brought pressure to bear on them as openly as it can do in theatre” (56). Stating on two occasions his theatre seeks to circumnavigate “party differences” and “party strife”, Strindberg does not disavow the political. Instead, his theatre approaches political topics in a way that avoids an up-down vote along party lines. To do so, he avoids intelligible messages, making his picture book one of uncommon difficulty.

Strindberg’s strange relationship to a pedagogical theatre mirrors his idiosyncratic relation to tragedy. Strindberg wavers on whether this downfall of an aristocratic family is indeed tragic. The complexity of Strindberg’s contradictory views on tragic identification and emotion have elicited justifiably confused responses. Strindberg conceives of a tragedy that will one day cease to seem tragic:

When I took this theme from a real incident I heard about some years ago, its seemed to me a suitable subject for a tragedy, not least because of the deep impression it made on me; for it still strikes us as tragic [...] But the time may come when we shall have become so highly developed, so enlightened, that we shall be able to look with indifference at the brutal, cynical, heartless drama that life presents, when we shall have laid aside those inferior, unreliable instruments of thought called feelings, which will become superfluous and harmful once our organs of judgment have matured. (57)

If my tragedy makes a tragic impression on people, that is their fault. When we become as strong as the first French revolutionaries, we shall feel as much unqualified pleasure and relief at seeing the thinning out in our royal parks of rotten, superannuated trees [...] as it does now to see an incurably ill man die. (57)

⁶³ Strindberg affirms that audiences tend to project an interpretation on dramatic works based on their own life experiences. In a sense, no message could ever be clear enough to be understood in the same way by the masses, rendering conventional political theatre ineffectual.

Strindberg writes a tragedy at the same time as he mocks audiences for finding it tragic. Such arrogance would be off-putting if not for one fact. Strindberg himself later in the “Preface” admits that he too finds it tragic (61), not yet being the rational being he hopes to become.

Strindberg shows resistance to embracing objectivity and the “pleasure and relief” it offers (57). Strindberg accepts that writer and audience alike are irrational beings formed by bourgeois institutions at the current moment. Aesthetic and political intervention are aporetic attempts for the educators to educate themselves. Strindberg’s ironic, funny, and at times haunted voice reflects the difficulties of this *blind leading the blind* predicament that characterizes political life. Tragedy today in the theatre might create audiences who are able avoid tragedy tomorrow in politics.

But for now, the political world is a place of tragic collisions and emotionality. He even claims that in a rational nation, the theatre would cease to exist (“Preface” 56). Strindberg writes tragedies for not-yet rational nations, saying he hopes not to innovate but adapt the form to contemporary audiences (56). His sublime tragic drama is not understood immediately: a clear message would elicit boos and whistles from partisans who coerce minority opinions. His theatre creates a space free of the party law that would cut short experimentation with different political libidos.

Strindberg’s characters cannot separate rational spheres (economics and politics) from irrational ones (romantic love and sexuality). *Miss Julie* is an erotic play concerning the struggles between lovers in the confines of the home, but domestic space is no longer a retreat from the political and historical.

The passionate dreams of Jean and Julie reveal not bare biological impulse but desire mediated through cultural values and economic aspirations: “There’s a dream I have from time to

time; I'm reminded of it now— when I look down, I get dizzy, but down I must, though I haven't the courage to jump; I can't stay where I am and I long to fall [...] were I to reach the ground I'd want to bury myself in the earth" (*Miss Julie* 79). For Julie, sexual and romantic release are intertwined with her desire to escape the expectations of her stultifying class. Working within a set of sexual tropes concerning the loss of control, Julie now dreams of ecstatic lust despite her previously sadistic history. Both feared and yearned for, the dizzying fall into the materiality of earth is eroticized socio-political fantasy. Jean's servant flesh becomes symbolic fulfillment based on the cultural association of the lower classes with animality. Jean's dream, whether real or merely an instrument of seduction, works with figures of conquest and climbing from earthly labor. Both male and female sexual fantasies show the degree to which sexual impulse expresses itself in relation to cultural aspirations.

Audience members who identify with the characters in moments of seduction are forced to confront that deeply political fantasies— such as achieving freedom from one's class through mésalliance— shape the expression of sexual instinct. The love affair between Julie and Jean, momentarily looking like an escape from socio-economic calculation into presence and immediacy, reveals itself to be a mirage. The home is a microcosm of larger political struggles that all parties desire to escape or, failing that, to win. Realizing they are trapped in the very political antagonisms they hoped to transcend through sexual union, Julie and Jean exchange vitriolic barbs.

Miss Julie and the servant Jean vie for power, gaining and losing advantage. Julie's ability to make him kiss her feet reverses after their physical liaison. Jean seizes upon her shame to realize his dreams: he encourages her to steal her father's capital so they can start a hotel on the continent. He would excel in this position as he has internalized the languages, tastes, and

manners of the well-bred through his work as a valet. Later, he explains the romantic story he told Julie in a cynical tone. Kind words were as the result of his study of the signifiers of the higher class: “I’ve read lots of novels and been to the theatre, Besides, I’ve heard posh people talk. That’s what’s taught me the most” (*Miss Julie* 84). Jean has cannibalized his betters.

This ability to imitate prestige and authority leads him to conclude that he has a right to mastery: “Maybe at bottom there isn’t such a big difference as they say there is between people and— well, people” (*Miss Julie* 84). Yet during moment of confidence, Jean affirms his right to entry into the world of the privileged: “I wasn’t born to bow and scrape, there’s something to me, I’ve got character, just let me get ahold of that first branch, and you’ll see me climb! I may be a servant today, but in a year I’ll have my own place, and in ten years I’ll be a landed gentleman” (88). Jean is suited to new social conditions: he believes in the “bourgeois immutability of the soul” that Strindberg ridiculed in the “Preface”. The vitriolic responses of liberal critics were not unfounded. Strindberg heaps special scorn on Jean’s capitalist aspirations.

Jean shows the cruelty necessary to realize his dreams in a dog-eat-dog capitalist order, lacking concern for his fiancée Kristin, Julie, and the master of the house. When Julie refuses to be his proverbial first branch, the two engage in brutal exchanges: volleys of “Lackey, servant, stand up when I speak to you!” are returned with “Lackey’s whore, servant’s slut” (*Miss Julie* 91). The scandal is compared to ancient taboos of bestiality and cannibalism, Julie declaring “I do believe I could drink from your skull [...] I’d roast your heart and eat it whole!” (103).⁶⁴ Upon learning of the affair, Kristin calls it a violation of the God-Master-Servant and Man-Animal

⁶⁴ Jean mocks Julie’s comparison of their liaison to bestiality by reciting the Swedish penal code’s penalties for such an offence: two years of penal service and the death of the animal (95). According to contemporary accounts, Julie’s barb was so offensive that it elicited boos from the audience at the Danish premiere.

hierarchies that she wishes to uphold. Jean's aspirational quest to join his masters confounds her traditional sensibilities.

The resolution of Jean and Julie's conflict cannot be achieved through its internal logic. Though Aristotle demanded the intelligibility of tragedies, *Miss Julie* embraces the arbitrary. An external event—the master's arrival home that occurs offstage—precipitates the catastrophe. The time-imposed urgency moves the lovers' to a highly constricted decision. The decision is ironically to vacate their previous claims to agency.

Jean's tenacity coupled with Julie's wounded pride leads to his momentary triumph. Though he will not get the capital he sought, he convinces Julie to accept his hypnotism so she can have the strength to kill herself. His manic reasoning hopes this turn of events will free him from scandal, despite his culpability already apparent to the chorus. Kristin, who obeys the social order due to the "last being first" in the kingdom of heaven (*Miss Julie* 107), has her words echo during the sudden resolution. Jean assures Julie that she will receive the gift of grace as she is now the servant of a servant, thus allowing her divine reward in Christianity's mythology of the oppressed. But in this psychic murder, purportedly the act of ultimate domination, Jean only seeks to continue to be dominated by Julie's father.

Strindberg, with theatrical brilliance, destroys all claims to freedom and authority through the ultimate act of masterly confidence: the master of the house gently rings his bell off-stage. His sovereign act initially does as it intends. With an animalistic response, the sort later theorized by Pavlov, Jean returns to a servant mentality. Jean cannot but respect his master's authority due to his own desire for unconditional respect.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ If he were to acquire the status of a master, he would wish it to be unalienable: he planned to buy a countship in Romania.

But the master's bell has power far beyond the master's own knowledge. This strength is dangerous to the one that wields it. In response to the bell, Jean, in turn, masters Julie through impelling her to suicide, ending her claims of freedom from her class and gender. Finally, Julie precipitates the downfall of her father whose authority she always doubted. Her suicide will be a scandal that the tottering house cannot endure. The sovereign act of ringing the bell turns out to be the master's own accidental *coup de grâce*. All three characters gain mastery over someone, while in turn losing their liberty in a general. If classical tragedy depicts the fall of an authority, Strindberg's well-crafted play produces a stage-world in which the very notion of mastery itself experiences its downfall.

Strindberg's theatre is one of constrictions rather than the phantasms of liberation characteristic of most political art. While some might appreciate this assault on the idealist notions of freedom, more often it has met criticism. Typically, this critique of individuality is perceived as an unwanted attack on agency.⁶⁶ Strindberg embraces a thinking of nature and tragedy, two concepts dubious to the intellectual left. But for Strindberg, both nature and tragedy contained an element of chance and accident rather than pre-determined necessity. He suggests that he, like Nietzsche, no longer believes in the metaphysical term "action," favoring a notion of "occurrence" (*Strindberg on Theatre and Drama* 74). Neither the decision of distant gods nor the repetition of a circular nature, Strindberg's fate encompasses elements of chance.

Strindberg motivates Julie's downfall with an abundance of circumstances and motives, none absolutely determining:

What will also bother simple minds is that my motivation of the action is not simple, and that there is not a single point of view. Every event in life—and this is a fairly new discovery!—is usually the result of a whole series of more or less

⁶⁶ Göran Stockenström concludes "The Dilemma of Naturalistic Tragedy: Strindberg's 'Miss Julie'" in decisive fashion: "it is no coincidence that tragedy has become obsolete, casting doubt on its ultimate validity in the twenty-first century regardless of the apologetics for its defense" (55).

deep-seated motives, but the spectator usually selects the one that he most easily understands or that best flatters his powers of judgment. Someone commits suicide. ‘Business worries’, stays the businessman. ‘Unrequited love’, say the ladies. [...]

But it may well be that the motive lay in all of these things, or in none of them [...]

I have motivated Miss Julie’s tragic fate with an abundance of circumstances: her mother’s ‘bad’ instincts; her father’s improper bringing-up of the girl [long catalogue of possible causes] and finally chance that drives these two people together in a room apart, plus the boldness of an aroused man. (“Preface” 58).

This abundance of circumstances, “which together form the equivalent of the old-fashioned Fate or Universal Law” (61), creates a proliferation of perspectives and potential outcomes. Rather than the definitiveness of fatalism, Strindberg’s tragic downfalls seem unintelligible. They occur not out of necessity but out of nearly endless circumstances. These circumstances are themselves unexhaustive: Strindberg allows for more factors motivating events than even he, as author, is aware of. Most crucially, Strindberg explains that fate contains an element of “chance”; an element that confounds necessity and intelligibility (58).

Fate makes itself known, but not understood. It remains “concealed” rather than rendered visible on stage (“Preface” 58). Strindberg creates an atmosphere of arbitrary inevitability. A thinking of fate that embraces chance withers the boundary between the necessary and the accidental, sublimely offending against notions of intelligibility. Such a consideration occasionally appears in ancient tragedy, most notably in the *deus ex machina* that so bothers Aristotle (*Poetics Book 15*). The theatrical reversal that is perplexingly contingent excites Strindberg; his work proves that tragedy can be a modern genre due to the stagey *coup de théâtre* rather than despite it. Strindberg incites emotions without the cathartic purgation that so many

have seen as a conservative impulse to reconciliation. Rather than satisfying closure, absence eats away at both character and dramatic structure.⁶⁷

The lawlessness of Strindbergian anarchy is due to too many overlapping laws, norms, and conventions. Within this realm of chance collisions, the resolution of the conflict can only take on the appearance of an arbitrary decision. The new—produced through the collision of the superabundant structures of thought and feeling—arises not through triumph of one law above the others, but through the mysterious manner contesting claims find resolution beyond anyone's intention.

Strindberg's *Miss Julie* inaugurates a genre of intense tragedies that offer the audience no intermission to recover their faculties.⁶⁸ Two characters—one coded as a master and the other their former servant—struggle for mastery. Intimacy and cruelty alternate in a suffocating space. The torrid pace of their reversals has uncontrollable momentum. If not for a delaying agent the momentum might consume itself: a third character, Kristin, momentarily releases pressure. Finally, the only authority that could arbitrate the conflict remains offstage. The Count whose ring inspires conflicted awe in Jean is only heard. Masters are unable to manifest themselves on Strindberg's stage.⁶⁹

Although rational decision makers will not appear in Strindberg's plays, neither do they propose a pre-determined world. Assaulting agency struck so many as reactionary fatalism, but Strindberg sought change beyond the will of any politician or party program. As it is affirmed in

⁶⁷ Aristotle's hope for intelligibility in the drama demands plot events to be connected through "necessity or probability" (*Poetics Book 9*). Without rational structure, cathartic closure is absent or dangerously irrational.

⁶⁸ Eliminating the intermission was understood as means to keep the audience in an emotional state: "the drawbacks of letting the audience out to imbibe in strong drinks in the middle of the drama are well known. The mood is destroyed by talk, the transported spirit loses its flexibility and becomes conscious of what should remain unconscious" (*Open Letters 20*). Strindberg's interest in hypnotism resonates with this view of art.

⁶⁹ This basic structure was attractive later playwrights: Genet's *Deathwatch* and Baraka's *The Slave* both adapt Strindberg's formula.

Strindberg's *Inferno*, “it is not a reactionary phase that awaits us, nor is it a return to what has already run its course; it is an advance towards something new. We must wait and see what that will be” (266).

Creditors: Responsibility among Cannibals

Refining *Miss Julie*'s formula, *Creditors* simplifies in order to complicate. One act, one room, and three actors dramatize the instability of any claim to mastery over another human being. As Marcel Mauss would later theorize, the play explores how what is given—even among friend and lovers—obligates and enslaves those who receive it. However, reminiscent of the debts that motivate the dynamics of Hegel's Lord-Bondsman dialectic and Nietzsche's conquering Christian slaves, the weaker party turns debt into power. The debtors acquired something the creditors had considered properly their own, thus rendering the creditors dependent on those they wished to enslave.

Anna Westerståhl Stenport explains how despite its title and persistent use of the language of finance, critics have largely focused on a battle of the genders interpretation. To Stenport, reception has ignored *Creditors*' relation to major contemporary economic shifts: the importance marginalist models of economics and the rising credit economy of the nineteenth century. She describes:

The title *Creditors* directs attention to the fact that the characters in this play express their emotional, intellectual, artistic, and sexual relationships in financial terms. For example, the dialogue reflects sentiments of being caught within a system of bookkeeping that allows no flexibility, as being trapped in a system of resources that risk depletion, and as wanting to believe in a system of fair bartering but being victimized by an inequitable system of supply and demand. (Stenport 148)

Stenport shows that economic terminology becomes invested with deep emotional and moral value within Strindberg's work. Building on this view, I argue that though Strindberg shows the connection between new economic practices and the sentimental and sexual desires, the play also

contains the sacrificial dynamics of ancient economics and tragic moralities. Strindberg's *Creditors* embraces metaphors of cannibalism. It suggests that creditors and debtors cannot be clearly distinguished from one another. The tragic reversal will bring down those who claim mastery over others, making the audience experience the joy or fear of losing one's economic and political role.

Creditors shows the becoming master of the slave and the becoming slave of the master; however, each claim to control has so little duration that the play provokes a sense of futility. Gustav, whose wife left him years earlier for the painter Adolf, has assumed a false identity to befriend, care for, and nurse Adolf during a period of mental and physical frailty. He gives malevolently to Adolf in order to spoil the new marriage. This deliberate scheme is the application of reason to fulfill the emotional goals of a resentful person.

Adolf is already weak, having been consumed by his new wife Tekla. He has given so much that he now feels helpless without her. Gustav leads Adolf, a willing party due to feelings of resentment, to believe that his wife is a metaphorical vampire and cannibal. Adolf states, with encouragement, "I've imagined that I'd have peace if I were free— but she has only to leave me and I've longed for her, longed for her as I might long for my own arms or legs! It's strange, but sometimes it seems to me as if she weren't anything in herself but a part of me; an intestine that carried away my will, my desire to live— as if I had deposited my urge to live with her" (*Creditors* 150). His personhood resides in Tekla's digestive track, leaving him with a void inside himself. The language of being "drained" and "emptied" repeats throughout the play. He compares himself to a goat slaughtered and eaten, among other metaphors of ingestion (158, 159, 174).

Gustav explains indirectly that he too was once devoured. He had met a young woman (the yet unidentified Tekla) without developed sensibilities. Attempting to master her, he encouraged her to copy his thoughts and beliefs. Unwittingly, these gifts led to his own enslavement. She cannibalized him, incorporating the personality he felt was his own property. He was left to feel incomplete, neither master of himself nor of her. She was a “phonograph” who devoured him and stole his speech (*Creditors* 158): her departure made him lose part of himself. Without the recognition he needs, Gustav is incontinent enough to wage a potentially humiliating revenge plot against the dictums of good sense. In the their nostalgic yet caustic reminisces, Gustav recalls to Tekla:

Do you remember when I first met you? You were a little, lovable child, a slate on which your parents and your governess had made a few scratches, which I had to erase. And then I wrote anew lessons in my own spirit until you felt you were completely covered [...] there's a certain pleasure in meeting you again. Our thoughts are alike and sitting here talking to you is like opening an old bottle of wine of my own making. (*Creditors* 180)

He thought she was meant for his consumption like wine, but she, like alcohol so often does, consumes him.⁷⁰

Resisting being enjoyed like a “bottle of wine,” Tekla accuses “you’re taking my soul” (*Creditors* 182).⁷¹ Gustav’s retort sheds light on the situation: “And giving you mine [my soul] in return! You haven’t any soul, so far as that goes; that’s only an illusion” (182). He asserts “You had stolen my honor, and I could get that back only by taking yours!” (185). They find themselves in a loop. In eating the other, they gain a soul, soothing their emptiness. However, since this soul can be stolen, it will soon be appropriated back. Once one character becomes

⁷⁰ The cannibalism and vampirism motifs have been noted by many, generally being interpreted as a misogynistic trope. But male characters also participate in the appropriation of others, Gustav making similar cannibalistic, as well as homoerotic, suggestions to Adolf.

⁷¹ Strindberg’s 1884 prosecution resulted in part from his questioning the sacramental wine of communion, a ritual whose cannibalistic dimensions are hard to miss.

master of the other, the other feels servile and resumes mimicry, thus regaining mastery. The soul is transferrable property; thus it offers only an illusion of security.

Property only exists through recognition within a social framework, as countless political economists and theorists have illustrated. But this recognition can be denied. Even if the recognition is given, it makes the recognized master dependent on the servile party, turning master back into slave. Recognition is a reversal which is a recognition which is a reversal: the play does not have any potential end that conforms to the demand for intelligibility. Strindberg has little choice but to end to the motion through an arbitrary *coup de théâtre*; a stroke of authorial freedom arising as if from nothing.

Tekla and Gustav, lost in a mirror in front of mirror nightmare, discuss how each feels determined by desire and circumstance: every decision “to a certain extent is not free” (*Creditors* 184). Nevertheless, they both are inclined to pardon themselves and blame others, attributing freedom selectively. Morality is a cudgel against others. A powerful exchange occurs between the two freethinkers shortly before the conclusion:

Tekla: Christians say that it’s destiny that controls our actions; others call it fate. Aren’t we innocent?

Gustav: Yes, to a certain extent. But there is a margin of responsibility all the same; and the creditors appear sooner or later! Innocent but responsible! Innocent before Him, who doesn’t exist anymore, responsible before oneself and before one’s fellow man” (185).

Gustav forgives himself—he is just rightfully settling the score according to an exchangist morality— while she, as an irrational woman, is mostly innocent as an animal is. However, despite this lack of culpability, she is somehow still guilty enough to be punished for doing something that he thinks she could not *not* do. Moral vocabularies are crumbling, the audience forced to witness the immaturity of contemporary claims to righteousness.

The play concludes with a most artificial device: the psycho-physical expiration of Adolf due to the stressful fighting. The blow from the author ends the play that could not conclude in a way that makes sense. Only an arbitrary addition of an element of bad tragic composition could break the loop of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*.

Strindberg's contrivance forces audiences to confront whether their own actions arise from similarly irrational depths. Rokem writes "The *deus ex machina* and its iconographic configurations are ubiquitously present in modern drama, as well as in the contemporary theatre. What Strindberg was able to demonstrate is how the device can be transformed to serve a modern world where its theological basis has been undermined" (172). The mystical foundations of human motivations briefly flash in the theatrical coup. Strindberg shows that art and politics still demand leaps of faith. Modernity's disenchantments make it more important, not less, to believe so that we may understand.

Impossible to say who is master and who is slave, Gustav and Tekla consider the possibility that they are both innocent. Perhaps, they wish to correct hypocritical positions of moral positions, though their motivations remain opaque. In another light, the audience may deem that these egoists simply want to absolve themselves. However, Gustav's famous lines articulate something else if read beyond his petty motivations: "Innocent, but responsible! Innocent before Him, who doesn't exist anymore, responsible before oneself and before one's fellow man!" (*Creditors* 185). A tragic morality once again arises, one that cannot guarantee justice nearly as effectively as it can suffering. In the absence of a universal standard that only metaphysical belief could provide, politics and ethics appear impossible. Nevertheless, this tragic vision, in which choice and freedom are not the necessary preconditions for judging an action, reaffirms ethico-politics at the moment it seems to disappear.

If responsibility before oneself—who is really a composite of the others that one has consumed—and responsibility before others—who are partially you yourself—are paramount, one must use the freedom that one no longer believes in to make the “right” choice. This decision now has even greater importance if the eventual triumph of unified moral standards is not guaranteed.

Strindberg impels his characters and his audiences to make decisions that will be arbitrary, innocent, and guilty all at once. These decisions are neither free nor determined. They are the result of collisions between the sets of structures inherited in concrete, yet unique relation to the past. Just as Strindberg saw the Théâtre Libre as a site of freedom because it allowed genres to combine, Strindberg’s characters are over-motivated by determining forces.⁷² The surplus of competing demands push characters to decisions beyond calculation and prediction. The *coup de théâtre* does not provide the certain picture of the tableau, much less a moral consensus. But, through its forceful action, the coup faces up to the quandaries of the ethical and political life.

Rather than economic man as a producer, Stenport contends that Strindberg’s characters see themselves as consumers.⁷³ Though Stenport’s focuses on the characters’ different economic moralities, an implicit political mentality unites all three. If a political and economic environment demands the human being to define itself through consumption (cannibalism), the individual remains forever dependent on the outside. Rather than in control, modern economic masters, in consuming what they wish, assert their power at the exact moment that they reveal their weakness, debt, and dependence on others.

⁷² Strindberg’s “Preface” and “On Modern Drama and Modern Theatre” suggest that he viewed artistic freedom in a similar way: the new will not arise spontaneously but through the unpredictable collision of formal restrictions.

⁷³ Stenport draws Reginia Gagnier’s argument that subjectivity now defines itself by what it wants rather than what it makes. See *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society*.

Stenport argues that Strindberg naturalizes economic conditions by showing the centrality of economic metaphors to moral and romantic experience. However, the play could instead show the catastrophic conclusions that greet a society that attempts to naturalize its economic conventions. Escaping the systems that motivate the cannibalisms of Tekla, Gustav, and Adolf very well might seem essential to those viewing the drama.

Creditors depicts a society of consumers who depend on what they acquire from others. Precious individuality is always vulnerable to the theft as well as the whims of what (and whom) the market makes available to consume. In the flux between being a creditor and debtor under capitalism, a stable sense of identity and independence is increasingly illusory. One borrows, invests, and lends, always defining one's wealth and status in terms of what one does not currently possess.

Conclusion

Strindberg's plays show the disappearance of mutual recognition that once produced well-defined social roles. Strindberg turns his back on Aristotle's good tragedies, which rely on the recognition and consistent characters, adapting tragic conventions to his political vision. Fatalism returns to remind human beings that their ambitious desires—for material comforts and mental security— are unlikely to be achieved within contemporary relations.

Strindberg's audiences must ponder if true possession of oneself, others, and the future can be imitated but not realized. Despite intellectuals viewing his attitude politically irresponsible, the downfall of mastery was a potential route for a leftist political theatre disinterested in epic foundations. Strindberg shows that emotional identification and the proscenium theatre still offer resources to those willing to take the risk of seeming reactionary. The contentious productions of *Miss Julie* in recent decades offer a reminder that political

performance need not respect the false dichotomy between Brechtian detachment and postdramatic presence.⁷⁴

In his drama, the violability of the individual is provocation rather than edification. Strindberg shows the violation one feels in discovering the absence within oneself. A hunger might arise to define the contemporary environment otherwise: to escape a regime that makes ownership of scarce resources and privileged roles—that others jealously usurp—the only road toward the vanishing point of security. The “natural” capitalist order proves tragically incapable in producing the masterful subjects it promises.

Theodor Adorno wrote of the politics of Strindberg’s plays: they “attest to the transition of society to horror more authentically than Gorki’s bravest accusations. To this extent they are socially progressive, the dawning self-consciousness of that catastrophe for which the bourgeois individualistic society is preparing” (*Aesthetic Theory* 257). The difficulty of grasping Strindberg’s sublime tragedies is not a compromise of radical political values, but a constitutive element. As Adorno reminds readers, “freedom—surely freedom from the principle of possession—cannot be possessed” (261).

⁷⁴ Yaël Farber’s triumph *Mies Julie* has traveled the world to outstanding reviews. The adaptation tackles race and gender in post-Apartheid South Africa, reproducing the shock that Strindberg’s play once inflicted on audiences.

Chapter III.

Risking Fascination with Jean Genet

“Les révolutionnaires risquent de s'égarter dans trop de miroir. Il faut pourtant des moments saccageurs et pillards, côtoyant le fascisme, y tombant quelquesfois momentanément, s'en arrachant, y revenant avec plus d'ivresse. Ces moments ne sont pas exactement d'avant-garde, ils étaient avant-coureurs...”⁷⁵

-----Jean Genet's *Un captif amoureux*

Genet's Dramatic Politics and Aesthetics

Affirming political emotions led to a reputation of irresponsibility for August Strindberg. Yet his theatre was not without impact. Strindberg's drama explores the absence within the human being, challenging bourgeois notions of identity and mastery.

By his own statements, Jean Genet was also more interested in the absent rather than the present; in impermanent appearances rather than eternal essences. Genet sought to summon the void through ritual means, invoking absences that haunt the subject and social institutions. For a man who praised infidelity, his formulations concerning theatrical aesthetics are surprisingly consistent. Tableaus take form before falling apart, letting “le vide” appear—if such an oxymoronic phrasing is appropriate.

The frequency with which term *mise en abyme* appears in descriptions of Genet's work is telling. Genet is associated with the disappearance of present realities into art, emptiness, and phantasm. However, if Genet only evaporated identity into the mists of aesthetic perception, he

⁷⁵ “Revolutionaries are in danger of getting lost in a hall of mirrors. But they are necessary, those intervals of sacking and looting that skirt and sometimes briefly fall into fascism, that break free of it only to return with even more abandon. Such intervals were not exactly avant-garde, but they were forerunners...” (*Prisoner of Love* 298). I have used the published English translations of Genet when possible. When no English translation exists or the translation is inadequate to the grain of my argument, I have provided my own translation or kept the original French.

would not have factored into the political debates that have long surrounded his work. Genet—a thief, orphan, and a sexual deviant by the standards of his day—exposed his fantasies, composed in prison notebooks, to a resistant audience. French society had done all it could to escape seeing the marginalized groups it produces as well as exploits to sustain itself. Mythologizing those excluded from social fantasies, the *poète maudit* Genet imbued unfamiliar fears and aspirations with the beauty that hegemonic groups normally reserve for themselves. Genet may have compared his writing to private masturbation, but the publication of *Our Lady of Flowers* (1943) in wartime France by a notorious pornographer was a political gesture.

Yet if not for his investment in the taboo, Genet's formal experimentation might have otherwise placed him in the history of *l'art pour l'art*. Affirming the superiority of artifice to reality, Genet's approach to politics was often considered irresponsible. Even his well-publicized participation in revolutionary groups seemed rooted in bad faith:

I'm not all that eager for there to be a revolution. If I'm really sincere, I have to say that I don't particularly want it. The current situation, the current regimes allow me to revolt, but a revolution would probably not allow me to revolt [...] I would like for the world not to change so that I can be against the world.
 ("Interview with Hubert Fichte" 129)

By his own words, he was in many ways a parasite to the paramilitaries he lived among, using their struggles to satisfy his own adventurous aesthetic and sexual appetites. Nevertheless, one should not take Genet's comments straightforwardly. Moments earlier he declared "when I speak to you, here in front of the microphone, I'm not completely sincere. I want to give a certain image of myself. And I can't say exactly who I am or what I want, because I'm like anyone else, essentially changing" (128). Genet's faithfulness is to the absence within human beings that makes personal identity a fiction. His work, both artistic and political, challenges traditional conceptions of the writer as one who expresses stable dispositions through action and decision.

In front of the microphone, he performs with the same intention of his actors: to create a powerful image that betrays his own mutability.

Many noted something suspicious about Genet's iconoclasm that prefers emotionality, infidelity, and inconstancy to intelligible critique. His plays were unsuited to the pedagogical intentions of most political theatre. Before questions of sexual and racial identity became central to progressive politics, Genet was as likely to provoke outrage as praise, even from his leftist contemporaries.⁷⁶ Richard Coe, a major American critic, concluded as many did: Genet was some sort of right-wing anarchist ("Les Anarchistes de droite" 99).

Yet Genet also inspired reflective responses from the political left. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (1952) popularized Genet, arguing that the playwright's ethics of evil expands one's moral imagination. Becoming aware of options beyond naturalized bourgeois habits, the reader or viewer will later make authentic decisions that define her essence on existentialist grounds. Yet Sartre's interest in Genet came with caveats: he even titled the final chapter of his magisterial work "Please Use Genet Properly" (584).⁷⁷ Genet's "solitude" is a way to break unthinking adherence to inherited values. The focus on absence and appearance, sophistry in Sartre's view, endangers bad standards of propriety. But Genet's work and its mystifications must only be a temporary stage. Genet is a figure of great risk and reward: he wills evil for the sake of evil (with an Augustinian spiritual thirst), unaware that his art might instead cultivate better individuals and a better society.

Genet's betrayal of foundational moral notions (identity, freedom, friendship) appealed to the deconstructive political sensibility. Derrida's work explored the ineradicable danger,

⁷⁶ Jean-Jacques Gautier's review "Undiluted Filth" in *Le Figaro Littéraire* is exemplary. The conservative critic denounces *Deathwatch*'s homosexual themes and formal experimentation as corrupting. Genet's depiction of sexuality and individual revolt troubled plenty of leftists as well, notably those associated with the PCF.

⁷⁷ See Mori Norihide's "On the 'Proper Usage' of Immoral Works in *Saint Genet*" for a summary of Sartre's position.

irrationality, and irresponsibility that accompanies political investments, refusing the righteous comfort of good conscience. The absence of a signified among the signifiers in Genet's art excited Derrida just as much as it alarmed Sartre. Derrida celebrates Genet's work as a challenge to the metaphysics of presence. Pushing oppositional logics (of citizen and criminal, of presence and absence) to their failure, Genet became a talisman within deconstruction.⁷⁸ Because Genet does not show complacent confidence in the achievability of justice, identity, or truth, his work is open to the outside and the quasi-messianic event.

Another devoted reader shaped Genet's French reception. Lucien Goldmann was heterodox Marxian sociologist famous for his opposition to the Communist parties of France, his native Romania, and the Soviet Union. In a 1960 article in *Les Temps modernes*, Goldmann argued that Genet's *The Balcony* was the first great Brechtian play in French literature ("Genet's The Balcony"): high praise at a time in which the Berliner Ensemble was the paragon of responsible art.⁷⁹ Goldmann pioneered the argument that Genet's late theatre may be a "sign of a turning point in our intellectual and social life" ("The Theatre of Genet" 61). For Goldmann, the conceptual framework of classical Marxism had ceased to correspond to socio-economic realities and had grown inseparable from the GULAG. Genet's work represents the coming to self-consciousness of those expelled from bonds of respect and recognition within capitalist civil society: "Genet has interiorized this expulsion and raised it to the level of a world vision" (52). This world vision, which demands radical negation of the present order, might dialectically make

⁷⁸ Robert Harvey notes the fetishistic in Sartre's and Derrida's books devoted to Genet: "As Genet did each time he set out to plumb his poetic imagination, Sartre, and Derrida in turn, would create for Genet—but even more importantly for themselves—an object of devotion called 'Genet,' a sort of writerly fetish for whatever a 'real' Genet might have been" (104). Insofar as Derrida explicitly fetishizes Genet's name in *Glas* and seeks fidelity through disloyalty, Derrida highlights the appropriative and worshipful dynamics of literary criticism and political idolization.

⁷⁹ Goldmann urged Genet back to Paris in May of '68, convinced that the playwright would be thrilled. But Genet was skeptical of the unrest, excluding the early days of the occupation of the Théâtre de l'Odéon. Despite his initial interest, Genet bemoaned how quickly the theatrical protest evolved into a site of political debate.

communication, authenticity, and recognition possible again even if Genet did not desire such wholesome goals.

Goldmann himself articulated a tragic Marxism built on the grounds of a salvific and passionate leap of faith, contesting the scientism and triumphalism of Soviet Marxism. Yet despite his embrace of tragic thought, Goldmann's humanism considers the tragic plays of Genet not yet political. Rather, the Brechtian later plays—consisting of discrete tableaus that demand mental effort to discover their intelligible relationships—mark the entry into politics. Of the early tragedies, Goldmann writes “in short, in a world where the power of the rulers cannot be shaken, where the ruled are motivated by love-hate for the rulers, an inadequate reality offers the possibility of a poetic-religious ritual through which the ruled identify with the rulers and succeed in fantasy in overcoming them” (“The Theatre of Genet” 54). Goldmann sees this love-hate, in which oppositions between friend and enemy or self and other are not clearly distinguished, as inconducive to the formation of a revolutionary class.⁸⁰ Any Marxism, even if tragic, must imagine the likelihood of a successful revolution and avoid the compensations of “poetic-religious” pleasure.

In the theatre, Genet has earned a reputation as politically-charged choice, but largely within a politics of sexual or racial identity rather than class. English language scholarship has been less inclined to see Genet as a political writer, often taking his own comments straightforwardly. A 2006 collection *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics* sought to reverse this longstanding view. Like Goldmann, the editors posit that Genet's theatre became political with its turn toward Brechtian aesthetics. Carl Lavery, author of *The Politics of Genet's Later*

⁸⁰ Focusing on the “poetic-religious” dimension of art offers dangerous consolation that distracts one from revolution. Goldmann argues Genet's early theatre is something like the “imaginary solution,” a concept first theorized by Claude Levi-Strauss and made famous in Marxist circles by Frederic Jameson.

Theatre: Spaces of Revolution, argues that the late theatre qualifies him as “one of the most astute political playwrights of his generation” (Lavery).

Extending Genet’s reluctant admission that he was a political playwright in an “oblique way”, I argue that Genet’s early tragic theatre was just as political as his mature works. But one’s understanding of politics must encompass emotionality and risk to recognize tragedy’s worth. Genet’s tragic drama shows that the difference between self and other is tenuous, demystifying identity and possession as performances vulnerable to sudden reversals.

Say No to Smoking (Brecht’s Cigars): Genet’s Strindbergian Theater

Drama historians note the similarities between the work of Strindberg and Genet. Yet rarely do comparisons focus on their similarity as political playwrights. Both authors are considered representatives of a world-weary sort of theatre. For all their boldness, Strindberg and Genet belong to a larger history of modernity’s malcontents.⁸¹

Genet reflected on his work’s relationship to Strindberg. Interestingly, he posits that their commonality puts them in contrast with the twentieth century’s most famous innovator in political theatre. In an interview, German author Hubert Fichte asks Jean Genet to explain his controversial preference for Strindberg over Brecht. Genet states:

Parce que Brecht ne dit que conneries, parce que *Galiléo Galiléi* [*La Vie de Galilée*] me cite des évidences que j’aurais découvertes sans Brecht. Strindberg, en tous cas dans *Mademoiselle Julie*, ne me propose pas des évidences. C’est très nouveau. Je ne m’y attendais pas. [...] Rien de ce que dit Strindberg ne peut être dit autrement que poétiquement et tout ce que dit Brecht peut être dit et finalement a été dit prosaïquement. (*Dialogues* 11)⁸²

⁸¹ An opinion solidified by Robert Brustein’s influential *The Theatre of Revolt* (1964).

⁸² “Because what Brecht says is nothing but garbage; because *Galileo Galilei* cites the obvious; it tells me things I would have discovered without Brecht. Strindberg, or in any case *Miss Julie*, does not present the obvious. It’s very new. I wasn’t expecting it” (*Fragments of the artwork* 117).

Brecht's dramaturgy does not distinguish the poetic act of the *mettre en scène* from the prosaic act of *mettre en évidence*. With the association of making clear, Brecht makes the visible intelligible, transforming theatre into a practice of public meaning. Genet regards the affirmation of truth as “bullshit” or “nonsense” aesthetically and, perhaps, politically. Strindberg—who does not employ tableaus with definite meaning—attempts to “say” something poetic that goes beyond the meanings available within existing prosaic terminologies.

Genet showed attraction to Strindberg's lack of argumentation. Poetic saying focuses on “how” of communication rather than “what”. Genet's celebration of staginess and form contrasts with Brecht's more conventional usage of signs to communicate—even as the sign's semiotic nature is demonstrated by non-naturalistic methods. Genet hopes to exceed a pedagogical model of theatre.

Though he affirmed the difference between artistic and political revolution, Genet does not disavow the political message of Brecht: “everything that Brecht says can be said and finally has been said in prose” (*Fragments of the Artwork* 11). Rather than disagreement, it is as if Genet viewed such a political message as beyond the need of articulation. Brecht's critique of capitalism is something that many people do not need to be taught and something that other people refuse to learn.

Fichte challenges Genet's skepticism of Brecht. He asks Genet to consider Brecht's detached observer, stating that Strindberg's theatre cultivates the same sort of “cold” spectator.⁸³ Using direct reference to the “Preface to Miss Julie”, Fichte demonstrates a misunderstanding of

⁸³ See Meg Mumford's *Bertolt Brecht* for a clear explanation of Brecht's ideal viewer (15-19): masculine, emotionally detached, and cigar-smoking, the spectator has the knowledgeability of a boxing aficionado who watches the struggle with intellectual interest rather than unruly bloodlust. Similar is his ideal citizen whose political action is the result of dispassionate deliberation.

Strindberg's text. Genet, unswayed by Fichte's pseudo-scholarly appeal, cites his own experience watching Strindberg's plays as proof of an invested audience.

Genet declares "dans les choix du geste, fumer un cigare, il y a désinvolture à l'égard de l'oeuvre d'art qui en fait n'est pas permise. [...] Je ne connais pas les Rothschild, mais enfin je pense que vous pouvez avec les Rothschild parler d'art en fumant un cigare" (*Dialogues* 12).⁸⁴

Fichte asks if "le geste de Brecht est un geste bourgeois capitaliste?"⁸⁵ (12) to which Genet assents. The cigar-smoking gesture of Brecht's imagined spectator is unintentionally on the side of the casualness and clarity of bourgeois claims to mastery and masculine self-confidence.⁸⁶ Genet declares that smoking the proverbial cigar is "not simply a question of distancing, but of a lack of sensibility" (*Fragments of the Artwork* 118). Brecht's theatre, despite its tendentiousness, would only appeal to calculative reason. To cultivate such dispositions in audiences might inadvertently strengthen the capitalist order. Genet does not want to abandon the passionate relationship that the masses evince towards art and entertainment.

Despite his outsider status, Genet showed delicate awareness of the aesthetic debates within French intellectual life. Brecht's well-known theory of the *gestus social*—as it became known in France—as a formal element may be indirectly criticized as politically reactionary. The social *gestus*, a political tableau, wishes to engage a dispassionate spectator, a character Genet does not believe should exist outside boardrooms.

⁸⁴ "In the choice of gesture, smoking a cigar, there is a casualness towards the work of art that is, in fact, not permitted. I don't know the Rothschilds, but then again I think that you can with the Rothschilds talk about art while smoking a cigar" (*Fragments of the Artwork* 118).

⁸⁵ "So you think that Brecht's gesture is the gesture of a bourgeois capitalist?" (*Fragments of the Artwork* 118).

⁸⁶ In a later political essay, Genet cautions revolutionaries against emulating bourgeois control over language: "the bourgeoisie is well-informed, wily, and still master of the definition of words" ("The Palestinians" 7).

Disavowing the tableau, Strindberg's plays demand sustained vulnerability from their audiences. Genet describes what he frequently terms the "fascination" elicited by art, referred to here as "contemplation" by Fichte. Genet clarifies:

Je perds de plus en plus le sentiment d'être «moi», le sentiment du «je» pour n'être que la perception de l'œuvre d'art. En face d'événements subversifs, mon «moi», mon «moi social» est au contraire comblé de plus en plus même, il est gonflé de plus en plus et de moins en moins j'ai la possibilité quand je suis en face de phénomènes subversifs, j'ai de moins en moins la liberté de... justement de cette contemplation.⁸⁷ (*Dialogues* 12-13)

Genet is interested in art that risks one's personal as well as social identity. But direct subversion, such as Brecht's, inflates one's sense of self. A person reflexively accepts or rejects revolutionary sentiments to preserve her social identity and habits. The individual grows more resolute but does not truly change in the face of political statements. Strindberg's claim that political art with messages turns into a referendum along party lines foreshadowed Genet's attitudes. Within routine arguments, in which one's political tribe is a source of security, people do not risk their predispositions.

Questions of sacrifice appear throughout the interview. Fichte notes the radicality of this vision, probing the relationship between the loss of self in art and the loss of self in revolution. Genet equivocates about similarities and differences between artistic and political self-abdication, eventually calling them "doubles":

H.F. : Contemplation absorbs your "self" to the point of destruction?
 J.G. : Not to the point of destruction, not to the point of losing the 'self' completely, because at a certain moment, you notice that your leg is asleep, you come back to "yourself," but you tend towards a loss of "self".
 H.F. : Whereas the revolutionary?...
 J.G. : In my opinion, it's the opposite, since you have to act. Confronted with the artwork, you have to act, as well. The attention you give to the artwork is an act; it

⁸⁷ "I lose more the sense of being 'myself,' the sense of the 'I,' and become nothing but the perception of the artwork. Confronted with subversive events, my 'ego' or my 'self,' my 'social self,' is on the contrary more and more filled, it is more and more inflated, and I am less and less capable, when confronted with subversive phenomena, I am less and less free for.... precisely for that sort of contemplation" (*Fragments of the artwork* 118).

is impossible to listen to the vespers of the *Beata Virgine* without at the same time composing it with my modest means [...] if I'm not writing *The Brothers Karamazov* while I read, I am not doing anything. (*Fragments of the Artwork* 119)

Brecht denied the complete absorption on grounds that it made viewers passive: the narcotic power of the emotions makes viewers incapable of autonomous action. Genet describes an active spectatorship that tends toward the destruction of the agent of the action. Genet's viewers abdicate themselves, recomposing the work in their own minds and bodies. Rapt attention to something outside oneself is a secularized form of "possession" that art demands. Loss of self is requisite to transformation, whatever the risks fascination entails.

For Genet, poetic possession and revolution are not the same nor are they mutually exclusive. In both, Genet denies the prosaic. The step beyond inherited boundaries is taken from passion. It entails risk and danger in a distinctly sacrificial mentality that spans Genet's work.

Genet's essay "That Strange Word..." makes the anti-pedagogical attack more sharply. Even if the theatre was once a site of political debate, Genet argues it should no longer play the same civic role in an age of mass media. Though claiming that he has no spiritual powers, Genet puts his theatre in continuity with various religious practices. He makes a distinctly historical argument in favor of freeing theatre from debate:

If we—provisionally, accept the common ideas of time and history, admitting, too, that the act of painting did not stay the same as it had been before the invention of photography, it seems that the theater will not remain, after cinema and television, what it was before them. As long as we have known the theater, it seems along that with its essential function, each play was full of preoccupations about politics, religion, morality, or anything, transforming the dramatic action into a didactic means.

Maybe—I will say "maybe," since I am a man, and alone—maybe television and cinema will better fulfill an educative function: while the theatre will find itself emptied, perhaps purged, of what encumbered it, maybe it will be able to shine from its sole virtue(s)—which is, or are, perhaps still to be discovered. (106)

No longer shaping opinion as much as it once did, theatre is “purged” of its former political responsibility, opening it to new possibilities. The theatre is a vestigial public organ, one whose freedom from immediate political necessity might grant it a disruptive potential; to fit a world and mentalities that do not yet exist.

Though the essay has been read as a disavowal of the political, his comments show something more complex. “Maybe” television and film will fulfill the role of political pedagogy and debate. This “maybe” would allow a totally apolitical theatre; however, Genet emphasizes the conditionality of such developments. Strindberg, who found himself yearning for a rational future while stuck in an irrational present, embraced tragedy’s emotionality with hopes that it could surpass itself. Conversely, Genet finds himself for yearning for ecstatic passions but stuck in an age of argumentative theatre. Both playwrights describe a theatre stuck in the interstices between historical eras, hoping their plays would help break into the future.⁸⁸

Though he does not mention Genet, Christopher Innes posits Strindberg’s appeal to political artists: “the projection of emotion involved spectators on a new level of intensity (both denying the validity of rationalism—the defining quality of nineteenth-century Europe—and potentially gaining converts to the cause)” (369). Having disavowed a strict thinking of cause and effect, Strindberg and Genet created art that might gain “converts to the cause” through emotional intensity. Their political theatres belong to a politics of the coup (*de dés, de théâtre, d’etat*) rather than the necessity sought by many engagé playwrights. Genet’s and Strindberg’s spectators do not arrive at their verdicts according to reasoned interpretation but

⁸⁸ Genet reimagines Strindberg’s comments about the deferred era when tragedy will no longer be staged. First, Genet describes his ideal funeral, in which the mourners should “mime” and reenact the death scene. But even this “tragic” funeral will have an end some day in the future: it will last “until a new ceremony offered by another dead man whose life will deserve a dramatic, not tragic performance. One must live tragedy, not play it” (*Fragments of the Artwork* 111). Crucially, Genet affirms that life itself should be tragic in a Nietzschean sense, not positing a day in which it might be overcome (as Strindberg had).

instead through a decision; a leap of judgment from unknown motivation as strange as the coups of stagecraft. Comparing his dramatic work to the poetry of Mallarmé, Genet states “I think a little darkness must be added. Science deciphers everything, or wants to, but we’ve had it!” (*Fragments of the Artwork* 110).⁸⁹ His theatre accustoms viewers to sublime political fantasies that might make the loss of bourgeois subjectivity a source pleasure. Of course, the *metteur en scène* who stages Strindberg and Genet risks (*met en jeu*) her reputation of political responsibility.

Strindberg’s stoking passionate attention while avoiding cathartic conclusions reappears in Genet’s theatre.⁹⁰ Could this swelling agitation without predetermined end enact political as well as aesthetic revolution? Or, as the left often suggests, are experimental and tragic theatre decadence, toothlessly fatalistic in comparison to the epic theatre?

The notion of a politics outside intelligible messages and good faith remains unstable territory. Many believe it to be uninhabitable, even those who prefer non-political art to resist communicating prosaic meanings. To fully respond to this critique, I will turn to Roland Barthes’s reflections on aesthetics and politics.

Showing Absence: Barthes and Genet

Chapter One introduced Roland Barthes, a thinker whose aesthetic preferences demand intelligibility in political art yet otherwise celebrate resistance to meaning. Though it is easy to characterize this position as inconsistent, his arguments merit consideration.

⁸⁹ One might think of the rhetoric teacher, recalled by Livy and Quintilian (Lanham 141), who would yell “Darken it!” at students. Believing obscurity excited the imagination of audiences, the teacher encouraged students to make their figures less clear in order to make them more powerful.

⁹⁰ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle describes tragedies which fail to produce cathartic responses since the resolution of the play is contrived through theatrical means. The cathartic moment of recognition that makes experience intelligible flees the stage. The arbitrary coup intervenes in the “bad” tragedies that Strindberg and Genet inherit.

Barthes claims center around the “constitutively reactionary” nature of language (*Critical Essays* 265). Since art uses inherited signs, it must be to some degree on the side of conventional understandings. Even if one attempts a revolutionary expression beyond accepted meanings, the audience engages in a semiotic relation to what they hear and view, decoding the work to find familiar messages.

A responsible artist prefers advancing socially-critical meanings rather than reinforcing dominant conceptions (“mythologies” in Barthes’s terms). Though no representation can adequately represent an outside reality, art can use tableaus to motivate the mass of people—who still believe in such things as Truth—to take the uncertain actions of political life. He affirms his loyalty to dogmatic political art: “The work is always dogmatic, because language is always assertive” (*Critical Essays* 278). Meaning must instantiate “the law of the party” (*Music Image Text* 77): a shared understanding that unites individuals into a politically-effective group.

Interviewed for *Tel Quel* in 1963, Barthes was asked to explain his continued support for Brecht. Barthes had recently distanced himself from the leftist *Théâtre populaire*, in which he had championed Brecht to French audiences. His loyalty to political art that communicated ideological messages was now somewhat surprising: Barthes’s thinking headed in a new direction.⁹¹ Yet in political art, Barthes praises Brecht for facing up to the semantic nature of representation, making responsible use of it (*Critical Essays* 262).

This position seems incoherent for various reasons that Barthes himself expounds. Barthes already took for granted the basic tenets of “The Death of the Author” (1967), which argues that the belief in transmitting a meaning in language is ultimately theological. Barthes states that art that “promises” meaning is deceitful: it can never “fulfill” this desire for

⁹¹ Post-structuralist approaches were fast becoming more popular than Western Marxism among *Tel Quel* readers (though the journal would become Maoist in the early 1970’s).

communion (*Critical Essays* 268). Since people interpret even the most straight-forward message differently, the work of art is incapable of unifying a group with a politically-expedient lie.

Using signs, the artist is unable to engage responsibly according to accepted standards. “The writer is someone to whom ‘authenticity’ is denied” (278) Barthes affirms without mourning.

Due to these obstacles, it is curious that Barthes does not disregard the quest for communication in political art. To answer critics, he contrasts Brecht’s *engagé* failure to communicate against experiments in creating meaningless art such as the “theatre of the absurd” (*Critical Essays* 264, 265, 272). Barthes writes:

To "annihilate" meaning is a desperate project in proportion to its impossibility. Why? because what is "outside meaning" is infallibly absorbed (at a certain moment which the work has the power only to delay) into non meaning which itself is of course a meaning (under the name of the absurd): what could "signify" more than questions about meaning or the subversions of meaning, from Camus to Ionesco? Indeed, meaning can know only its contrary, which is not absence but opposition, so that any "non meaning" is always a "countermeaning": there is no such thing as a zero degree of meaning. (272)

If a work of art appears to have no meaning, it is labeled “absurd”. Thus, it is once again endowed with popular intelligibility. When viewers encounter a representation, they will find meaning regardless of the obstacles. And if they are to do so, would not you, I, and everyone else prefer they embrace our preferred political stances rather than returning to their own prejudices? In art, there is no escape from the “infallible” imposition of meaning: there is only the “power to delay” (272). Barthes celebrates this delaying force, reminiscent of Shklovsky’s *braking*, in unpolitical works of art. But in the urgent domain of politics, Barthes demands that we do not tarry.

Barthes’s argument espouses a powerful Hegelian logic. The attempt to annihilate meaning reinstates it. “Absence” transforms into “opposition” with little delay, and “non meaning” becomes “countermeaning”. His argument against the theatre of the absurd— drawing

upon Martin Esslin's coinage—is compelling. If the various attempts to escape intelligible meaning could be so quickly subsumed into a category, perhaps the artistic theatre had never been as radical as it hoped.

Barthes, backing off the strident arguments he made as editor of *Théâtre populaire*, no longer celebrates Brecht for producing a coherent political message. Instead, Brecht owns up to the impossible situation of the political artist. His failure will demonstrate the futility of political art's quest to deliver a univocal and unifying message, but it honors the inescapability and urgency of politics.

Despite argumentative inconsistencies,⁹² Barthes's faithfulness to Brecht raises important considerations. If theatricality is perceived knowingly or unknowingly as a “*density of signs*” (*New Critical Essays* 262), any attempt to escape discursive thought for pure immediacy or nonmeaning might fail. To attempt to show absence runs a risk. If one shows it clearly, does it not cease to be absent?

We must look to Genet's work to see if he escapes Barthes's criticisms.⁹³ Genet emphasizes the importance of absence to his non-pedagogical theatre:

Politics, entertainments, morality, etc., have nothing to do with our intentions. If, despite ourselves, they slip into the theatrical act, they should be chased out until all traces are erased [...]

But the drama itself? With the author, it has its dazzling beginning, so it is up to him to capture this lightning and organize, starting from the illumination that shows the void, a verbal architecture—that's to say grammatical and ceremonial—cunningly showing that from this void an appearance that shows the void rips itself free. (*Fragments of the Artwork* 107).

⁹² Barthes uses “good” and “bad” to describe political art: the former reserved for works that attempt and fail to communicate a message and the latter for works that refuse to communicate a message. Yet if all representations fail to communicate regardless of their intentions, these moral categories are obsolete. Going further, the artist can only use repeatable signs; thus sincerity is easy to fake for Barthes (278). The attempt to distinguish “committed” from “uncommitted” art is impossible.

⁹³ Barthes distaste for Genet was personal as well. Genet was quoted in *Le Figaro* as outing Barthes as a homosexual. Barthes consulted lawyers for a libel suit. See Tiphaine Samoyault's *Barthes: A Biography* (394-395).

Genet attempts to “show the void” or at least an “illusion” or “appearance” of emptiness. The “turning” around an absence aims to suggest the unrepresentable in a fleeting way. A lightning strike makes something visible so briefly that one cannot say that the object was seen; just the same, one cannot say it was not seen either.

Religious ritual, an influence on Genet’s theatre,⁹⁴ can inspire theatrical practices that act rather than represent. Genet’s ritual theatre has a force that might allow absence to be sensed without turning it into presence. One wonders if this encounter with absence—a secularized revelation for Genet—would also leave one changed politically.

If absence remains to some degree absent, the stage could be a place of the spectrality that Derrida celebrates regarding theatre, leftwing thought, and their conjunction. For Derrida, the spectral is “the frequency of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible” (*Spectres of Marx* 165). The spectral, associated with the mysteries of force, would haunt disastrous political oppositions, introducing complexity to a tradition that must be inherited differently lest it repeat the same mistakes.

Derrida, who views dialectical oppositions as threatening to a politics of difference, reads Hegel parallel to Genet in *Glas*, using the latter to critique Hegelian dialectics whose influence persists within leftist thought. Though this contrast between Hegel and Genet might suggest that Derrida believes in the latter’s straightforward superiority, one must be cautious of oversimplification. Genet’s wasteful sacrifices cannot be a strict opposite to Hegelian dialectics for their difference would be resolved through a greater dialectic. An opposition of “bad Hegel” and “good Genet” would overstate their differences and allow Genet-worshippers the refuge of

⁹⁴ Monographs written about ritual and Genet’s theatre include Lewis T. Cetta’s *Profane Play, Ritual, and Jean Genet: A Study of his Drama*, Sylvie Debevec Henning’s *Genet’s Ritual Play*, and Gene A. Plunka’s *The Rites of Passage of Jean Genet: The Art and Aesthetics of Risk Taking*.

good conscience. Though Hegel emphasizes the eventual victory of necessity over chance and justice over injustice, Hegel and Genet both fixate on the dangerous risks of sacrifice that individual political actors and groups often ignore. Tragic failure is a part of political participation in such a mentality, one in which greatness calls us to move beyond inherited norms; to heights that make vertiginous falls possible (and even likely).⁹⁵

Derrida celebrates impossibility as a precondition for any political thought worthy of its task. His *Specters of Marx* urges one to think about Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost as what puts “time out of joint”, creating new (im)possibilities beyond the political injustice of Denmark. Analogously, Derrida shows enthusiasm for an untimely encounter with Marxism in its ghostly life beyond its political death (the fall of the Soviet Union).

Genet's tragedies refuse oppositions such as past and present, absence and presence, and necessity and chance. His ritual theatre summons specters but does little to exorcise them. This inability to find closure allows precursors, whether Marx or King Hamlet, to continue influencing the world. Genet and Derrida pursue a politico-aesthetics which is open to reversals in the future. Yet they recognize that future arrives not from the spontaneity of new beginnings, but instead through a haunted sensitivity to the tragic past.

The Maids: The Madness of Possessing and Being Possessed

Goldmann and Lavery suggest that a shift occurred in Genet's dramaturgy. The early tragedies may have political resonances, but they are ultimately quasi-magical rituals. Works like

⁹⁵ Derrida conceives of a Genetian leftism rather the Hegelian Marxism. It would take tragic theatricality, indecision, and irrationality seriously, confounding the intelligible plots of the Aristotle-Hegel-Marx line of Western metaphysics. It would be an equally dangerous politics, but one that disavows righteous certainty.

The Maids and *Deathwatch* were a substitution for politics,⁹⁶ compensation for those who are both fatalistic and dissatisfied with social conditions.

The left tends to call everything not engaged in rational critique or partisan agitation apolitical—and to call everything apolitical bourgeois mystification. Nevertheless, critics are not wrong to notice a concern with tragedy and ritual in Genet's early theatre, though they fail to recognize that the “force” summoned in Genet's rites was often oriented toward politics. Writing in 1957 to his English translator, Genet divides his theatrical career:

je serais heureux que vous établissiez un parallèle aussi exact que possible entre mon théâtre et *Les maîtres fous*. Plein de développements, de rapports, d'analogies sont possible. Montrez-les. Mais dites-vous bien que tout ce théâtre déjà mort. Oublié. *Les Paravents* sont une indication assez, précise, déjà, de ce vers quoi je vais. (“Lettre de Jean à Bernard Frechtman” 913)⁹⁷

Genet's statements declare their own clarity while remaining cryptic. He indicates that his early theatre resembles *Les maîtres fous* (*The Mad Masters*), though it is unclear if he has in mind Jean Rouch's ethnofictive documentary (1955) or *hauka*, an anti-colonial performance that the film documents as well as fictionalizes.

The *hauka* ritual of various African communities featured participants miming positions of authority in a “mad” fashion. Robes, weaponry, books, and other symbols of colonial power are props in collective celebration. Anthropologists have debated the performances with little consensus. For some, *hauka* is mocking indictment of imperial arrogance, displaying that political domination has not led native peoples to accept the fiction that colonial forces possess

⁹⁶ And presumably the play *Splendid's*, composed in the late 1940's, but remaining unstaged and unpublished in the author's lifetime.

⁹⁷ “I would be happy if you establish a parallel as exact as possible between my theatre and *The Mad Masters*. Full of as many developments, connections, and analogies as possible. Show them. But tell yourself that this whole theatre is already dead. Forget it. *The Screens* is already a sufficiently accurate indication of what I am heading toward”.

godlike mastery. As such, it carnivalizes objects, social roles, and attitudes that colonizers hold sacred.⁹⁸ Others have argued that the performances were an attempt for colonized people to be recognized as equals by the occupiers. The adoption of colonial displays of grandeur is the result of native agency; an attempt to gain recognition using the colonizers' system of signs.⁹⁹ Finally, some see it as a deployment of totemic religious practices, viewing the performances as local populations redirecting the spiritual force of the objects that had given Europeans power. If *hauka* has led to debates, Rouch's film, in which a European social scientist and filmmaker misrepresents the ritual, has inspired even less consensus.¹⁰⁰

It is perhaps in its polysemy that Genet saw *hauka* as a fitting comparison to his ambiguous yet politically provocative plays. Founded in social fictions, mastery is shown to be coveted, feared, and yet ultimately without secure grounding.

Jean-Bernard Moraly argues for a continuity in Genet's theatrical practices: no such apolitical and political phases occurred. Genet's art was too charged to be apolitical, yet too complicated to be subsumed to conventional frameworks. In a section ironically titled "Refus de la lecture politique," Moraly writes:

Les deux phrases qui suivent sont célèbres, les plus célèbres sans doute de tous les écrits théoriques de Genet:

Une chose doit être écrit : il ne s'agit pas d'un plaidoyer sur le sort de domestiques. Je suppose qu'il existe un syndicat des gens de maison—cela ne nous regarde pas.

Genet refuse la lecture politique de son théâtre. Catégoriquement. Il ne faut pas le croire. Absolument. Ce refus est pédagogique. Genet craint que l'analyse de la parabole sociale ne détourne des autres niveaux de la pièce, moins évidents

⁹⁸ See Paul Stoller's "Horrific Comedy: Cultural Resistance and the Hauka Movement in Niger".

⁹⁹ See John G. Ferguson's "Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the 'New World Society'".

¹⁰⁰ See Paul Henley's "Spirit Possession, Power, and the Absent Presence of Islam: Re-viewing *Les maîtres fous*" for a discussion of the controversies.

(lecture métaphysique, lecture théâtrale). Malgré deux petites phrases, *Les Bonnes* est un pièce politique. Évidemment, le “sort de domestiques” y sert de métaphore, mais c'est bien du Maître et de l'Esclave qu'il s'agit, et du rôle de l'Art, de la culture dans ce difficile rapport. Le alienation y est analysée comme alienation culturelle. L'outil principal du pouvoir de Madame, c'est le théâtre, la culture. (85)¹⁰¹

The staging of master and slave in *The Maids* intervenes in political discourse. Genet might not nationalize the theatre in the name of servants, but neither does its ideological power remain with their masters. If art usually serves to alienate audiences, alienation of the tools of alienation is subversive. Moraly perceptively argues that “Refusing the political reading” is, ironically, a pedagogical strategy to discourage limiting art to political pedagogy.

Rational communication is not the only strategy available to political art. *Les Bonnes* embraces Strindberg's “formula” to depict the changing dynamics of a power struggle.¹⁰² Again, mastery does not emanate from natural charisma but from objects and signs imbued with social meaning. Just as Jean does, the maids grow in strength through pretending to be their mistress. The plays fixate on how the role of the master is performed yet never achieved. Rooted in social recognition rather than substantial identities, mastery is subject to dramatic reversals.

An unexhaustive list of similarities between *Miss Julie* and *The Maids* includes:

¹⁰¹ “The following two sentences are famous, probably the most famous in the entire theoretical writings of Genet: ‘One thing must be written: it is not advocacy for the fate of servants. I suppose there exists a trade-union of housekeepers—it does not matter to us.’

Genet refuses the political reading of his theatre. Categorically. We must not believe it. Absolutely. This refusal is pedagogical. Genet fears that analysis of the social parable will distract from the other levels of the play that are less obvious (the metaphysical interpretation, the theatrical interpretation). Despite these two short sentences, *The Maids* is a political play. Obviously, the fate of servants serves as a metaphor, but it is a question of the Master and the Slave, and the role of Art, of the culture in this difficult relationship. Alienation is analyzed as cultural alienation. Madame's primary tool of power is the theatre; the culture.”

¹⁰² Edmund White explains “The true literary forebears of *The Maids* were Racine (the long, elevated speeches, the disciplined passions, the observance of the classical unities of place, time, and situation, the conclusion precipitated by a final catastrophe) and Strindberg, particularly the Strindberg of *Miss Julie*, a one-act play that also deals with the theme of servants and masters and represents the struggle for power between two half-mad characters” (White 302). White identifies a tragic lineage.

one-act tragedies that obey the classical unities
a servant's sudden rise and fall in fortune
psychic murders conclude the performance with the "ultimate" sign of dominance
the psychic murderer ironically returns to servility through their triumph
the theatrical coup employed, hypnotism, confounds the logic of the stage-world
the lack of intermission prohibits viewers to restore themselves.
the pace accelerates, yet the plays ending suddenly and arbitrarily, denying cathartic release
the action primarily occurs through the dialogue of two characters vying for power in a domestic space
a third and final speaking role interrupts but cannot stop the mutually destructive conflict
Characters seem gain ideas from objects, setting and circumstances rather than their own minds ¹⁰³
Figures of cannibalism show the permeability between self and other

Louis Jouvet, director of the first production, attests to the Stindbergian interpretation through which Genet's drama was popularized. In an interview in *Courier des spectacles*, Jouvet stated of Genet "'S'il est un auteur dont on puisse le rapprocher, c'est à la rigueur de Strindberg'" (1048).¹⁰⁴ Though Genet later claimed to wish for it to reflect the "bonhomie" of game-playing (*Comment Jouer «Les Bonnes»* 126), early productions emphasized the intensity

¹⁰³ Much like Strindberg's claims in the "Preface to Miss Julie," Genet discusses how objects can have an active force over people. He calls this understanding a "stage logic" (*Our Lady of the Flowers* 64) that is more truthful than the psychological motivations of realism. Genet writes "the presence of a huge army revolver at the back of a drawer was enough to dictate her attitude. This is not the first time that things have been the instigators of an act and must alone bear the fearful, though light, responsibility for a crime" (64). Material objects and circumstances motivate actions.

¹⁰⁴ "'If there is an author whom one can compare him to, it is to Strindberg's rigor'".

of Strindberg. The manuscript was originally titled *La Tragédie des confidentes* in reference to the conventional figure of the confidant in French neoclassical theatre, but Jouvet encouraged Genet to condense his highly stylized play into a more contemporary form. The final playscript achieves a greater resemblance to the hallucinatory acceleration of Strindberg's one-act tragedies than to the deliberate pace of the tragedies of Corneille or Racine.

Thematically, both *Miss Julie* and *The Maids* show the desires of the politically dispossessed. *The Maids* depicts the ceremony of two maids who imitate the composure of the woman who employs them. The grandiose gestures, grandiloquent speech, and props (jewels, gowns, glamorous lovers) that affirm Madame's superiority over her domestic staff are subjected to mimicry. The sisters Claire and Solange are keenly aware of the symbols that their social betters embrace to justify hierarchy. Nevertheless, rather than simply profaning what the dominant order holds sacred, they covet mastery as much as they want to destroy it. The sisters develop an obsessive relation to playacting humiliating scenes: one sister pretends to be Madame while the pretends to be her sister. Self-criticism punctuates hackneyed melodramatic speeches that are otherwise delivered with glee.

Though the playscript evolved,¹⁰⁵ the opening lines remained the same. A stage direction indicates that Claire should pose with her arm out (with “exaggeratedly tragic” gestures), declaring “Those gloves! Those eternal gloves!!” (35). The maid embodies the elevated, confident, and controlling body language of her social superior. As she attempts to raise herself to the idealized stability of the tableau, Claire decries the essential abjection of the servant’s

¹⁰⁵ Genet changed his plays in accordance to the practical needs of the theatre and his own developing tastes. See the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade *Théâtre complet* (146-160) for details about the changing playscripts. I have decided to look at Genet’s plays as they were written and performed in the late 1940’s, though I will reference other variants when appropriate.

rubber gloves. Claire and Solange crave identity, alternatingly wishing for pure, ethereal mastery and pure, material degradation. Genet explores difficult pleasures, aware of the sadomasochism of political and economic libidos.

The play introduces its primary device. Attempts to eternalize “true” mastery as well as “true” servitude through ceremony recur. The sisters compulsively attempt to feel themselves meld with their fantasies. Each sister wishes to strike a pose, thereby becoming an image endowed with significance recognized by both self and other. But the sisters break character, causing fantasy to dissolve into harshly fought competitions. Mastery remains elusive within their “performative” as well as their “real” interactions (if one hazards to distinguish between them). Their relationship is unsettlingly co-dependent not just due to their taboo, likely incestuous intimacy. Each maid is incomplete without the other, perverting the bourgeois stage’s standard of character.

A dreamlike logic drives the play’s forward-motion through successive ceremonies. In one such attempt to become an icon, Solange imagines a scene in which the sisters “take form” against Madame who oppressed them: “So I’ll finish up. Now, here are the two maids, the faithful servants. They’re standing in front of you. Despise them. Look more beautiful—we no longer fear you. We’re merged, enveloped in our fumes, in our revels, in our hatred of you. The mold is setting. We’re taking shape Madame. Don’t laugh—ah! Above all, don’t laugh at my grandiloquence (*The Maids* 46).

The sisters wish to “take form” or “take shape” in a tableau. This desire manifests in the sisters’ repetitive glances at themselves in mirrors. Claire shows satisfaction when looking at the slap mark on her face (from her sister’s strike), believing the blemish makes her a more beautiful image than ever (*The Maids* 45). Their concern with their own image causes resentments about

seeing themselves distorted in the “mirror” that each sister is of the other (61). Rather than the duo identifying as members of the same class or family, the sisters’ see in each other uncanny similarity as well as difference.

Collaborative acts of imagination create powerful images and identities, even if these products have short lives within the play’s reversals. Richly drawn fantasies allow the sisters to imbue themselves and their masters with hagiographic images: Madame, performed by Claire, will like a martyr follow her lover to prison in the white mourning dress of queens. Sometimes, Solange and Claire imagine they will achieve recognition outside role-playing, imagining that their crime will transform them into the “eternal couple of the criminal and the saint” (*The Maids* 61). Solange recollects that the sisters’ anonymous denunciation of Madame’s lover made all parties appear as if in a sentimental painting or a religious icon. Renarrating the past event in the present, Solange uses painterly detail to hypostasize the event into a faux timelessness:

Look, just look at how well she suffers. How she suffers in beauty. Grief transfigures her, doesn’t it? Beautifies her. When she learned that her lover was a thief, she stood up to the police. She exulted. Now she is forlorn and splendid, supported under each arm by two devoted servants whose hearts bleed to see her grief. Did you see it? Her grief sparkling with the glint of her jewels, with the satin of her gowns, in the glow of the chandelier. (57)

Ceremonies transfigure Madame into someone sacred. The sentimental tableau associates vision with idealization and intelligibility. However, each attempt to construct a stable relation overturns the prior, depriving each tableau of self-identity. Though the characters crave stability and recognition persistently, each episode differs in tone. Audiences remain off-balance.

In “Comment jouer «Les Bonnes»”, Genet explains “L’unité du récit naître non de la monotonie du jeu, mais d’une harmonie entre les parties très diverses, très diversement

jouées”¹⁰⁶ (126 *Théâtre complet*). Genet’s unity comes from a harmony of diverse devices. *The Maids* possesses a unique atmosphere that mixes irony with madness and cruelty. It enacts the rise and fall of servants typical of domestic tragedy, though its tone alternates between the tragic and comic poles of the grotesque.

Genet’s late prose, documenting his political participation, provides insight into his understanding of heroism. Genet’s theatre aims not to represent of living individuals as we see them—for they are too unstable to possess singular identity—but rather to create definitive, complete, or fabulous images (*images définitives, complètes, or fabuleuses*).

These images make recognition and identity possible, elevating the individual to the embodiment of a political community. In *Prisoner of Love*, Genet explains how the “image” of the hero surpasses the actual material being in importance:

When a man invents an image that he wants to propagate, that he may even want to substitute for himself, he starts by experimenting, making mistakes, sketching out freaks and other non-viable monsters that he has to tear up unless they disintegrate of their own accord. The operative image is the one that’s left after the person dies or withdraws from the world, as in the case of Socrates, Christ Saladin, Saint-Just and so on. They succeeded in projecting an image around themselves and into the future. It doesn’t matter whether or not the image corresponds to what they were really like: they manage to wrest a powerful image from that reality. (*Prisoner of Love* 302)

Death assists martyrs to wrest their totemic image from the mutability of life. One is not a hero while alive: mortal violence becomes means to cleanse away profane realities. The maids create “non-viable monsters” whose motley constitutions prohibit recognizable, and thus powerful, identity. The succession of the maids’ attempts accords with Genet’s notion that one must “tear

¹⁰⁶ “The unity of the story is not born in the monotony of the game, but in the harmony between the very diverse parts, very differently played.”

up" these half-living creations. Only total commitment to the stability of death can produce the "powerful" image.

Genet continues:

The theatre may disappear in its present form. It may already be threatened. The essence of theatre is the need to create not merely signs but complete and compact images masking a reality that may consist in absence of being. The void. To create the ultimate image he desires to project into a future no less absent than the present, every man is capable of supreme acts that will topple him into nothingness. (*Prisoner of Love* 302)

Heroism is a mask created by the persistence of names and images. Its glory need not—and more likely cannot—correspond to anything within past or present reality. Theatre exists to create the *l'image definitive*: an illusion of static identity. Genet states this "essence of theatre" is threatened in a disenchanted world of the technological reproduction of the visible. But theatrical artifice can sacralize ethical and political movements (like those led by Saladin or Christ). The image "fascinates" the viewer (302) independent from its truth or falsity. It needs not represent reality to exercise social or political influence.

According to Ahdaf Soueif, Genet viewed himself as a "subversive image-maker" for the forces of the Palestinian opposition and other political groups: "Genet was engaged upon a project at once more artful and more truthful. The Palestinians, he says, were no good at making images" (xvii). Genet sought to counterbalance Israel's media products that excite political fantasies among international audiences. But with his stress on absence, Genet's images rarely secure a substantial identity for heroism. Instead, Genet's reversals between coup and tableau suggest the latter has temporary use rather than lasting truth.

Genet showed skepticism toward any enduring symbols. Edmund White describes how after praising student radicals for their red and black flags in '68, "he warned that soon these flags would have to be torn down, since any symbol restricts people even as it exalts them"

(White 503). Only the fleetingly heroic image, one both enticing as well as hollow, could remain loyal to the belief in “nothing” within identity that the left takes as an axiomatic principle. Upon receiving Fidel Castro’s invitation to Cuba, Genet avowed “I would very much like to go, if it’s really a revolution according to my lights, that is, if there are no longer flags, because the flag as a sign of recognition, as an emblem around which people gather, has become a kind of theatricality that castrates, which causes death” (White 503). The theatrical tableau creates a group, allowing for self-recognition, sense of community, and recognition. But a politics of identity is not the sort of revolution Genet can fully endorse as its strength arises from death. Identity constricts living beings defined by absence, change, and impermanence.

In *The Maids*, the heroes imitate signs that produce social recognition. Yet the play produces a feeling of circularity. The maids have on countless times performed these ceremonies, summoning momentary spiritual feeling. This dynamic stuck Goldmann as apolitical, offering only fatalistic and compensatory solace. But such a reading ignores that the play concludes with a tableau, one posited as both powerfully capable as well as frailly fleeting. Genet’s maids succeed in wresting an image of the underclass’s strength from the void. The play “cuts the tableau,” in Barthes’s terms, through a maneuver more mad than well-reasoned. It concludes with a *coup de théâtre*.

Recalling Strindberg’s hypnotism, Claire possesses Solange, demanding that she in turn push Claire to suicide. Solange must repeat the coaxing words that Claire wants to hear. Spurred on by her own words, spoken through her sister’s mouth, Claire drinks the poison that neither sister had the strength to give Madame. Rather than both sisters facing prison due to their denunciation of Madame’s lover, Claire achieves true mastery over her sister, the circumstances that oppress her, and the penetration of the outside into her body. Death, eternal and unchanging,

will make her something recognizable and intelligible: she will gain the eternal fixedness of the tableau which will enslave her sister through fascination. Claire will exist forever in the tableau of the moment of suicide that is figured repeatedly as martyrdom (via immolation). Claire's psychic murder, paradoxically a suicide in Genet's play, brings an unfinished play to a close. This finish, arriving unexpectedly, fails to produce a cathartic sense of closure.

As Solange weakly protests the plan, Claire chooses powerful and potentially malevolent words despite her apparent self-sacrifice. Claire states "Solange, tu me garderas en toi" (*Théâtre complet* 163) and "but, Solange, you are immortal" (198) to steel Solange's nerves during the upcoming time of hardship in prison.¹⁰⁷ Claire will be inside Solange, depriving Solange of the interiority she desired but also increasing her strength to resist.

Claire dies, but the psychic murder really kills Solange. Solange will remain alive but servile to memory. She will be haunted by Claire and the "the hellish agony of their [dead maids'] names" (*The Maids* 100), as Solange declares in the play's closing spell-bound monologue. Claire, through her sister's words and the image of self-sacrifice, will become an idol inspiring strength in those living under economic exploitation and social humiliation. Psychic murder, the ultimate sign of domination, turns out to be a form of submission.

Claire orders Solange "I summon you to represent me [...] represent me in the world" (*The Maids* 97). Solange will exist as a sign of her dead sister. Her quest for interiority, self-possession, and self-mastery now is cut short. The liberatory struggle against the class of masters will not itself be free: Solange is possessed, drawn to politics not from rational choice but from more mysterious desires. Collective aesthetic practices can produce heroes out of humans. Solange feels unfamiliar strength after believing in martyrdom: this myth will assist her to

¹⁰⁷ "Solange, you will keep me inside you."

withstand the degradations of prison. In this bittersweet trade, death transforms into political efficacy through tenuous social belief.

In *Miracle of the Rose* (1966), a motif associating the tragic image with possession and fascination brings structure to the complex narrative reversals between fact and fiction and past and present. After repeated imprisonments, the semi-autobiographical narrator has begun to feel “disenchantment” (114) with the sexual and religious pleasures he had formerly been able to conjure from prison life. To endure the increasingly “painful torpor” of incarceration (28), the narrator gives himself over to fascination with a young prisoner who will soon die in a failed escape. While in a state of possession by the young man’s tragic “image”, the narrator reports “my chest swells, I breathe more quickly, my lips are parted, my bust feels as if it were straining toward the tragedy which the boy experienced, the rhythm of my circulation quickens, I live faster” (58). As a “spectator” who sympathetically identifies with the young criminal “tragedian” (58), the narrator feels reinvigorated to resist the profane and oppressive conditions that authorities use to break the underclass.¹⁰⁸

Fascination and possession complicate the boundary between self and other: the enraptured viewer of a tragedy (or of a painting of martyr’s death) strains to feel the same pains and glories of the hero. Yet *The Maids* goes further to show how identities are enmeshed. Attacking the other might be an attack on the self, as the play literalizes through the sisters’ roleplaying. *The Maids* suggests masters and servants cannot be recognized apart from through their interrelation, troubling the complacent beliefs that justify class hierarchy. When Solange

¹⁰⁸ “Indeed it seems that when tragedians, while performing, reach the heights of tragedy, their chests swell because of the rapidity of their breathing. The rhythm of their life is quickened. [...] the spectator, who is a victim of this art, feels similar movements within himself [...] He parts his lips, he breathes rapidly, he gets excited” (58).

instructs Claire to begin with the insults (the step that directly precedes their play-acted fight to the death), Claire declares:

Je hais les domestiques. J'en hais l'espèce odieuse et vile. Les domestiques n'appartiennent pas à humanité. Ils coulent. Ils sont une exhalaison qui traîne dans nos chambres, dans nos corridors, qui nous pénètre, nous entre par la bouche, qui nous corrompt. Moi, Je vous vomis! [...] Vous êtes nos miroirs déformants (191-192)¹⁰⁹

The hatred is not that servants are abject, but that the abjectness of the servants' *species* has already *penetrated* their masters. Servility is already inside the master, acquired by the accidental cannibalism that occurs in mutual interaction. Masters and servants exist within the property of the home that is nearly synonymous with the propriety of the bourgeois body. For those who crave identity, the tenuousness of social difference makes one want to retch. Solange highlights the mutability of social roles: "I've been a servant. Well and good. I've made the gestures a servant must make. I've smiled at Madame. I've bent down to make the bed, bent down to scrub the tiles, bent down to peel vegetables, to listen at doors, to glue my eye to keyholes! But now I stand upright. And firm" (92). The interiority of Madame has been spied upon and the gestures of servility have been performed. Now the oppressed class desires to pretend to a new role.

Masters and servants seem to only exist relative to one another, a mutual interdependence risks the notion of mastery and servility alike. Semiotic systems, systems of difference without positive terms, share much with social systems. Both are haunted by absence for Genet. Categories and roles only exist in opposition to one another rather than springing autochthonously from substantial differences. Reversals are always possible in such a view.

¹⁰⁹ "I loathe servants. A vile and odious breed, I loathe them. They're not of the human race. Servants ooze. They're foul effluvium drifting through our rooms and hallways, seeping into us, entering our mouths, corrupting us. I vomit you! [...] You're our distorting mirrors" (*The Maids* 86).

Despite class themes, Sartre warns of the corrupting influence of the play for a socialist politics and an existentialist ethics. It dangerously depicts human beings as possessing only “relative being” to the philosopher. Rather than securing identities for master and servant, action and performance spin in “increasingly rapid circular movement” (7). Sartre’s writing is powerful, yet his criticisms undermine the leftist critique of individualism:

As a woman in relationship to Monsieur, Madame has only *relative* being. As the maids’ mistress, she retains an absolute being. But the maids are relative to everything and everyone; their being is defined by absolute relativity. They are *others*. Domestics are pure emanations of their masters and, like criminals, belong to the order of the Other, to the order of Evil. (*Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr* 617)

Genet grants servants only status in the imagination, dreams, and recognition of others. He does not renounce this relativity through providing his characters a decision to create themselves as absolute beings. Instead, he allows his maids to luxuriate in their fantastic nature:

These specters are born of the dream of a master; murky to themselves, their feelings come to them from the outside. They are born in the sleeping imagination of Madame or Monsieur. Low, hypocritical, disagreeable and mean because their employers dream them that way, they belong to the “pale and motley race that flowers in the minds of decent people.” When he presents them before the footlights, Genet merely mirrors the fantasies of the right-minded women in the audience. Every evening five hundred Madames can sing out, “Yes, that’s what maids are like,” without realizing that they have created them, the way Southerners create Negroes. The only rebellion of these flat creature is that they dream in turn: they dream within a dream; these dreams dwellers, pure reflections of sleeping consciousness, use the little reality which this consciousness has given them to imagine that they are becoming the Master who imagines them. (617)

Genet displaces political topics into the personal, apolitical realm of “sleeping consciousness” where there is “little reality” (617). His maids are specters that merely haunt their masters and bourgeois audiences. The philosopher criticizes Genet for his illusionistic theatre. He claims that Genet’s fascinated audiences might lose themselves. Sartre wishes for an existentialist theatre of political decision in which ideas do not “come to them [characters] from the outside” (617). Genet does not strive for self-mastery, viewing it as bourgeois.

Sartre's claim that Genet's maids are "disturbing only in that they are dreams that dream of swallowing up their dreamer" is meant as criticism (617). However, could this insight signal Genet's value as political theatre? Though social realities do not take the stage in any straightforward sense, the bourgeois audience must confront their nightmare—that those who exist as their tools might wish to kill them—within the normally welcoming embrace of the artistic theatre. "Specters" that live as close as shadows want to achieve the mastery they have been taught to respect more than all else. Genet's play subjects viewers to fantasies that cannot be easily mastered. For Derrida, the specter's ability to make one question the difference between waking and dreaming might motivate on to pursue the seemingly impossible demands of justice, but Sartre sees in it only dispiriting ambiguity.

The whirligig (*tourniquet*) of appearances and roleplaying disturbs Sartre:

Thus, their [the servants'] truth is always elsewhere; in the presence of the Masters, the truth of a domestic is to be a fake domestic and to mask the *man* he is under a guise of servility; but, in their absence, the *man* does not manifest himself either, for the truth of the domestic in solitude is to play at being master. The fact is that when the Master is away on a trip, the valets smoke his cigars, wear his clothes and ape his manners. How could it be otherwise, since the Master convinces the servant that there is no other way to become a man than to be a master. A whirligig of appearances: a valet is a sometimes a man that plays at being a man; in other words, man who dreams with horror that he is becoming subman or a subman who dreams with hatred that he is becoming a man. (*Saint Genet* 619)

Despite the brilliance of his writing, Sartre hopes for a socialism that makes the absolute identity of the bourgeois subject universal. For Strindberg and Genet, the imitation of one's superiors produces instabilities that threaten social difference: theatricality and roleplaying should not be dispiriting to the left. The human being's capacity to vacillate wildly from master to servant grants imitation moral and political potential. Channeling Neoplatonism, Sartre writes "Evil is a Nothingness which arises upon the ruins of the Good" as a warning about *The Maids'* potential

to corrupt (625). Genet's theatre, exposing absence, scares Sartre for the same reason it could disturb political masters: it undermines desires for security and mastery. Even when Claire achieves Genet's definitive or ultimate image, Sartre notices nothing but slippery illusion: "in this pyramid of fantasies, the ultimate appearance de-realizes all the others" (624). Rejecting meaning in art and morality is not entirely removed from the political rejection of mastery. Genet would later insist "this is what it means to be the master: to determine the meaning of words, to assign to them or withdraw from them their moral import ("The Palestinians" 26).

Strindberg's quest to say something in poetry that could not yet be articulated in prose animates Genet's theatre. If it makes no univocal statement, does this still count as speech? Perhaps, if speaking is not limited to the visual metaphorics of clarity, light, recognition, and truth; insofar as theatre is not conceived merely as representation. Genet's political art invokes specters neither seen nor unseen: specters of class struggle that have haunted Europe since the time of Marx.

Haute Surveillance: Devouring our Heroes Together

Many thinkers have sought the origin of tragic theatre in sacrifice.¹¹⁰ The hero is great because he moves beyond the bounds of law; nevertheless, the hero suffers and is eliminated as warning to those who might also transgress. Sacrifice, in such a view, is on the side of scapegoat rituals in which the group creates a sense of uniformity through expulsion. Tragedy sacralizes the social structure by showing that nature and fate, rather than just political authorities, punish wrongdoers.

¹¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, Rene Girard, and Walter Burkert built upon a long tradition to produce their influential theories. Though scholars including Eli Rozik contest tragedy as a continuation of sacrifice, the connection holds so deeply in the modern imagination that it has mythological importance.

Genet's interest in sacrifice must be sought elsewhere. Genet sided with the ostracized, his theater celebrating imprisoned murderers (*Haute Surveillance*), sex workers and their visitors (*Le Balcon*), and the most dispossessed of Algeria's colonized population (*Les Paravents*). His political allies—the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Black Panthers, and the Red Army Faction—were likewise conceived of as criminal transgressors.

Genet imagines sacrificial rituals for subgroups, producing sacred images to contest those of dominant political communities. Yet Genet's sacrifices highlight a dynamic that often goes ignored in political debate. Rather than expelling an internal or external threat, Genet depicts communities that devour their own totems in the sacrificial feast. For Genet, communities commit violence against themselves in their attempts to create a uniform identity. The same mechanism that constitutes and secures the group also harms it, a dynamic Derrida refers to as autoimmunity (*Rogues* 63). *Deathwatch* concretizes this idea. The criminal subculture transforms a murderer into their totemic idol. Yet becoming an essence demands a sacralizing material death.

Green Eyes, the murderer, recognizes the fictional origins of his heroism, asking his cellmates “Can't you see that here we make up stories that can live only within four walls?” (*Deathwatch* 124). The fourth wall is absent: the audience of *Deathwatch* is brought intimately into the private ceremonies of three convicts. The trio's discussions circle around the same questions. Which convict in the prison is the true lord of it, possessing the spiritual force of a god?; whose crime is so great that it inspires fear and fascination?; who is strong enough to be sacrificed, and who is weak enough to worship and consume other men? Discussion gives rise to concepts to which there could be no object within material existence. A spiritual thirst animates their discussions and eroticism.

The two cellmates revere Green Eyes, telling stories about his upcoming execution. Like ancient Greeks sharing tales about their gods, Green Eyes is the object of erotically-charged veneration. His special status is proof that these criminals are not without values: they value the strength to oppose a society that constricts them. The penal system sacralizes otherwise unremarkable criminals.¹¹¹ The media coverage of criminals sets them apart as anti-heroes: hated yet alluring to upstanding citizens and fascinating to subcommunities. Societies prefer to represent their customs as emanating from the very laws of nature, as Marx's reification suggests. Following from the mythological belief in the naturalness of law, the break from human convention has a supernatural appearance. The criminal's power emanates not from material reasons like need but from the transcendent force of evil.

The prohibition against murder does not end killing but instead makes it sacred. Transcending the taboo that constrains profane behavior, a murderer is able to interact with the sovereign power over life and death. The brotherhood of thieves, an unruly bunch, can unite themselves in admiration for the murderer. As Durkheim explains, the ability to violate the taboo—thereby potentially unleashing sacred contagion and catastrophe—is the mark of the priest or holy man (of which the murderer is a demonic double). Yet despite his holy status, Green Eyes knows himself to not be wholly strong. Admitting in an introspective moment that the murder was done as if by accident—including a gag in which the hyper-masculine prisoner attempts to run backwards in time to undo his crime (*Deathwatch* 131)—he has grown skeptical of his reputation. Social alchemy, the process by which a group forges its own “truth”, has

¹¹¹ Durkheim explains that negative rites (such as prohibition and taboo) sanctify people and objects: “By definition, sacred beings are set apart” (303). These strategies create the fiction that some people and things belong to spiritual rather than material life.

transmuted Green Eyes into an idol of eternal strength that rings false the longer his vigor dissipates amidst the conditions of prison life.

The following motivates the drama's conflict. The sacred, that which stands apart from the profane world of work and only encountered in moments of ritual effervescence, is brought into contact with the quotidian life of incarceration.¹¹² Rather than the ritually-prescribed passage between them, the audience of *Haute Surveillance* watches the prolonged coexistence of two incompatible modes of experience. Genet's theatrical ceremony destabilizes both categories. Hero worship replaces religious worship, but the unfixed norms of modern communities make spiritual products fleeting.

The sect that worships the counter-cultural hero peddles in glorification in Green Eyes' view. The theater, where illusion becomes real only to fizzle away, is like a church or this cell-sized chapel to infamy. The chains binding Green Eyes' feet, at times reminiscent of Prometheus, also suggest the potential he is a defeated specimen. His need for comfort from his girlfriend leads him to ask the literate Lefranc to pen letters, though the latter wishes to push him back into a position of isolation from human inconstancy. Lefranc is at times disgusted with Green Eyes: "He's too much a coward to leave her [...] His life's starting all over again" (*Deathwatch* 119). Rather than gloriously leaving the material world, Lefranc feels anger that the accursed murderer wants to renew his life.

Refusing to abandon his hero completely, Lefranc hopes to separate Green Eyes from earthly weakness, declaring to Maurice that the letters he has written have sought to sunder the bond between Green Eyes and his girlfriend. Lefranc seeks to write Green Eyes into an anti-hero.

¹¹² For Durkheim this collision of sacred and profane would threaten logic itself: "It [the difference between sacred and profane] is absolute. In the history of human thought, there is no other example of two categories of things as profoundly differentiated or as radically opposed to one another" (Durkheim 36).

In response, Green Eyes says with defeat “She needs a man, a real one, and I’m a ghost already. I should have known how to write. I ought to have made fine phrases. But I’m a fine phrase” (*Deathwatch* 123). Listening as how other inmates turn him into myth, Green Eyes states that he is turning into a ghost. He watches as his flesh and feeling disappear; others transform him into a “belle phrase”. With the loneliness of the sacrificed, he notes these fine phrases often feel alien to his lived experience: “I’m all alone, all alone. [...] Too wilted by the cell. Too pale. Too wilted” (124). With resignation, he does not initially become jealous when Lefranc claims the Snowball has surpassed him in sovereignty, instead maturely stating “in prison, no one’s a king” (108).

But Green Eyes bounces from bouts of resentment to moments of invigoration. On one occasion, he declares “The prison is mine and I am its master” (*Théâtre complet* 112) like an omnipotent Sun King of the criminal underworld. He affirms his power to murder his cellmates (121); to determine sovereignty whom to let live and whom to make die.¹¹³ He cites his future execution as proof of his special status: “I remain the master. Fate will say the knife... but the executor, it's me” (95). In the 1988 edition, he even claims “Green Eyes is in the process of reorganizing himself. I am rebuilding myself” (20), feeling the generative force that emanates from his moniker through third-person self-address. *Deathwatch* shows how roleplaying creates authority, though this authority is subject to doubt.¹¹⁴

The uneducated Green Eyes is often a spiritual disappointment to his cellmates. Of the two, Maurice develops a libidinal passion for Green Eyes. But he notes to his friend “you have

¹¹³ As Michel Foucault notes, classical sovereignty’s power was to let some live and to make others die (Foucault 241).

¹¹⁴ *The Balcony* shows the possibility of imitating the mystical sovereignty of judge, bishop, and general; nevertheless, no one ever achieves lordliness apart from the recognition of others (a powerful force). The counter-revolution installs those who mimic authorities in sexual play to fill vacant positions of political authority, the world none the wiser.

lost your force, your fine criminal force" (*Deathwatch* 148). Force, associated with the totem, has begun to wane as Green Eyes becomes an object of physical rather than spiritual desire. However, Lefranc does not experience complete spiritual disenchantment. He is a veritable monk in the world of hero-criminal worship. His mattress is stuffed with newspaper clippings of France's most infamous killers: Maurice mockingly asks if Lefranc says "mass to them" (128). Lefranc desires his object of veneration to suffer for two vacillating reasons: sometimes because Green Eyes disappoints his spiritual expectations, and other times because the sacrificial guillotine can transform Green Eyes into an idea separate from the world of things. Reminiscent of members of totemic religions, Lefranc's heroes are drawn upon his body. The word avenger is scrawled across his chest to celebrate murderers who have earned the epithet. Yet Green Eyes notes the difficulty of being worshipped: "Avenger is a title. It's not an easy one to bear" (153). Lefranc brags that he is willing to sacrifice himself, aching for the sacrality about which Green Eyes and Maurice have increasing doubts (114).

Lefranc begins to idolize another murderer who lives in different cell. Snowball is glimpsed but briefly, Lefranc declaring him to be the new king of the prison to the anger of Maurice (85). Contact has revealed Green Eyes as inconstant, Lefranc looking to uncouple Green Eyes from his profane existence or, failing that, to replace him with different god seen only in moments of ecstasy. These attempts to draw heroism out of Green Eyes cause the murderer to swing wildly: sometimes he believes the myth of his own superior essence and at other times he feels like an imposter. For totemic believers "identity in name is presumed to be identity in nature" (Durkheim 134), but the heroic moniker Green Eyes now seems like a signifier without signified. At his lowest moment, he speaks nostalgically about his simpler nickname from the days before the murder.

Investigating his idols, Lefranc wishes to find the force that exists beyond the symbols that signify its existence. He commits minor crimes to draw closer to those he worships, wishing to live among them in prison. But getting close to Green Eyes, a person going through outbursts of regret, fear, and bravado, conflicts with his image. Frustration with Green Eyes's failure to live up to expectations causes Lefranc to suggest that he himself is the true heroic martyr. Maurice sees the desire for social recognition undergirding Lefranc's hope for personal spiritual apotheosis: "You're jealous! [...] You'd have liked for them to talk about you all over France like they talked about Green Eyes" (*Deathwatch* 120). As fighting within the cell accelerates, the question of who is strong enough to be sacrificed comes to the forefront. At one point, Lefranc yells "I'm big enough to nourish the whole cell" (*Théâtre complet* 95). Maurice insults Lefranc: "You nourish yourself on others" (119). Particularly, Maurice explains that Lefranc feeds on Green Eyes's heroism, Lefranc is a cannibalistic worshipper hungry for sustenance.

The play concludes abruptly after Lefranc's unexpected murder of Maurice "for the glory" of it; "for no reason" other than to deny his own relation to the world (*Théâtre complet* 120).¹¹⁵ But his act does not make him a glorious equal to his mythic heroes but instead a fraudulent imitation. He is another forsaken person who can no longer fully believe in sacred guilt. In his attempt to leap from the cult of worshipers to the fraternity of the gods, Lefranc discovers that those same gods could only exist in the estimation of a community; a community that he is now separate from his choice to commit a capital crime. Lefranc concedes in the final

¹¹⁵ Strindberg's formula is evident: *Deathwatch* is one-act play that depicts the battles for dominance between two characters in a room; others fail to stop the tragic collision that leads to psychological murder. Thematically, Strindberg's 1889 *Pariah* features two men isolated in a house who admit their crimes. Rather than forming a community based on shared transgression, the men attempt to master one another.

line “I really am all alone!” (*Deathwatch* 121), though he still desperately asserts that isolation is a sign of status.¹¹⁶

The friend-enemy distinction, held by reactionary thinkers like Carl Schmitt as central politics, presupposes that the in-group is primarily threatening to the outgroup. However, Genet’s play problematizes the complacency of this sort of common-sense thinking. As the most *in* of anyone in the in-group, the murderer is the height of criminality among the community of criminals. He is their totem. But this distinction makes him no safer than the hated outsider, though his death will be described in the hushed tones of martyrdom. Paradoxically, the Guard, chummy with Green Eyes, speaks of the goal of his profession to Lefranc as “the opposite of their [prisoners’] friend. I’m not saying their enemy. Think about it” (*Deathwatch* 140). This enigma unravels once one considers that Genet depicts communities as equally dangerous to friends as to enemies. Green Eyes echoes the guard’s sentiment later in one version of the play.

Genet’s *Funeral Rites* makes the dynamics of cannibalistic communion more explicit. The homosexual criminal narrator writes a novel to glorify his dead lover Jean, a young communist resisting the Nazi occupation. Mixing fantasy with memory, the narrator takes pleasure in betraying his lover by spinning perverse tales, many about the hated Nazi-boyfriend of the ardent young communist’s mother. After the death of the beloved, only an imaginary bond is possible. The narrator fantasizes about eating the young man he worshiped, calling him “totemic food” (*Funeral Rites* 248).¹¹⁷ The narrator explains that it is only through consuming can the funeral rite be accomplished:

¹¹⁶ The final edition (1988) grants the final line to a chief guard, not present in earlier versions, who states that everything was visible through peephole. It was a “beautiful tragic sequence” in his estimation (*Théâtre complet* 32). From what perspective does this strange play, which leaves so much from view, seem beautiful?

¹¹⁷ As Edith Wyschogrod notes, “Genet’s work fastens on totemic cannibalism such that the text itself acquires liturgical force” (109).

I can eat the flesh of the tenderest body without danger of remorse, so that I can assimilate it to mine, can take the best morsels from the fat with my fingers keep them in my mouth, on my tongue [...] and know that their vitals will become the best of myself. (247)

The desire to devour the person that is idealized reveals both love and hostility. Mourning his beloved, Genet appropriates his memory to preserve him and bring him nearer. So too does eating the totemic animal conceal a wish to grow closer to that which remains absent (the gods and political leaders with whom we have intimate, yet fictional bonds). Endocannibalism, in which a member of the ingroup is eaten, reveals a desire to preserve as well as destroy.¹¹⁸

But far from just the eccentric ceremony of a mourning lover, Genet constructs the consumption of “privileged flesh” as much larger cannibalistic communion, one through which multitudes can “belong to France”:

My body was supple, I was preparing it to receive the totemic food. [...] I waited for Jean, who was dead and naked, to bring me, on his outstretched arms, his own corpse. [...] The blacks were still playing the bamboo flute and the tom-tom. Finally, Jean appeared from somewhere or other, dead and naked. Walking on his heels, he brought me his corpse, which was cooked to perfection. [...] I sat and ate. I belonged to the tribe. And not in a superficial way by virtue of my being born into it, but by the grace of an adoption in which it was granted me to take part in the religious feast. Jean D’s death thus gave me roots. I finally belong to the France that I cursed and so intensely desired. (*Funeral Rites* 248)

The episode, in which humanism has gone mad, is perversely unifying. The homosexual outcaste, a Nazi, an anti-Nazi communist French resistance fighter, France, and an African tribe are all united through “the beauty of sacrifice”. Totemic impulses are something common to both outcastes and national communities, and communion could unite these groups. Though outside the fantasies of a writer disloyal to identity, each of these communities might not recognize the similarities of their religious feasts. *The Blacks* similarly ends with a cannibalistic rite.

¹¹⁸ The ways people attempt to get closer to those they love often destroy the object of affection: this is the consuming love about which Genet so often wrote.

For Genet, idealization and violence are shared passions. These tendencies are uniting in addition to destructive. Genet does not ironize religion but rather he imitates it, reconceptualizing in whom the sacred can be revealed. This ideality possesses an attraction even more alluring due to its contrast with the destitute realities of oppressed communities. Genet owes his fame to bourgeois audiences eager for piquant exoticism, but his work does not merely romanticize the socially-divergent. His enchantments are shot through with absence, impermanence, and illusion. Genet's ceremonial coups invoke the dangerous aspects of spirituality: the demonic left sacred powers capable of both gifts and betrayal.

Eventually, Genet turned his attention away from art to political action, spending his later years living among the P.L.O. But his interest in paramilitaries remained ambiguous. He was in many ways a parasite who gained sustenance from his host. Genet stated that “The day the Palestinians establish themselves, I'll no longer be at their side. The day that the Palestinians become a nation like any other nation, I'll no longer be a part of it” (Wischenbart 245). Transgression attracts Genet so long as it remains taboo—thus related to sacralization and its unruly contagiousness—and not the first step towards a new standard of propriety.

Edward Said notes a resistance to the authority of any group:

all social movements normally harden once they have achieved success. Genet celebrates the betrayal [...] not only because it guarantees the prerogatives of freedom and beauty for an individual in perpetual revolt, but also because its preemptive violence is a way of forestalling what revolutions in course never admit, that their first great enemies—and victims—after they triumph are likely to be the artists and intellectuals who supported the revolution out of love... (81)

Political investment is somewhat anti-social in such a view. Rather than rushing to be devoured by the revolution, one helps enough only to defer its victory, prolonging the glamorous suffering of both friends and enemies. Genet believed that transgressive leftwing politics are necessary to

create sacred beauty, if not always justice. That alone is enough to motivate participation. His thought rejects a rationalized and profane politics that forecloses miracles or wagers.

Cults of Genet

Genet has become a totem to various intellectual communities. His image unites new moral and political sensibilities that question the assumptions of Western political thought. Genet-the-totem still exerts influence through his followers among deconstruction and queer theorists committed to the anti-social thesis.¹¹⁹

Genet's cannibalistic communion might be the new feast for groups whose hungers are unsatisfied. Maybe men must eat men to imagine what it is to be human? Lévi-Strauss explains that cannibalism:

entails intentionally introducing into the bodies of human beings parts or substances from other human bodies. The notion of cannibalism, thus exorcised, will now appear rather commonplace. Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw the origin of social life in the sentiment that impels us to identify with others. And after all, the most simple means to identify others with oneself is to eat them. (88)

Counterintuitive methods must be devised to draw closer to the beloved ideal of man, a figure who has thus far resisted material instantiation. The revolutionary humanisms of modernity can be seen in such a light, so often devouring their young. So too might "anti-humanist" philosophies, acknowledging the anti-social, strive for a new means to pursue humanism covertly, as other strategies have failed.

For Derrida, Genet favors communities of criminals because they hold in common betrayal rather than fidelity. Their communities are less talented at being communities, always open to divergence due to their autoimmune and self-cannibalizing qualities. But Derrida, though

¹¹⁹ Kadji Amin's *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* details the "disturbing attachment" that the queer academic community has with the romantic outlaw image of Genet. Amin ascribes "subcultural iconicity" to Genet (1).

claiming to move beyond good conscience, spent the latter portion of his career demystifying sacrificial rituals.¹²⁰ For Derrida, ethics and politics demand one attempt to transcend a definition of man as a “meat eating and capable of sacrifice” (“Force of Law” 246); his work calls readers to the admittedly impossible task of moving beyond the “affinity between carnivorous sacrifice, at the basis of our culture and our law, and all the cannibalisms, symbolic or not, that structure intersubjectivity” (247).¹²¹

The radical critique of community is a valuable consequence of engagement with Genet. Yet Genet’s work does not have strictly desacralizing intentions, enchanting domains in which work and habit threaten consuming passions. He affirms that all communities produce the flickering beauty that alone redeems the pain of living with others. So long as revolutionaries exist without being normalized, sacred experience will still shimmer with a life-affirming attraction. But this invigorating force is complicit in the deaths that manufacture it, explaining Genet’s wariness toward any political projects and even his own political tableaus.

Artists defy the limits of prosaic description, once again becoming prophets. Genet’s attempt to say something poetically that could not be said in prose makes heroic failure a possibility. Along leftist lines, prophecy and heroism can only be created through fickleness of social alchemy. Genet’s tableaus might do something to strengthen those who consume them, but his rituals also approach the absent, risking what audiences think they possess.

Rather than a pedagogical theatre sure of its own methods, Genet, like Strindberg, exposes the complacent vanity of masters to terrifying reversals. Approaching the paradox of

¹²⁰Derrida’s *The Death Penalty* discusses Genet’s depiction of the “quasi theater” (28) and “quasi salvation” (33) of execution during the first session of the seminar. Derrida emphasizes his own childhood initiation into the “worldwide” thinking of sacrifice: he remembers media representations of the same execution that Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers* memorializes (29).

¹²¹Community must be disavowed according Derrida, though he attempts to claim its self-destructive elements (which are conducive to the event) with his thinking of “auto-co-immunity”.

who would educate the educators, Strindberg and Genet dwell with the mad quest for the ignorant to play and create new roles. The quixotic and perhaps impossible dreams of the left were not perceived as evidence to refute radicalism but rather the proof of its value.

Chapter IV.

Bad Actor: Amiri Baraka's *Second-Rate* Tragedies

Amiri Baraka (born LeRoi Jones) has long been closely associated with political theatre. Jones assumed unofficial leadership of the Black Arts Movement as founder of Harlem's Black Arts Repertory Theatre (BART), becoming a controversial public figure during the tumultuous 1960's. Circumstances dictated his notoriety exceed the limits normally constraining an American artist. Great Society-era social investment briefly financed Baraka's radical performances that advocated "arm yourself or harm yourself" to black America, stoking the culture wars. Though never deeply invested in Islam, he assumed the name Imamu Amear Baraka in 1967 to signal his role as a cultural leader. Dropping the title of Imamu— carrying connotations of spiritual leadership unfitting for a Marxist— he was known as Amiri Baraka until his 2014 death.

In his discussions with critics, Baraka divided his career into four stages: Beat poetry and bohemianism; a "transitional period" from 1961-1965 in which his work demonstrates undefined political awareness; Black Nationalism from 1965-1974 during which he viewed his efforts as direct political action; and "Third World Marxism" from 1974-2014 in which dogmatic attitudes replaced the daringness that once excited critics. Baraka's theatrical work from 1965 onward displayed partisan tendencies, dismayed many who celebrated the younger Jones as an exemplar of Greenwich Village's experimentalism. Baraka's self-conscious avowal of propagandistic art partially eroded his literary and theatrical reputation.¹²²

Some have noted that this teleological narrative fails to account for Baraka's complexity. Jerry Watts's monograph *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* develops

¹²² Samy Azouz's "Black Theatre and Propaganda: Amiri Baraka's Adherence to the Negro Problem and Defense of the Question of Labor" describes Baraka's positive views of propagandistic art.

this argument, shining light on Baraka's complicated legacy. Watts's study will be a touchstone in this chapter: its contextualization of Baraka within larger debates and cultural memory remains unsurpassed. Watts sees his own work as in part polemical, depicting Baraka as a representative of some of the dead ends (hypocrisy, irrationality, and essentialism) pursued by black intellectuals. I hope to provide a redemptive reading of Baraka's perceived shortcomings.

The flaws of periodization appear regarding any author. However, in the case of Baraka, periodization shows both its appeal and its poverty. Baraka's work ranges from the erudite lyricism of *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* to the vulgar socialist realism of *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to The Means of Production?*. Not only did Baraka create diverse forms of art, his political participation and writings could not long avoid self-contradiction. Without dividing his career in stages, it is difficult to see such differing works and actions as the product of the same man.

Nevertheless, Baraka's narrative of an apolitical Beatnik becoming a responsible Marxist belies what was a less consistent progression, as Watts argues. Baraka was not just a man of the theatre, but also a deeply theatrical artist and political actor, prone to exorbitant gestures, shocking declarations, and unexpected reversals.¹²³ I argue that the theatricality of Baraka—observers never entirely sure when he was pretending and when he was not—was a consistent inconsistency that destabilized traditional categories in the way that actors have long caused panic. Rather than dismissing him as politically unaccountable, Baraka's alleged hypocrisy and irrationalism were part of a much larger project to displace rationality—so long an ideologically

¹²³ His removal as Poet Laureate of New Jersey in 2001 was the result of the poem "Somebody Blew Up America" in which he justifies the September 11 attacks (and engages in anti-Semitism). This episode was quite typical for Baraka, as Naila Keleta-Mae's "Amiri Baraka: A Lifetime of Saying the Unsayable" explains.

instrument used to justify white racial superiority—as the sole legitimate dimension of political engagement. This limited notion of the political privileges the voices of those atop the social hierarchy whose norms have long been the standard by which reasonableness is measured.¹²⁴

This chapter highlights two tendencies of Baraka's work that are often overlooked. First, Baraka's work was laden with political concerns from the outset, particularly coalescing around the types of analysis and rhetorical techniques of the left. Even 1964's "Leroi Jones Talking," his first declaration of Black Nationalism, contains critique of modern capitalism. His scholarly work during his "pre-political" phases showed considerable affinity with the Marxian critical and literary traditions. The sophisticated socio-historical analysis evident in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* indicate that his conversion to Marxism was not a radical shift but rather a foregrounding.¹²⁵

Secondly, Baraka's art has been deemed politically irresponsible for its deeply theatrical tendencies. If the Western Tradition defines action and speech as properly political only insofar as they emanate from reason, Baraka's provocative attempts to disquiet rather than to communicate were doomed to appear unaccountable. Responsible political action, emanating from personal decision, does not resemble the actor's emotionality and repetition of another's words. Baraka referenced an anecdote in which an African American professor at Howard

¹²⁴ My argument is indebted to recent discourses concerning the political resistance of minoritarian authors. But even earlier, Lloyd W. Brown's 1974 "High and Crazy Niggers: Anti-Rationalism in LeRoi Jones" attempted to redeem accusations of irresponsibility that dogged Baraka. Brown argues the Baraka's madness was a "reasoned anti-rationalism which arises from a general skepticism about the scientific rationalism that has become a sacred cow in Western societies" (1-2).

¹²⁵ Scholarship often portrays Baraka's leftism as a detour from questions of racial injustice. However, Baraka's interest in class politics was long-standing. His undesirable discharge from the United States Air Force for suspected Communist inclinations in 1957 was not exclusively McCarthy-esque projection: Baraka's FBI file reveals early ties to political radicalism ("F.B. Eyes Digital Archive"). His 1960 trip to Cuba and subsequent publication of "Cuba Libre" made him one of the first prominent American defenders of the Castro regime. The Communist Party of the United States even offered Baraka the editorship of their literary magazine in 1963, eleven years before his "conversion" to Marxism

University disapprovingly commented that black music, often using European instruments without respecting existing standards, showed much “bad taste” (“The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’” 126). Taking what he saw as the greater force of black music as a model, Baraka cultivated this bad taste, repeating existing forms in ways that compromised their propriety.¹²⁶

Baraka acted out the paradoxes of African American identity rather than suppressing them. Baraka often discussed Dubois’s notion of double consciousness as a conceptual tool: identity, supposedly singular, makes itself unavoidably multiple to black Americans who must see and perform themselves through multiple cultural perspectives.¹²⁷ Since trying to master the performance of rationality would draw criticisms and accusations that he was only pretending, Baraka played the role America wrote for him; that of a brutish black man. But he played this role poorly (“second-rate” in his terms), demonstrating a political insightfulness. The remainder of this chapter will show how Baraka’s politico-aesthetics shares similarities with the interventions of Genet and Strindberg, making the generally-acknowledged resemblances between their tragedies far from superficial coincidence.

Interrupting Epic

This section will look closely at several essays written in 1963-64 about language, representation, and philosophy, attempting to elucidate the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Baraka’s work. A brief reading of the chapter “Sound and Image” from Baraka’s highly experimental novel *The System of Dante’s Hell* will serve as an additional resource.

¹²⁶ Jonas Barish’s notion of the antitheatrical prejudice explains how theatricality has been nearly synonymous with bad taste in the Western tradition.

¹²⁷ Patrick Roney argues that Baraka’s black identity is a “performative act, and as such the ‘essence’ of this tradition-if such terms still apply- is revealed as performance” (425).

The essay “Expressive Language” contains little concrete political content, preferring instead abstraction about language, culture, and art. The essay begins:

Speech is the effective form of a culture. Any shape or cluster of human history still apparent in the conscious and unconscious habit of groups of people is what I mean by culture. All culture is necessarily profound. The very fact of its longevity, of its being what it is, *culture*, the epic memory of practical tradition, means that it is profound. (190)

Baraka conceives of language as the repository of culture and history. Its forms preserve and give duration and relative consistency to a culture: language is the “epic memory” that makes a culture possible.

A culture, however, is not unitary. Despite possessing duration, achieved through repetition of its speech, differences occur and proliferate. Baraka explains that “all cultures communicate exactly what they have, a motley of experience” (“Expressive Language” 196). “The multiplicity of influences” cultures have on one another ensures constant changes (190). The interactions between these durable yet changing cultures are sites of strangeness and creativity: one language’s epic disrupting another does not panic Baraka. He writes “the reaction or interaction of one culture on another can produce a social context that will extend or influence any culture in many strange directions” (190).

Baraka introduces an example of what he later calls “the multiplicity of different definitions that fit” (“Expressive Language” 195). He discusses the change of a word’s meaning over time, highlighting an example charged with leftist attitudes:

Social also means *economic*, as any reader of nineteenth-century European philosophy will understand. [...] Money does not mean the same thing to me it must mean to a rich man. I cannot, right now, think of one meaning to name. [...] Even as simple term of the English language, *money* does not possess the same meanings for the rich man as it does for me, a lower-middle-class American, albeit of laughably “aristocratic” pretensions. (191)

Words, rather than neutral, have “*power*” that interests Baraka (192). Baraka explains “the words themselves become, even informally, laws” that make certain “fantasies realities” (192). Fantasy becoming reality (in other words, reification) is not usually a movement of emancipation. These fantasies belong to privileged groups.

Whether a group’s definition is accepted (Baraka refers to this symbolic power as ““pull””) is a matter of great importance: “every word we use *could* mean something else [...]” And in ‘pluralistic’ America, one should always listen very closely when he is being talked to” (“Expressive Language” 195). Baraka explains:

It is certainly the meaning of words that are most important, even if they are no longer consciously acknowledged, but merely, by their use, trip a familiar lever of social accord. To recreate instantly the understood hierarchy of social, and by doing that, cultural, importance. (193)

Simply using words recreates the power dynamics that suffuse language. In reference to colonialism and chattel slavery, Baraka suggest how certain definitions of words—repositories of their speaker’s perspectives— are excluded even within liberal pluralism. Language is produced in a social environment of division and hierarchy: the advantaged group determines the “correct” usage of terms.

For Baraka, it is the poet who uses words differently. The poet should restore the sense that “words could mean something else,” thus performing an act with political force. Poetry can disrupt mutually-reinforcing relationships between social hierarchy and semiotic structure.

Despite language being a site of open-ended contestation, Baraka quips “but we still need definitions, even if there already are many. The dullest men are always satisfied that a dictionary lists everything in the world” (“Expressive Language” 194). Rather than using words correctly like reactionary dictionary-lovers, he suggests speaking improperly to produce “new definitions”. Baraka writes:

being told to “speak proper,” meaning that you become fluent in the jargon of power, is also a part of not “speaking proper”. That is, the culture which desperately understands that it does not ‘speak proper,’ or is not fluent with the terms of social strength, also understands somewhere that its desire to gain such fluency is done at a terrifying risk. (196)

Promptings to speak grammatically conceal a danger: the participation in one’s own oppression. The black artist cannot speak properly and be understood without ceasing to be either black or an artist; a troubling realization. It is this quandary that motivates Baraka’s “second-rate” and “bad taste” transgressions.

Baraka’s thinking in this essay indicates that blackness exists as the repeating performance of certain types of speech and customs. The loss of black speech would cause the loss of the black community. Without the ability to introduce their own words and definitions, black people will not grow or change. Instead, they would be frozen into the categories favored by the dominant society. For black people, to abandon a thinking of blackness would not deliver a new post-metaphysical age but instead trap minority groups in the prison of white language.

Baraka’s *The System of Dante’s Hell* is a lyrical and fluid work, a highpoint of his early experimentalism. In 1965, having become a Black Nationalist, Baraka added a new final chapter “Sound and Image”. By his own words, Baraka adds this conclusion to show the errors of his previous interpretation of political and artistic life; his views were those of “a black man unfocused on blackness” (158). This new chapter has been read as the embrace of an essentialist notion of blackness that decides to return home after the hell of life under white definitions. It is said that the narrator vows to find the true language of black experience: one that corresponds to psychical, political, and even metaphysical realities

However, Baraka’s poetic conclusion remains open-ended. Echoing a great deal of European literature (Aristotle, Sartre, Joyce) in his disavowal of white influence, Baraka writes with anguish “What is hell? Your definitions. / I am and was a social animal. Hell is definable

only in those terms. I can get no place else; it wdn't exist" (*The System* 158).¹²⁸ For Baraka, hell is life under other people's definitions, yet for the "social animal" there is no other place that could exist. The return to blackness has wrongly been called a secure and essentialist homecoming for Baraka, who instead understood experience as an impossible journey.¹²⁹ Baraka continues:

Hell is actual, and people with hell in their heads. But the pastoral moments in a man's life will also mean a great deal as far as his emotional references. One thinks of home, or the other "homes" we have had. And we remember w/ love those things bathed in a soft black light. The struggles away or toward this peace is Hell's function" (159).

Hell is ubiquitous and painful. It cannot be easily escaped. Struggle in art and politics heads toward or away from peace rather than achieving wholeness. Home, always in fact "homes," achieves comfort only through nostalgia's "soft black light". Identity achieves itself only in the literary mood of the "pastoral" rather than in actual fact. As Roney explains, racial identity is a "homelessness" which is "affirmed as a fundamental condition"; the black "tradition is renewed and recreated" in Baraka's text (425). His art and politics at this stage affirm the tragic impossibility of unity, community, and identity, but he still affirms the importance of struggling in pursuit of these aims.

The worst possibility would be to surrender to white institutions and definitions. He describes "hell in the head" as:

The torture of being the unseen object, and, the constantly observed subject. The flame of the social dichotomy. [...] The dichotomy of what is seen and taught and desired opposed to what is felt. Finally, God, is simply a white man, a white "idea," in this society, unless we have made some other image which is stronger, and can deliver us from the salvation of our enemies. (*The System* 158)

¹²⁸ Baraka cites Joyce's exploration of Irishness as an example of what good Black writing might look like in 1963's "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'". The allusions to Aristotle's *zoon politikon* and Sartre *Huis clos* are obvious.

To be black existing within white language is to have the worst of all worlds. One is an object but not truly seen, and one is an agent but always under surveillance. The transcendental signifier that serves to enforce the lie that the words and definitions currently used reflect metaphysical realities is God, “simply another white man,” that will be suffered by black people until “we have made some other image which is stronger” (158). Baraka advocates contesting the definitions and images of the dominant society, the exemplar of which is the interruption of English and European musical forms with those used in slave communities. The poet must craft a stronger, rather than truer, image to aid black people in the struggle against oppression.

Hybridity or détournement, rather than essentialism,¹³⁰ is the paradigm of this “other image”. Baraka in his 1984 autobiography explains in the following terms:

But how strange is the human mind that is can receive all kinds of things from all kinds of places [...] Like the African slaves worshipping Catholic saints, yet Saint Michael and Saint Stephen, when you get up close to the slaves’ renderings of them, have tiny cuts [...] The cuts speak of another world, another culture and language and life. (*The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* 49)

Rather than only advocating for black icons, Baraka has another side in which European forms are ruptured by the “cuts” of black culture. In his tragedies, Baraka is more interested in this cutting (or perhaps the coups) of European forms than idealizing tableaus. Black art, in this tragic mode, aims to disrupt dominant idealizations that marginalize the viewpoints of other groups.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Houston Baker’s criticism of the Black Arts Movement hinges on the latter’s purported essentialism that repeats the less attractive tendencies of Western thought. Baraka undoubtedly did much to invite such an interpretation, but it’s possible to explore other dimensions of his varied career.

¹³¹ Should the “black” image and definitions grow dominant, they would be capable of the worst elements of the bourgeois order, the charge the mature Baraka would later level against his middle Black Nationalist period.

The essay “Hunting is not Those Heads on the Wall” echoes many of the same concerns. Baraka attacks the reifications that naming and artistic artifacts often produce.¹³² Baraka declares the importance of the motion of the “*verb process*” (198) over “nominalization” (199). The process of thinking is superior to artistic or intellectual products. He continues “the academic Western mind is the best example of the substitution of artifact worship for the lightning awareness of the art process. [...] But the process itself is the most important quality because it can transform and create, and it's only form is possibility. The artifact, because it assumes one form, is only that particular quality and idea” (197-198). Artistic form should make possibility its “only form,” obstructing its own completion. The positive aspects of art—its production of possibilities without finalization—is apparent in the actor; a craftsman whose substancelessness is a virtue rather than a failing.¹³³

Baraka states “the academician, the aesthete, are like deists whose specific corruption of mysticism is to worship things, thinking that they are God” (“Hunting” 198). Worshiping words and their current definitions is a form of commodity fetishism and superstition. The title of the essay — “Hunting is not Those Heads on the Wall”— criticizes art that violently hypostasizes objects of experience. Such artworks share similarities with hunters who put emphasis on trophies rather than the pursuit.

Instead, Baraka embraces of the “zoom” of the kinetic process of verbs:

If we describe a man by his life we are making him a verb, which is the only valid method since everything else is too arbitrary. The clearest description of now is

¹³² Baraka espouses his own brand of his friend Charles Olson’s views. Baraka’s esteem for the avant-garde poet continued at all stages of his career, even when he disavowed white art as a matter of principle, as Lisa Siraganian’s *Modernism’s Other Work: The Art Object’s Political Life* details.

¹³³ Following Dennis Diderot, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe suggested “the more the artist (the actor) *is* nothing, the more he can be everything” (*Typography* 260). The actor multiplies and proliferates possibilities due to his “absence or suppression of any property” (258); his “gift of nothing” grants him the great power to become anything (260). This power is threatening to current forms of personhood, propriety, and property, explaining why reigning political authorities long held biases against actors.

the present participle, which if the activity continues is always correct. [...] Art is not a be-ing but a Being, the simple noun. It is not the verb, but its product. Worship the verb, if you need something. Then even God is after the fact, since He is the leavings of God-ing. The verb-God, is where it is, the container of all possibility. ("Hunting" 199)

Baraka imagines art as a performing that is not stable enough to be a noun. He discusses this attitude as wanting the force of God's act of naming: "'the force out of which the world and life is issued'" (201). Baraka "worships the verb": his interest is in the performative act of nominalization, denigrating the name produced. Like god, the poet must strive to speak new potentials into existence. But unlike god, the poet should resist the realization of these potentials lest they become new fetishes and coercive standards.

This affirmation of process is not mere 1960's spiritualism, Baraka connecting it to concrete political goals as well. He declares process as paramount: "everything else is most likely to be nationalism" ("Hunting" 201). Naming has a mystical force worth worshipping, but the names produced are nouns responsible for nationalism and its arrogance.

Baraka argues in favor of craziness and not saying what one means:

No one should fool around with art who is only trying to 'make sense.' We are full of meaning and content, but to make that wild grab for more! To make words surprise themselves. [...] "using" words denies the full possibility of expression, which is, we suppose, impossible, since it could not be stopped and identified. Art is identification, and slowing-down for it. But hunting is *not* those heads on the wall. (199-200)

Rather than to communicate a meaning, Baraka imagines art as making signs surprise themselves. He denigrates instrumentalizing words since instrumentalism robs language of its true essence: expansive possibilities that exceed any particular deployment. Baraka suggests that although art eventually arrives at identification, it should be the "slowing down" of this process, expressing something close to Viktor Shklovsky's notion of braking or Barthes's delaying. The force of performance is radical in comparison to the communicative function of language.

The essay makes the political ramifications of Baraka's ideas explicit. Names make the world known, granting power to those who control words. Baraka writes:

When God started to *look like* a human being, men had gotten very sure of themselves. [...] *naming* is the first appropriation, the earliest humanist trend. Jane Harrison says the Greeks took the fear away by not only making all the various qualities known in the world men, but understandable, knowable, men. [...] From the unknown verb, to the familiar artifact. Greek Gods are beautiful Greeks, which finally in social/political terms is the beginning of modern nationalism. What the Western white man calls the beginning of democracy was the positing of the sovereign state, wherein everyone was free. The rest of the world could be exploited. *Logos*, then, is not merely a thought, but belief. Greeks were Greeks because they had the same beliefs. A Greek was a man who believed the Gods were Greeks. [...] Man's mind is revered and, in the ugliest emphasis, man's inventions. (202)

Baraka explains what he later calls "the craziness acquired in our most rational moments" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 236). Knowledge and understanding are not unbiased. *Logos*, both as language and logic, is the means through which Athenian democracy justified the existence of godly political men (Greeks) and bestial natural slaves (non-Greeks). The very terms of Western language encode this hierarchy. He identifies nationalism itself as a product of language and as something art must avoid if it does not wish to be reactionary. For the socially privileged, to use words correctly and to worship God is narcissism, as those both words and gods are fashioned in their own image. For the politically marginal, to use the dominant language correctly is an act of self-hatred since it defines one as a beast.

These attitudes are far from those of a radical Black Nationalist in any straightforward way. However, in favoring performativity over identity, they may be the attitudes of a man who would go on to play a blood-thirsty nationalist. Baraka deconstructs the purported naturalness of language and customs. Accusations that Baraka's madness was counterproductive to political aims do not quite fit: he argues that means-ends rationality was part of the apparatus that preserves the inherited order. No artist should make sense, Baraka exclaims, as he writes what

Aristotle would have labeled bad tragedies. His plays of this period do not strive to communicate but to disturb the political and semiotic systems that define good sense.

Baraka's Notion of Violence

Baraka's views on language and representation reappear in his political writings. This section will address Baraka's controversial embrace of violence. Violence is central to Baraka's attempts to break constricting structures and terminologies in politics as well as art.

Baraka's art elevates the term coded as inferior with Western hierarchies. Violence achieves ascendancy over peacefulness. Likewise, blackness assumes precedence over whiteness, irrationality over rationality, and the body over the mind. Many assert these reversals leave traditional dichotomies intact, leading to unfortunate consequences. For example, commentators castigate Baraka for essentializing blackness. Baraka's statements that the black man is closer to nature and more virile mean that Baraka can be rightly criticized for stoking terror of black men that leads to police brutality.¹³⁴

But Baraka's earlier views on language recontextualize criticism. Baraka's desire for a politics outside rationality entailed necessary risk; a step beyond utilitarian logics and assured results. In "What Does Nonviolence Mean?", Baraka rejects the "middle class" and "bourgeois" doctrine of passive resistance of Dr. Martin Luther King:

A political rebellion within the existing social structure is impossible. Any energy seen to exist within the superstructure of American society is almost immediately harnessed within acceptable motifs, and shaped for use by the mainstream, whether the results of this process are called Swing music or CORE. The intent is the same: *white music*. There is no way the black man can be heard, or seen clearly, in the existing system. (166)

Even criticism is repurposed to fit white standards: one cannot be seen or heard without being understood within commercializable forms. Baraka's work seeks to be neither visible nor

¹³⁴ See Baraka's "American Sexual Reference: Black Male".

invisible; neither understood nor misunderstood. Clarity, for black people, comes at the expense of self-advocacy. He seeks to find political intelligence in violence: a force capable of destroying the structures that make minorities complicit in their own oppression.

Baraka encounters a challenge familiar to radical artists. If clarity of meanings is on the side of the incumbent power structures, how can a theater communicate a message without itself being reactionary? Baraka warns that being understood is already to be defeated. Instead, he seeks to disrupt the “monolithic syndrome of predictable social values, based on the economic power and hegemony of the American (Western) white man” (“What does...” 157). Whether this disruption is violent metaphorically or literally remains an open question.¹³⁵

The violence of his tragic Revolutionary Theatre ought to be seen in connection with his affirmation of political violence. Baraka writes:

The moral priggishness of the Western white man, which grows to insane proportions in America, is displayed religiously in every part of the world he has exploited. The ritual murders in the name of reason and progress go on every hour, in every part of the globe. How many nonwhite peoples have been killed in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, just since 1945, in the name of some almost mystical need for a consistently accommodating order? The “Free World” is merely that part of the world in which the white man is free to do as he wants with the rest of the people there. [...] When the white man says *violence*, he means first of all violence to his system, the possibility of outright war to change the political and economic categories of rule. (“What does... 165)

Performing sacrifices to their metaphysical ideals of “reason and progress,” the white man is violent and superstitious according to Baraka. The focus on crime has distracted attention from violent policy, notably foreign wars that have caused numerous deaths. At this stage of the argument, white rationality is asserted to be the truly savage violence. When the “white men says

¹³⁵ Baraka celebrated property damage and ideations of black-on-white violence, but it is much less clear if he endorsed violence against persons outside of self-defense. His violence was largely symbolic. His 1967 trial, in which a judge allowed his most vitriolic poetry to be entered as evidence of Baraka’s responsibility for the Newark Race Riots, led to a conviction. But the suggestion that his poem (published after the Riots) incited violence was nonsensical as higher courts ruled.

violence,” he means something different than he thinks he does. He parrots words without understanding.

But Baraka goes further to deconstruct the conceptual apparatus that associates rationality with nonviolence. Baraka writes “violence or nonviolence as actualities have never been real categories. Rather, their use is symbolic in discussing possible goals of any Negro ‘progress’ in this country (and the white West). Negroes, except for isolated, *i.e.*, limitedly organized and unconnected, incidents, have never been anything else but nonviolent” (“What does...” 167).¹³⁶ Baraka pointedly asks:

one might wonder just why it is so necessary for white liberals and the Negro middle class to exhort Negroes constantly to follow a path that, willingly or not, they have always followed? [...] It would seem too that if there were any need to caution some group against violence, and influence them toward a path of righteous passivity and moral indignation, it would be the white man. (167)

If violence truly existed, we could say white Americans exercise it most often. But Baraka questions the categories “violence and nonviolence” as “actualities” with substance beyond what collective judgments ascribe. This maneuver jeopardizes the classical hierarchy rather than simply reversing it.

For Baraka, questions of violence and nonviolence are paramount to white America and the black middle class due to their investment in the present order. These categories function to protect the current state of affairs:

Nonviolence, as a theory of social and political demeanor concerning American Negroes, means simply the continuation of the *status quo*. As this “theory” is applied to define specific terms of personal conduct [...] Nonviolence on this personal (moral) level is the most sinister application of the Western method of confusing and subjugating peoples by convincing these people that the white West knows what is best for them” (“What does...” 169)

¹³⁶ Baraka later used the terms rebellion and revolt rather than riot to highlight the political dimension of unrest.

Baraka explains “nonviolence can be your ‘goal’ if you are already sitting in a comfortable house being brought the news of your oppression over television. It *can* be the normal conduct of rational” human beings (176). Baraka earlier claims that if there is true rationality, it could only be in actions that promote self-preservation, as natural law theorists did.¹³⁷ Peace and order are *rational* strategies to those who are not subjected to the hidden violence that keeps a society together. Those living in dire conditions understand reasonableness differently. Rationality, like any other word, cannot be limited to one meaning without covertly excluding other viewpoints. Politics and art, for Baraka, are to meet this exclusionary violence with violence.

The end of black nonviolence is not a guarantee of a better world. Though potentially appearing mad, Baraka understands that this revolutionary political decision could have both positive and disastrous consequences:

The most horrible vision I have is that the white man, in growing terror of those suddenly ubiquitous acts of unorganized violence to which the most oppressed black men might resort, will become even more repressive, and even the veneer of the liberal establishment will be stripped away. [...] The result of such chaos is anybody’s guess. (“What does...” 177).

Baraka calls this the “ugly fantasy” (177) of what awaits after violence, physical or symbolic. He cannot disprove it, but neither does he view this nightmare of lawlessness as justification for the existing order.

Baraka affirms his actions in both their worst and best possible outcomes, a distinctly tragic view that worth is commensurate to an action’s magnitude rather than its success.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Baraka writes “as an actual moral category all rational men are essentially nonviolent, except in defense of their lives” (174).

¹³⁸ Baraka often harbored grandiose visions of his own significance. Baraka mocked these tendencies in his autobiography, showing regret about his move to Harlem in 1965 as a self-appointed leader to a community he did not know well. He castigates his younger self, using Frantz Fanon’s notion of the colonized intellectual who uses over-exaggerated enthusiasm to cover feelings of insecurity.

Baraka's gambles the unsatisfactory present in hopes of an unknowable future. Rather than reason, historically-formed desires move one to decision.

AN EPIC IS CRUMBLING: Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre

The “transitional period” of 1961-1965 was among the most productive of Baraka’s career. *Dutchman* established Baraka as a major American playwright. The plays of this period were tragedies that shocked audiences with arbitrary reversals, incensing dialogue, and a refusal to communicate univocal meanings. Finding models in Strindberg and Genet, Baraka’s tragedies—pitting man and woman as well as master and slave against one another in intimate struggles—faced accusations of political imprudence. In the eyes of one contemporary reviewer, Baraka’s “obsession with a single—and hopelessly childish—hatred will prove ruinous to his art” (Gottfried). His plays of this period debuted in bourgeois theatres (Cherry Lane Theatre and St. Marks Playhouse) associated with experimentalism.

Baraka’s 1964 essay “The Revolutionary Theatre” reflects backwards on his experimental tragedies (*The Toilet*, *The Baptism*, *Dutchman*, and *The Slave*). Unlike his later theatre that aimed to create Black forms, Baraka’s earlier plays redeploy European forms to anti-European ends. Baraka said that “our culture provides us with an effective language of oppression but not with a comparable language of liberation” (*Amiri Baraka Reader* 241). Baraka’s plays of this period attempt to coax a different potential from the oppressive language of tragedy. Baraka would one day aim hope for autonomous black forms, but that day remained deferred.

The Revolutionary Theatre is a tragic space for death, catastrophe, and ritual rather than epic triumph. Baraka’s formulations declare “the force we want is of twenty million spooks storming America with furious cries and unstoppable weapons [...] AN EPIC IS CRUMBLING

and we must give it the space and hugeness of its actual demise" (*Home* 240). Against the common attempt of political theatre to unify the community through epic, the revolutionary theatre seeks to accelerate crumbling through miscommunication and rage.

The Revolutionary Theatre embraces the negativity of tragedy in multiple Hegelian formulations: "we must make an art that will function so as to call down the wrath of the world spirit. We are witch doctors and assassins, but we will open a place for the true scientists to expand our consciousness. This is a theatre of assault" (*Home* 241). The space for building epic is reserved to the "scientists" who are yet to come, whose work, after the radical assault on the current order is fulfilled, will create "new kinds of heroes" (240).¹³⁹ But his heroes are not like the bold anti-Western "Crazy Horse". Instead, they resemble tragic and wavering "Hamlet" in his surprising view. Baraka claims that the impassioned theatricality and emotionality typical of the European stage match the present historical moment, one in which viewers are not yet mature enough for a scientific or dispassionate relationship to art.

Baraka's aesthetics and politics are on the side of negation at this juncture of his career. He clarifies "the Revolutionary Theatre, even if it is Western, must be anti-Western. It must show the horrible coming attractions to *The Crumbling of the West*" (237). The relationship of art to the world is not conceived of as representational. It must precede that which it represents. Baraka's vision of revolutionary tragedy is that of a speech act that produces its referent.

Revolutionary Theatre hopes to "force change; to be change" (*Home* 236). Extolling "black nigger magic" (236), the causative force associated with ritual becomes central, a strategy

¹³⁹ Resemblance to Strindberg's "Preface to *Miss Julie*" is clear. Objectivity is not yet possible according to their stated beliefs, explaining the enduring influence of tragic models. See my "August Strindberg, Amiri Baraka, and the Radicalization of Domestic Tragedy" (2019).

resembling Genet's theatre.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, the unpredictability of ritualistic art is dangerous to the logics that justify the capitalist political order. Baraka, in a later interview, summarizes:

One time I asked a big time capitalist why they were so wary and suspicious of art. He said because it's unpredictable. That explains it. If you are a merchant and you've got to have predictable results for your bottom line, then the form of what you do, you want that to be predictable too. ("A Conversation with Amiri Baraka")

Baraka turned to unmotivated coups rather than the calculability of the tableau in his "Western" theatre that is "anti-Western" (237).

Baraka writes "this should be a theatre of the World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling" (*Home* 237). He continues: "the Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world [...] We are history and we are desire, what we are, and what any experience can make us" (238). Rather than interiority being ahistorical, inner emotions are shaped by history and shape the future. Baraka's thinking mirrors ancient tragedy in Hegel's view: socially-inculcated attitudes cause collisions that negate current institutions and social types, bringing about historical change that tragedy models.

Self-mastery is not an act of black self-determination. Baraka writes "the murderous philosophies of the Western white man take many curious forms. And that one of the most bizarre methods the man has yet to utilize against black people is to instruct large masses of black people that they are to control their tempers" (*Home: Social Essays* 228). Baraka hopes to move audiences, but not through a model of rational communication. He embraces the potential

¹⁴⁰ The connection between Genet's *Les Nègres, clownerie* (1959) and Baraka's *Great Goodness of Life: A Coon Show* (1967) is obvious. Kimberly W. Benston' and Michael Y. Bennet assert that Baraka satirizes and rejects Genet. Benston argues "Genet's vision of liberation, which proceeds from his own unique experience within society, is seen by Baraka as perhaps the most deceptive of all illusions" (217). I hope to take a different tack: Baraka's engagement with Genet was not uniform rejection.

of being like an actor, causing overflows of emotions in others. Baraka's "preaching, spitting craziness" utilizes the myth of black irrationality to seize the attention of white Americans: "we will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved" (239). White audiences, who discount black discourse as parroted, might recognize primal signs of pain and anger as authentic, whether they are motivated by terror or sympathy.

Amidst the violent imagery, Baraka inserts criticism that attacks Western rationality from within: "Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one. I believe this. So the Broadway theatre is a theatre of reaction whose ethics, like its aesthetics, reflect the spiritual values of an unholy society" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 238). Baraka explains his pedagogical theatre, one that seeks *to teach a lesson* to white audiences rather than to teach a lesson:

The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their [white people's] deaths. It must crack their faces open to the mad cries of the poor. It must teach them about silence and the truths lodged there. [...]

It should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness-- but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments. (236)

Rather than guiding audiences to civic discourse, Baraka hopes to make viewers experience feelings that threaten their self-control; and, by extension, their control over others. This path is dramatically compelling, though not without risk. Baraka communicates something not yet known, opening his theatre to unpredictable consequences. Baraka's work affirms that the political must be broadened to encompass violence and passionate emotionality for black needs to ever shake white society.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Queer theory has advanced different understandings of Baraka's political import. José Esteban Muñoz (in *Cruising Utopia*) and Darieck Scott (in *Extravagant Abjection*) show attention to Baraka's tragedies and early work. In Scott's Fanon-inspired reading, Baraka's power arises from his willingness to dwell with abjection, humiliation, and ostensible defeat. Muñoz claims Baraka for his Ernst Bloch-inspired politics of hope. Despite differences in focus, both thinkers make insightful observations. Like his tragic heroes, Baraka's early work swings between intense pessimism and optimism.

The Slave: Heavy Ideas and The Absence of a Meta-Language

Most histories of the United States record the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a triumphant moment in the nation's history. Contemporary observers saw practical as well as symbolic significance in the landmark federal legislation that prohibited discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and national origin. Even the most trenchant critics of American democracy concede that the legislation did much to move legal norms toward alignment with the high-minded humanist principles of the nation's founding documents.

For many, this victory proved that liberal democracy could redress the division and antagonism that had long plagued the *demos*. In his address to the nation upon signing the bill, President Lyndon B. Johnson conceived of the act as a triumph that would do much to realize the "sacred" task of the nation: "One hundred and eighty-eight years ago this week a small band of valiant men began a long struggle for freedom. They pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor not only to found a nation, but to forge an ideal of freedom" ("Remarks on Signing the Civil Rights Act"). Johnson, a man not without prejudice, exhorted the nation as well as his own self to fulfill their unique historical promise: "Let us close the springs of racial poison. Let us pray for wise and understanding hearts. Let us lay aside irrelevant differences and make our Nation whole" ("Remarks on Signing the Civil Rights Act"). Dr. King's non-violence had won tangible gains, so much so that a southern president could discuss race as an "irrelevant difference" while leading a bipartisan legislative effort. In America, humanity would finally become "whole".

Against this backdrop, Baraka's 1964 *The Slave* appeared untimely. Rather than closing the wells of racial poison, Baraka's play sought to open hydrants of racial animus. The play's

heightening of passion results from an anachronism: the revival of figures of mastery and slavery at the moment when hierachal notions seemed to be put to rest.

Anachronism is further foregrounded during the expressionist opening. Baraka depicts the physical aging and reverse-aging (through theatrical tricks) of the eponymous character. These shifts in time are confounding in a play that otherwise observes the unity of time and place (a bit more than an hour in a New York City apartment). The play criticizes notions of progress explicitly through impassioned monologues against liberal democracy and Western rationalism. Implicitly, the theatrical coups contest teleologies, both aesthetic and national. Against projections of peace, Baraka depicts America embroiled in future race war that pits the black and white populations against each other. Crucially, the tragedy does not depict reactionary elements within the white and black communities. Instead, the play excoriates white and black intellectuals who are at an impasse that cannot be resolved through liberal methods of nonviolent dispute resolution.

Walker Vessels, a poet-turned-revolutionary, breaks into the apartment of his white ex-wife Grace. Walker and Grace's biracial daughters sleep in an off-stage bedroom. As mortar rounds flash in the background, the trio of Walker, Grace and Easley (Grace's new husband and Walker's former mentor) in turn exasperate and deescalate the personal and political animosities that divide them.

In *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, Baraka comments on how deeply his first wife Nellie Cohn (with whom he fathered two children) disliked the play. The failure of intermarriage and liberal sensibilities to heal racial division was a sensitive subject, as both Baraka and Cohn had once expressed great hope in both. Conflating both *The Slave* and his failing marriage, Baraka sensed a pervasive failure to communicate between groups. This breakdown had been

repressed in hopes of moving beyond racial forms of identification. He recalls telling Nellie after a series of misunderstandings:

“I’m black, Nellie. I’m black... and you’re... “I trailed off. “White.” “I can’t do this, Nellie. I’m black.”

That look in her eye then was of such deep hurt and confused amazement that I almost covered my face so I didn’t have to look at her face. “Oh, Roi,” she said. “That’s silly. You’re Roi and I’m Nellie. What are you talking about?”

What was the correlative or parallel scene being played all over the world which meant the same thing in all the different spheres of human experience? That open call for that splitting up? As if the tragic world around our ‘free zone’ had finally swept in and frozen us on the spot.

The play *The Slave*, which shows a black would-be revolutionary who splits from his white wife on the eve of a race war, was what Nellie called “Roi’s nightmare” (*Autobiography* 186).

Humanist universalism (the derisively labeled “‘free zone’”) cannot heal division. Baraka suggests the return of a “tragic world” (186). Both his stage and his own home were sites of this tragic spectacle of division. Nellie’s negative reaction was fully understandable: the text implies that Baraka might have fantasies of killing her and their biracial children to prove his commitment to Black Nationalism.¹⁴² Watts sees *The Slave* as a low point of bad taste and cruelty.

The play adapts Strindberg’s master-servant model: two characters vie with one another for mastery as a third character attempts to slow the fatal conflict. Though Walker resembles Baraka and his future Black Nationalist politics, the play refuses to suggest his viewpoint as rational and consistent. All three characters have moments of biting insight into the hypocrisies of opposing viewpoints. Walker is, in some ways, the least sympathetic of the characters. On the level of the domestic dispute, Walker refuses many opportunities to avert violence when Grace

¹⁴² In confusing fashion, Baraka was still denouncing Black Nationalism as bourgeois in some of his essays, though he signaled his possible embrace of it in other works.

and Easley strike conciliatory poses. Nevertheless, Walker is also the most honest in his acknowledgment that he is not “so certain... emotionally and intellectually” (*The Slave* 85). He is angry that white Americans seem so complacently “secure in the knowledge that you [Easley, Grace, and White America] were good” (85).

Walker raves throughout the play, starting with his stream-of-consciousness monologue. He feels fury that those same traits go undiagnosed in white Americans whose viewpoints are mythologized as rational. The violence to change the world is pathological and terroristic, while the violence to preserve it is regarded as sane conduct.

The prologue attacks ideas. They are instruments of coercion: “we invent death for others [...] stone possible lovers with heavy worlds we think are ideas... and we know, even before these shapes are realized, that these worlds, these heights or depths we fly to smoothly, as in a dream[...]” (*The Slave* 44). Baraka describes the seemingly shapeless pleasure of the realm of ideas. But despite this abstract dimension, ideas contain a “heavy” mass that can be used to “stone” and “invent death for others” (44).

The ideal is “an ignorance. A stupid longing not to know... which is automatically fulfilled. Automatically triumphs. Automatically makes us killers of foot-dragging celebrities at the core of any filth. And it is a deadly filth that passes as whatever we feel is too righteous to question, too deeply felt to deny” (*The Slave* 44-45). Rather than helping people know the world, ideas offer false mastery. What “we feel is too righteous to question” is a filth that human beings love (45). Like Strindberg, Baraka mocks the etherealized “idea,” seeing its loftiness as a cover for its origins in material circumstances. His play will seek to use symbolic violence to challenge the idea that only certain political ideas are legitimate. Walker’s thinking about thinking takes the audience deeper into confusion. He says to the audience:

Yeah. Ideas. Let that settle! Ideas. Where they form. Or whose they finally seem to be. Yours? The other's? Mine? [*shifts uneasily, pondering the last*] No, no more. Not mine. I served my slow apprenticeship ... and maybe I came up lacking. Maybe. Ha. Who's to say, really? Huh? But figure, still, ideas are still in the world. They need judging. I mean, they don't come in the that singular or wild, that whatever they are, just because they're beautiful or brilliant, just because they strike us full in the center of the heart.... My god! [...] just because, and even this, believe me, even if, that is, just because they're *right*... doesn't mean anything. The very rightness stinks a lotta times. The very rightness. (44)

Ideas have mysterious origins outside the individual. Walker senses acutely a condition that afflicts people regardless of race: human beings repeat ideas like actors. Despite the difficulty in identifying their origin, these heavy and powerful ideas “need judging”. This judgment crucially is not based on their truth, a notion Walker calls an ideological lie.

Walker hopes to judge ideas by different criteria; to measure them against black perspectives. The absence of a “meta-language” (*The Slave* 45) to facilitate the communication means one language, itself limited, must conquer others. Walker states:

An old man full of great ideas. Let's say theories. As: Love is an instrument of knowledge. Oh, not my own, Not my own... is right. But listen now... Brown is not brown except when used as intimate description of personal phenomenological fields. As your brown is not my brown, et cetera, that is, we need, ahem, a meta-language. We need something not included here. (45)

Parroting great ideas, like the Platonic notion of love, Walker's disjointed monologue further crumbles. The condition for the possibility of meaningful communication—between Walker and the audience or between black and white citizens—depends on the presence of a neutral form of representation shared equally by all. “We need something not included here,” Walker says of the condition for rational communication that remains absent.

The monologue descends into lyrical reflections and field hollers, foreshadowing the miscommunication that will occur between characters. Language, rather than making experiences available to others, has force. Walker's monologue melds Wittgenstein and long-

repressed slave vernacular: it reasons itself out of reason, ending with the return of inarticulate cries.

Fantasies of Race War: Changing the Complexion of Tyranny

Paternalism and racial prejudices exist behind Easley and Grace's facade of the progressivism. Grace calls Walker a racial slur in a moment of passion (*The Slave* 54). Similarly, Easley calls Walker "boy" to assert himself over Walker (55). Yet Walker occasionally affirms that they are decent people, showing that intimacy still exists within fraught relations. As he states in the closing scene, Walker kills them for their very reasonableness and decency rather than in spite of it.

In their voices, Walker hears some of "his own" thoughts. The couple criticizes Walker for not being an original poet or a visionary leader. They accuse him of only playing these roles. Though he already expressed to the audience the knowledge that he repeats the words and ideas of others, Walker is still stung.

But, at other times, he is invigorated by the freedom that theatrics generate. Easley begins his verbal attacks of Walker's "twisted logic" and faux "heroism" (*The Slave* 49), incensed that Walker would confront them at gunpoint in their own home. Easley states "uh... no, now come, Jefe, you're not going to make one of those embrace the weeping ex-wife dramas, are you? Well, once a bad poet, always a bad poet... even in the disguise of a racist murderer!" (50). Easley accuses Walker of being a bad poet, one who pretends at originality but is carried away by misguided passions. This bad taste, according to Easley, has led Walker to disguise himself in a new character that has brought him greater attention. The accusation of mimicry strikes Walker as racist, though he fails to convince the white couple to reflect on themselves critically.

Walker repeats these criticisms as if they do not bother him, though later indications show he is wounded. To assert himself, he launches into a series of garish performances that interrupt the heated argument. By manically performing disjointed scenes, Walker gains a strange power over the situation. He alone is free while others react to him. His scenes include:

A comedic recital from his “newest work” (<i>The Slave</i> 50), ironically declaiming lines from Yeats
A performance of the national anthem, sung “ <i>like a drunken opera singer</i> ”
Pushing his ex-wife in a “ <i>burlesque</i> ” that contains too much force (54)
The affection of an “ <i>imprecise ‘Irish’ accent</i> ” for no apparent reason (55)
The grotesque performance Native-American stereotypes—vulgarly “dancing around and whooping like an ‘Indian’” and demanding “me want more fire water”—during a conversation about liberalism’s toothlessness
A shocking performance of Japanese stereotypes (60)
Moments of violent masculinity, joking about raping his white ex-wife and calling white men a variety of homophobic slurs (53-59)

Amidst these explosions of mad behavior, Walker shows moments of possible sincerity. During an overdramatic diatribe glorifying the beauty of violence, stage directions note that Walker grows suddenly more tender, stating: “I swear to you, Grace, I did come into the world pointed in the right direction. Oh, shit, I learned so many words for what I’ve wanted to say. They all come down on me at once. But almost none of them are mine” (*The Slave* 53). After this admission of vulnerability, echoing Caliban, Walker suddenly reasserts his masculinity, striking Easley and twisting his body. Walker accuses white America of having “twisted” him (49, 77), making him irrational and angry. He physically twists the white man, a gesture that typifies his Revolutionary Theatre’s desire to incense white audiences. Contorted by Walker, Easley experiences some of the powerlessness that black Americans feel. The metaphorics repeat in the play: Walker asserts “the country twisted them [black Americans] for so long” (77) they no longer know how they should be. Recalling the language of “knots” and “knotted characters”

that appears in Greek tragedies, Walker's lack of uprightness precipitates the downfall that destroys all parties.

As Easley and Grace escalate their criticisms of Walker's performances, more overtly racist speech and attitudes slip out. Walker vacillates between mad performance and rational argument, both of which antagonize his interlocutors. Easley makes an accusation that Walker writes "flashy doggerel" that moves black troops to kill themselves and others to murder (*The Slave* 55). Grace declares "Mr. Vessel [Walker] is playing the mad scene from *Native Son* [...] A second-rate Bigger Thomas" (57). Walker retorts not by denying his "second-rate" performances of black masculinity and savagery.¹⁴³ Rather, he suggests that Easley and Grace also are caught up in performances without knowing it:

But Remember when I used to play a second-rate Othello? Oh, wow... you remember that, Professor No-Dick? [...] Oh, come on now, you remember that.... I was Othello.... Grace there was Desdemona.... And you were Iago [...] or at least between classes, you were Iago. Hey, who you were you during classes? I forgot to find that out. Ha, the key to my downfall. I knew you were Iago between classes, when I saw you, but I never knew who you were during classes." (57).

Playing a "second-rate" Othello, Walker affirms the bad-taste of his unconvincing performance as an unhinged African American. Conversely, Grace and Easley seem to be so lost in their roles that they do not know that they too are actors. From the lecture podium, the white male voice of Easley convinced Walker of its reasonableness and originality. Walker blames the looming tragic downfall on Easley's convincing performance: such a powerful image of mastery has made

¹⁴³ Christopher Peterson's *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality* explores Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas. The character is often criticized for being a negative representation of black masculinity: he is animalistic and motivated by unconscious impulses. Peterson defends Wright thusly: *Native Son* shows how desperately white society labels black men as incapable of deliberation while at the same time holding them responsible for their actions. Peterson suggests that the novel makes apparent the irrationality within white logics that deem black men irrational animals culturally yet responsible subjects juridically. Baraka's *The Slave* features Walker playing a "second-rate Bigger Thomas", pretending to be what others think he is to show the incoherence of their viewpoint.

many black people wish to usurp the role. Yet Walker hopes to unmask white rationality as a fraud.

Grace insists that it is Walker who is the hysterical actor among them. Walker refuses to deny his performances, affirming their force and “use”:

GRACE. There are so many bulbs and screams shooting inside off inside you. So many lies you have to pump full of cut yourself. You're split so many ways ... your feelings are cut up into skinny horrible strips... like umbrella struts... holding up whatever bizarre black cloth you're using this performance as your self's image. I don't even think you know who your are any more. No, I don't think you *ever* knew.

WALKER. I know what I can use.

GRACE. No you never found out who you were until you sold the last of your loves and emotions down the river... until you killed your last old friend... and found out *what* you were. My God, it must be hard being you, Walker Vessels. It must be a sick task keeping so many lying separate uglinesses together... and pretending they're something you've made and understand.

WALKER. I can us, madam... what I can use. (*The Slave* 61)

From her position of purported objectivity, Grace declares to know “*what* you [Walker] were”: an empty space in which inconsistent images are projected. Walker is doomed to lack a true self in Grace’s negative judgment. However, Walker has given up pretending that he has a fixed subject position. He is more interested in what his provocations and performances can do.

Easley questions what he calls Walker’s “pragmatics of war” while Walker again refuses to deny his performative nature:

EASLEY. I thought you meant yourself to be a fantastic idealist? All those speeches and essay and poems... the rebirth of idealism. That the Western white man had forfeited the most impressive characteristic of his culture... the idealism of rational liberalism... and that only the black man in the West could restore that quality to Western culture, because he still understood the necessity for it. Et cetera, et cetera. Oh, look I remember your horseshit theories, friend. I remember. And now the great black Western idealist is talking about use.

WALKER. Yeah, yeah. Now you can call me the hypocritical idealist nigger murderer. You see, what I want is more titles. (*The Slave* 62)

Though Walker had long made arguments for the black man's role in fulfilling rational liberalism's promises, Easley had viewed this rationality as faked. Easley had never seen rational argument from black intellectuals as authentic. Walker does not deny Easley's appellations, wishing for more and more roles ("more titles").

The two continue to debate politics, Easley stating:

What do you hope to change? Do you think Negroes are better people than whites... that they can govern a *society* better than whites? [...] Do you think they'll make fewer mistakes? I mean really, if the Western white man has proved one thing... it's the futility of modern society. So the have-not peoples become the haves. Even so, will that change the essential functions of the world? Will there be more love or beauty in the world... more knowledge... because of it?

WALKER. Probably. Probably there will be more... if more people have a chance to understand what that is. But that's not even the point. It comes down to baser human endeavour than any social-political thinking. What does it matter if there's more love or beauty? Who the fuck cares? Is that what the Western ofay thought while he was ruling... that his rule somehow brought more love and beauty into the world? [...] but that was not ever the point [...] the point is that you had your chance, darling, now these other folks have theirs [...]

EASLEY. God, what an ugly idea[.]

WALKER. *[head in hands]*

I know, I know. [...] The complete ugly horseshit cruelty of it is there doesn't have to be a change. (*The Slave* 73-74)

Baraka, like Walker, reveals that though he might act as a militant Black Nationalist, he does so under a disguise. Rather than believing in the superiority of black rule, he affirms only that it "probably" could be better. Yet even such minimal confidence causes regret. Walker slumps his face in his hands to declare that he understands that black rule would likely be "horseshit cruelty"; a change in "the complexion of tyranny" as Easley puts it. Seeing a tragic dimension to the political, Walker declares that white liberal men have failed to create a just world, it is now turn for black people to try.

Easley finds the violence against the white political order sickening. Walker instead finds the violence that maintains the political order to be the greatest ill. Easley's "high aesthetic disapproval of the political," Walker asserts, "hated people who wanted to change the world" (*The Slave* 75). Walker claims that it is hate, rather than aesthetic disinterestedness, that moves white intellectuals into apoliticism. Quietism as well as revolutionary sensibilities, the play suggests, both contain irrationality and violence. Yet Walker alone recognizes the dire situation, sensitively slumping his head in sadness.

In another exchange, Walker swings wildly between distant enmity and close intimacy with his former friend Easley. Walker launches into a monologue that starts defiant yet ends otherwise:

I, Walker Vessel, single-handedly, and with no other adviser than my own ego, promoted a bloody situation where white and black people are killing each other; despite the fact that I know that this is at best a war that will only change, ha, the complexion of tyranny...

[Laughs sullenly]

In spite of the fact I have killed for all times any creative impulse I will ever have by the depravity of my murderous philosophies.. Despite I am being killed in my head each day [...] despite or in spite, the respite, my dears, my dears, hear me, O Olympus, O Mercury, God of Thieves, O Damballah, chief of the all the dead religions of the pseudo-nigger patriots hoping to open big restaurants after de wah... har har... in spire, despite, the resistance in the large cities [...] despite the fact that all of my officers are ignorant motherfuckers who have never read any book in their lives, despite the fact I would rather argue politics, or literature, or boxing, or anything, with you, dear Easley, with you...

[Head slumps, weeping] (*The Slave* 66-67)

At first mocking the exaggerated importance Grace and Easley attribute to him, Walker swings towards a sense that he has great and terrifying culpability. Walker fears that the black nationalist movement might be full of opportunists "hoping to open big restaurants", fully in-line with Baraka's leftist critique of nationalism's bourgeois character.

Walker acutely feels Easley's presence inside him. He has learned from Easley as a teacher, they have grown intimate as friends, Easley lives in his former home with his ex-wife, and Walker has considered that his political revolution will only replace one bad political order with another. The penetration of Easley wounds Walker's masculine subjectivity.¹⁴⁴ His blackness and independence feel devoured: Walker tells Grace that she "fed the thing [Easley] my children" (52). Rather than feeling at home among black nationalists, Walker secretly prefers Easley's company, though this preference fills him with guilt. The mythologeme of the slave liberating himself through violence takes on difficult hues. Rather than an emancipatory stroke, the master and slave have penetrated each other to the degree that violence is tragically self-destructive. Walker wants to appropriate Easley's mastery while nevertheless doubting its existence. Mastery, in its otherworldly stability, is a performance. In their final conflict, Walker murders Easley not due conviction but rather out of anger towards the irrational self-confidence in one's righteousness that white America possesses. This good-conscience is intolerable to Walker who finds the repression of life's tragic dimensions delusional.

Suspicious that the rules of the language-game are rigged against him, Walker refuses Grace and Easley's attempts to reason with him. Walker avenges himself by attempting to force Easley to repeat certain lines in his final moments:

You just die quietly. No more talk [...] No profound statements, Easley. No horseshit like that. No elegance. You just die quietly and stupidly. Like niggers do. Like they are now.

[Quieter]

Like I will. The only thing I'll let you say is, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." You can say that. (*The Slave* 81-82)

¹⁴⁴ In reference to hyper-masculine black nationalist authors, Edelman discusses black masculinity that seems always already wounded. The feeling of having been penetrated by the white world motivates desires to reassert masculinity. Baraka's exaggerated performances, which come after writing about earlier homosexual experiences, display the wound that haunts subjectivity; the fact the inside is constituted by words and habits that the subject does not author.

Black Americans suffer erasure, having no language in which they can be validated or recognized. To force Easley to feel such silence is his stated goal. Easley must die pretending a loyal self-sacrifice for the white order, a system of power that Easley's progressive sensibilities felt he was unimplicated in. Resentful for the roles America has forced upon him, Walker seeks vengeance through casting Easley in a role he would never wish to play. Walker plays a savage black man, though poorly as moments of political insight shine through. Rather than denouncing the futility of politics as Easley does, he affirms the political, despite its imperfections.

Nevertheless, Walker's confidence in the correctness of his path is shaky. Not only does he show moments of connection with Easley and Grace, he has come to their home to engage with them, unable to distance himself from the ramifications of his political acts. As the catastrophic finale shows, rather than saving his biracial daughters from white America, he has come there to witness as they are killed by mortar shells. The ambiguous ending suggests that he too may be killed by his own forces, a risk he was driven to by a need for his enemies.

Grace accuses Walker of being just as dangerously confident in his choices as white America is:

Is no one to reason with you [Walker]? Isn't there any way something can exist without you having the final judgment on it? Is the whole world yours... to deal with and destroy? You're right! You feel! You have the only vision of the world! [...] Every one of your yesses and nos is intended by you to reshape the world after the image you have of it. [...] I'm *not* in your head, Walker. Neither are those kids. We are all flesh and blood and deserve to live... even unabsttracted by what you think we ought to be in the general scheme of things. Even alien to it. (*The Slave* 67-68)

This criticism stings Walker. Grace argues that Walker asserts a "general scheme" that is self-serving, static, and abstract. Grace calls him a hypocrite whose anger has justified the repetition of similarly absolute judgments.

Despite her characterization, Walker does not show such conviction, only performing such an appearance in “second-rate” fashion. Walker continues down a path due to desires that he neither fully chooses nor believes to be fully just. The play returns to a tragic morality in which glory is equal to the size one’s transgression and risk.

Walker refuses to save his children in the final moments of the play, leaving them to discover their dead mother and stepfather. They themselves likely perish, though viewers struggle to identify why Walker reverses his stated intention to save them. This shocking reversal has elicited much resistance, striking viewer’s as gratuitously cruel and perplexing. Henry Lacey criticizes the conclusion as “pointless ambiguity” (90).

But Lacey does not recognize that ambiguity might be the play’s most powerful device: it leaves open the contestation of politics rather than reifying any solution. Refusing to enthrone any political perspective as masterful, a tragic mood probes the vulnerability of those who call themselves masters. The tragic collision destroys old antagonisms, clearing a space for something else.

Dutchman: Acting Out Different Forms

In a 1998 interview with Baraka, the poet and activist Kalama ya Salaam states his opinion that form and content are a “western dualism” inadequate to African and African American art. The interviewer suggests that a third category (style) must be considered to do justice to black expression. Baraka shows impatience with the suggestion:

BARAKA: But you have to have correct form or otherwise your shit is going to be fucked up. It’s like if I put you in a cop suit, I don’t care what you think, somebody might say there’s a cop, shoot him. There’s a content to form.

SALAAM: So you’re saying that each form—particularly once it has been codified into a specific form—proposes its own content.

BARAKA: Absolutely, because it carries thought with it, and it carries reason. There’s a reason for that form; it coheres with somebody’s language, somebody’s

rhythm, somebody's life, and somebody's philosophy.

SALAAM: How does it carry the content?

BARAKA: It carries the content by putting a philosophical emphasis on certain aspects of life. ("A Conversation with Amiri Baraka")

Baraka suggests that artistic forms are far from neutral vessels: they have a content-within-themselves. His example of the police officer highlights that such a "content to form" bears political importance. Shifting away from provocative language, Baraka explains that form "carries the content by putting a philosophical emphasis on certain aspects of life". Baraka espouses a sophisticated view about the ideological importance of form.

Baraka states "I wrote a long paper on something called the 'content of form.' Forms are a form of content" ("A Conversation with Amiri Baraka").¹⁴⁵ Baraka explains to Salaam that there is no neutral form, even those that claim to merely describe exercising a shape the material:

If you were describing an apple that's your description of it. You are trying to convince me that that apple is an apple for me as it is for you. What's the difference between that propaganda and me telling you capitalism ain't no good. Finally, one might have more implications than the other.

Baraka expresses an idea similar to Barthes's notion of the militantly representational dimension of art. The "form content" presupposes a certain perspective that excludes others.

Answering a question about how he wishes to communicate with audiences, Baraka suggests that he seeks neither rational nor emotional communication, as the distinction is normally made:

Salaam: Is emotional communication, for you, as valid as intellectual communication?

Baraka: I don't see that kind of separation. I mean I can see it in certain kinds of tortured kinds of definitions, but to me, I would say, what can not feel, can not think. What can not feel, can not think. That's what I think about that! The whole

¹⁴⁵ Baraka's impressive *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963) advances the notion of "form content". The book explains that American cultural artifacts are hybrids that draw upon both European and African models. Rather than just formal experimentation or immediate expression, Baraka stresses the sociological and historical depth of American jazz.

European thing about thought and emotion being at odds is bizarre. (“A Conversation with Amiri Baraka”)

Baraka’s art hopes to act on both the mind and passions, though he views such a distinction to be a bizarre “European thing”. He attempts to clarify his thinking by referencing Nietzschean terminology: he states the Western tradition values Apollonian intellectual representation over the unrulier Dionysian. For Baraka, viewing emotions as an interference rather than a precondition to thought is mistaken. Baraka sought “form contents” aligned with leftist political goals. He felt his political aims were incompatible with “predictable forms” that carry the bourgeois ethic of rationality within them. He asserts “form carries reason”: he sought theatrical models that contain a “reason” different from the one currently enthroned. Rather than disavowing European influences, he found inspiration in the political tragedies of European playwrights.

Baraka’s most famous play *Dutchman* draws upon Strindberg. Rather than pedagogical tableaus, *Dutchman* replicates the disorienting reversals of *Miss Julie*. Observing the unities of time and place, both plays feature two characters who move at a torrid pace through various stages of attraction, intimacy, malevolence, and, in the end, murder. Vitriolic language and grotesque seduction have led to accusations of misogyny and bad taste in relation to both authors. Finally, both plays feature a dream-like logic, confounding desires for intelligibility.

The incendiary debut of *Dutchman* caused confusion and scandal. Speaking of the reviews, Barak states “there seemed to me a kind of overwhelming sense from them that something explosive had gone down [...] the contradictory motions of my life must make it obvious, how confused I was. I had to read the play *Dutchman* again, just to understand it. And those words led in all directions” (*Autobiography* 187-188). Lost in his own performances,

Baraka follows his reflections back to Dolly Weinberg, his first white lover, who served as the model for *Dutchman*'s femme fatale Lula.

But the to the stability of a real-life referent is not wholly achieved. The first reference to Dolly occurs earlier in Baraka's autobiography. Baraka writes:

And I myself was a transitional figure, coming out of the brown world and its black sources but already yellowed out a bit by the Capstone employment agency on The Hill. And then I had offered myself to the totalitarian whiteness of the military. Running away from it, I dived into the books, only to get involved in but a deeper, more profound, more rational version of the same thing. And then running screaming from the scene of that crime, vowing never to have anything to do with such like. Seeking escape, I ran into a slender white woman with painted eyes, a ponytail, and sandals with a copy of Strindberg under one arm. (*The Autobiography* 128)

Baraka narrates the transitions of his early life: from his middle-class Newark childhood, to the “totalitarian whiteness” of the Air Force, and finally to his flight into the refuge of the art only to discover a “more rational version” of the same stifling politics. Seeking escape, he runs into the arms of an older bohemian woman carrying the works of Strindberg. Yet he finds only temporary refuge in both the woman and the author before his next transition. The plays of Strindberg offered a temporary “form content” to oppose the Western tradition from within.

Like *The Slave*, *Dutchman* highlights the threatening dimensions of performance. Lula, a beautiful white woman who lacks “good taste” (*Dutchman* 5), spots Clay through the window of subway car. Finding a seat beside the young black man, she begins a conversation that alternates between flirtatious and hateful, attracting as well as scaring the timid intellectual. Clay, eager with the prospect of a sexual liaison, attempts to display confidence.

Lula sees through his performances, identifying Clay's traits and personal history with preternatural ability. Lula toys with Clay for much of the action. She insists that “I didn't know anything about you ... you're a well-known type” (*Dutchman* 12), giving Clay the vulnerable feeling of being known to her white, objectivizing gaze. Frustratingly, he is unable to similarly

penetrate her (psychologically or physically). Taking pleasure in his submission as she steers the conversation, he is taken aback when she declares that they are talking “about your manhood, what do you think? What do you think we’ve talking about all this time?” (25).

Lula’s power emanates not only from the theatrical conceit of supernatural perception, but also from her skills of dissimulation. Her gratuitous aggression alternates with equally overstated seduction, changing her performances faster than Clay can adjust. She states “I lie a lot. *[Smiling]* It helps me control the world” (*Dutchman* 9), though such an admission does not aim to bring Clay security: one cannot identify when a liar tells the truth. These fabrications continue as she identifies herself as “Lena the Hyena” the “famous woman poet” (14). After demanding he ask her to go to a party, she denies him for not knowing her (16).

In contrast to her performances that trick and control, his faked confidence makes him more vulnerable. She declares his attractiveness to be like the cuteness of an animal wearing human clothes before shocking outbursts of cruelty:

LULA. Everything you say is wrong. *[Mock smile]* That’s what makes you so attractive. Ha. In that funny book jacket with all the buttons. [...] why’re you wearing a jacket and tie like that? Did your people ever burn witches or start revolutions over the price of tea? Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by. [...] What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave [...]

CLAY. My grandfather was a night watchman.

LULA. And you went to a colored college where everybody thought they were Averell Harriman.

CLAY. All except me.

LULA. And who did you think you were? Who do you think you are now?

CLAY. Well in college I thought I was Baudelaire. But I’ve slowed down since.

LULA. I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger. [...] A black Baudelaire.

CLAY. That’s right.

LULA. Boy, are you corny. I take back what I said before. Everything you say is not wrong. It's perfect. You should be on television.

CLAY. You act like you're on television already.

LULA. That's because I'm an actress.

CLAY. I thought so.

LULA. Well, you're wrong. I'm no actress I told you I always lie. I'm nothing, honey, and don't you ever forget it. (*Dutchman* 18-19)

Lula's power comes from her lies. She declares herself throughout the play to be a liar, a poet, and actress while mocking Clay for believing it. Rather than possessing a knowable identity, she celebrates her dark power: "I'm nothing, honey, and don't ever forget it" (19). In being nothing, she can pretend to be anything, her (non)essence as an actor makes her powerful. Her performances deny others their desire to recognize her. The "black Baudelaire" Clay is condemned to have his performance be ridiculed as his skin color is always noticed. The vulnerability of the black man is in his recognizability. The ability to act produces a threatening and alluring power. Unlike the tragic hero, the tragic actor behind the mask avoids recognition and submission to objectification, becoming dangerous to others.

After this exchange, Lula seductively invites Clay to move closer: "we'll pretend the people cannot see you. That is, the citizens. And that you are free of your own history. And I am free of my history. We'll pretend that we are both anonymous beauties smashing along through the city's entrails" (*Dutchman* 21). The physical closeness of interracial sex offers only be a performance of intimacy and escape from historical conflict. Moments of hostility puncture the duo's seduction. Eventually, she creates a scene, demanding to perform a hyper-sexual dance that she associates with black culture. Clay's discomfort transforms into overt fear of the attention they receive from other passengers.

Flashes of rage overcome her as he refuses to act out stereotypes to her pleasure. She yells "Your middle-class black bastard. Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be

Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man", accusing him of being an "Uncle Tom" and "so full of white man's words" (*Dutchman* 31). Clay, to her, spends his whole life acting unconvincingly. She is strong because she pretends without striving to be authentic; he is weak because he wants his performances to be true.

After repeated taunts that Clay is "afraid of white people" (*Dutchman* 33), the play takes an unexpected turn. Clay, slapping Lula, launches into a tirade, alternating between rational criticism and a hyper-masculine rage. He declares "I could murder you. Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue [...] For kicks" (33). As his monologue continues, he breaks out into a scream and bares his teeth, frightening the whole coach. His anger explodes:

Don't you tell me anything! If I'm a middle-class fake white man ... let me be. And let me be in the way I want. [*Through his teeth*] I'll rip your lousy breasts off! Let me be who I feel like being. Uncle Tom. Thomas. Whoever. It's none of your business. You don't know anything except what's there for you to see. An act. Lies. Device. (34)

While acting, Clay defends his right to act as Uncle Tom or Bigger Thomas: the extreme poles of a black literary characters. Having noticed that Lula's power is rooted in her privilege to play any role that is convenient, Clay launches into a series of disorienting performances. He has stolen her "device".

Clay explains that black America is neurotic since they act like white people to gain respect that remains withheld. He says:

A whole people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder. Simple as that. I mean if I murdered you, then other white people would be being to understand me. [...] Crazy niggers turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane. [*Suddenly weary*] Ahh. Shit. But who needs it? I'd rather be a fool. Insane. (*Dutchman* 37)

To be fully human and sane, black people need to murder. It is the *natural* way to communicate their feelings to white people who view them as specimens of nature. He declares that he does not wish for sanity as it is defined by white standards.

Incensing Lula, he explains:

But listen, though, one more thing. And you tell this to your father, who's probably the kind of man who needs to know at once. So he can plan ahead. Tell him not to preach so much rationalism and cold logic to those niggers. Let them alone. Let them sing curses at you in code and see your filth as simple lack of style. Don't make the mistake, through some irresponsible surge of Christian charity, of talking too much about the advantages of Western rationalism, or the great intellectual legacy of the white man, or maybe they'll begin to listen. And then, maybe one day, you'll find they actually do understand exactly what you are talking about, all these fantasy people. All these blues people. And one that day, as sure as shit, when you really believe you can "accept" them into your fold, as half-white trusties late of the subject peoples. With no more blues, except the very old ones, and not a watermelon in sight, the great missionary heart will have triumphed, and all of those ex-coons will be stand-up Western men, with eyes for clean hard lives, sober, pious, and sane, and they'll murder you, and have very rational explanations. Very much like your own. (36)

Western rationality, narrowly invested in identity and self-interest, has justified the deaths and suffering of black people. "Sober, pious, and sane" black people would be capable of justifying cruelty against whites. Clay states that black volatility and bad taste might seem mad. However, they are not the worst-case scenario for white people: black America adopting the same calculating and identarian logic would be far more dangerous. The madness of shouting in unintelligible code might be the best defense against the dangerous cruelty of sanity.

Clay triumphantly moves to leave, declaring "Looks like we won't be acting out that little pageant you outlined before" (*Dutchman* 37). At this moment Clay appears to have won mastery over the situation. Yet Lula looks towards the bystanders on the train, gains their tacit approval, and stabs him in an unexpected coup. The passengers throw Clay's body off the train, indifferent to the death of a young black man. The play ends as black conductor continues his work without

protest. Lula then spots another young black man carrying books beneath his arm. The tragedy is suggested to repeat itself.

The play would not have satisfied Aristotle. The quick pace of the reversals defies the demand for events to be connected through notions of necessity and probability. Not having recognized not his true self, Clay recognizes only the power of pretending. Lula, who had declared Clay to be in his essence a murderer early in the play (21), misrecognizes Clay's performance as the revelation of his character. Lula sees him as the violent aggressor, despite the fact she was the instigator of the conflict. She and the other white passengers believe their violence is self-defense due to the deep belief in the dangerous nature of black men. Clay shifts between performances that all have similar levels of authenticity or the lack thereof: a humble black boy, a confident lothario, a cosmopolitan intellectual, and, finally, a dangerous black man. Unlike Lula whose whiteness allows her freedom of self-fashioning, Clay is tragically destroyed. Rather than explaining to white America that they have mistook their own violence as self-defense, Baraka's play seeks to exasperate the conflict. Tragedy shows no clear route forward, but it remains the preferred political mood of Baraka's early theater.

Dutchman contains no explanation of its title. Coming from sailors' lore, the "Flying Dutchman" is a boat condemned to travel the seas without ever reaching its destination. Signaling to passing boats, the sailors send messages that arrive only to those who are already dead. Baraka's play, famously unintelligible to audiences, aspired to such a fate of failed communication and consummation. Far from defeatism or irrationalism, Baraka's tragedies speak without communicating and act without becoming. They imply an ethics and politics of potentiality. Tragic catastrophe clears the way for new possibilities.

Is *Slave Ship* also a Flying Dutchman?

The embrace of Black Nationalism that followed his political tragedies seems to be a homecoming; a return to the stable footing of good conscience. However, I caution against such a desire to see the messages of his propagandistic works as unifying. 1967's *Slave Ship* places audiences in the dark and cramped of a slave ship to increase the black audience's sense of solidarity and resentment. The play attempts to erase the distinction between audience and performer through an immersive experience that uses stench, music, and other devices.

Critics have called the play an attempt to provide a mythology for black Americans, hastening their rejection of dominant American political structures. Though the slave ship never makes land, forever suspended in the transatlantic voyage, critics were quick to identify the finale as a univocal political message. The slaves revolt, devouring the Black preacher who oppresses them through cooperation with Christianity and white supremacy. Amidst this violence, the lights in the auditorium come on and the audience is encouraged to dance in a public celebration. For critics, the finale seemed to advocate for political violence.

Nita Kumar's highlights other dimensions of the performance:

The celebration at the end takes us back to the origins of drama in sacrificial rituals. The sacrifices of the black Preacher and the white Voice are seen as propitiatory acts, which start the healing process for the black community. As Benston interprets it, the cannibalistic rite at the end is apocalyptic, completing the "absorption of the natural, historical cycle into mythology" and thus bringing the original sense of wholeness and identity to the community (254). In spite of Benston's neat explanation, the end, however, remains disturbing and ambiguous. [...] what remains unexamined and unexplained in the play is the way in which the cannibalistic ritual can provide direction for dealing with a world highly dichotomized and polarized between black and white. The participation of the audience in the dance at the end suggests an interface between the theatrical event and social reality. (50-51)

Kumar diagnoses critical confusion. When Baraka concludes a play with a cannibal-dance party, is such an act a call towards violence or is it a symbolic intervention with ambiguous effects?

I lean towards the latter view. Insofar as the slaves choke the white master and tear apart the black preacher, *Slave Ship* undoubtedly stokes anger against white America and black Christian leadership. Nevertheless, the hyperbolic character of Baraka's agitation suggests that the message itself takes back-seat to the unknown responses it might produce. It is difficult to conceive of a performance as contentious as *Slave Ship* providing an epic sense of unity. What black audience would be uniformly happy to celebrate the murder of black Christians, especially after the victories of Dr. King's movement? Forcing audience members to join simulated cannibalism is likely divisive. *Slave Ship* is a flying dutchman, its political message provoking rather than being understood.

Baraka prefers the dramatic swings between god and beast to the false security of human claims to rationality. Levi-Strauss describes how many groups practiced endocannibalism (*We Are All Cannibals* 87-89): eating a fellow tribe member to be closer to them. Many have identified Baraka's Black Nationalism as a counterproductive ideology that devours would-be friends (black Christians, practitioners of respectability politics, and liberals of all races). But, as the audience is cajoled to dance about the severed head of a black preacher, can we say with certainty that Baraka advocated narrow-minded forms of exclusion? Or is he just pretending with theatrical exaggeration?

I do not think Baraka's depictions of violence emanate from hatred. But neither are they the result of self-assured calculation. Baraka's performative nationalism embraces identity and fraternity without repressing their risks, leaving the world of good conscience behind.

Chapter V.

Tragic Means/Dialectical Dreams: Taking Andrei Platonov's Gamble

“Our ideal is the image of man, of man like a god, in relation to whom we are all raw material only, merely ingots waiting to be given shape, living ingots that bear their own ideal within themselves.”

-----Anatoli Lunacharsky’s *Religion and Socialism*

“The transformation of the world is a great, complicated and *painful* process.”

-----Josef Stalin to H.G. Wells

Andrei Platonov’s most artistically ambitious years coincided with efforts to create a new Soviet form of life, the political-economic-penal process analyzed in Sergei Prozorov’s *The Biopolitics of Stalinism: Ideology and Life in the Soviet Union*. Prozorov describes the "anti-realist" impulse of Soviet policy and thought. Western political powers claim to protect life, enacting a *securitarian*, *immunitarian*, or *katechontic* biopolitical logic. In contrast, Soviet *transformative biopolitics* valued life not as we inherit it nor as we attribute it to an earlier, more natural era.¹⁴⁶ For Soviet power, life possesses value insofar as it can be perfected (not protected) by human rationality and technological innovation. This chapter argues that Stalinism’s quasi-spiritual desire for perfection and transformation, particularly regarding the human body (the New Soviet Man), is central to Platonov’s work.¹⁴⁷

I will describe how Platonov’s dramatic texts and political-philosophical essays demonstrate a commitment to human potential inherited from ideologically diverse sources. The

¹⁴⁶ This dichotomy between Western political theory's desire "to protect" (the people, the race, the soil, tradition) versus Soviet hope "to perfect" (humanity, technology, the world, the cosmos) is Prozorov's major theoretical contribution. Recontextualizing early Stalinism as a transformative, rather than a reactionary, political theological project allows for a different understanding of Platonov's work and politics.

¹⁴⁷ Nikolai Berdyaev foreshadows Prozorov's politico-theological formulations: "there are two myths that can become dynamic in the life of nations: the myth of genesis and the myth of the end. The second myth, the eschatological myth, predominates among Russians" (Berdyaev 32). Though both Christian, the political theologies of Europe desire either to resurrect Eden or to build the New Jerusalem.

discursive foundations of both Stalinism and Platonov's work exist in the debates of constructivism, symbolism, religious philosophy, technological futurism (cosmism) and, of course, Russian Marxism. Despite manifest differences, these discourses privileged the potential of human life, concomitantly revealing a degree of antagonism to existing human lives. I will call this tendency the transformative ethic.¹⁴⁸ Stalinism readily justified sacrificing existing individuals in hopes of incarnating idealized future citizens. Rather than being exclusively social and political critique, this chapter argues Platonov's work embraces sacrificial thinking while acknowledging its potentially tragic consequences.

Intellectual precursors as diverse as the Marxian avant-garde and Christian socio-political fantasies played a role in the widespread yearning for transformation. *Mimesis*—the imitation what already exists—was understood as a circular return to the same hardships. For radical Christian philosophers such as Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolai Fyodorov, the human being should channel the creativity of the romantic artist. Believers glorify creation through emulating the creative freedom of God, not by serving a divinely-established order. The socio-political dimension of such thought, which sought to accelerate rather than restrain history's fulfillment,¹⁴⁹ echoed in ostensibly secular ideologies. For Sergei Tretyakov of LEF (Left Front of the Arts), realist representation serves only to reify the misshapen form of humankind that capitalism had produced. *Быт*, or everyday life, was the enemy of the avant-garde and many believers: profane routine forecloses the potential for radical transformation, whether conceived of as revolution, scientific breakthrough, or a miracle. Rather than reinforcing present forms of

¹⁴⁸ Stalinism's axiomatic privileging of possibility continues Marx's ontological attitudes, succinctly encapsulated by the final thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various way; the point, however, is to *change it*" (*Marx and Engels Collected Works Vol. 5* 5).

¹⁴⁹ Soloviev grew skeptical of his earlier zeal for transformation, writing "A Short Story of the Antichrist" to warn against those who wish to accelerate humanity's culmination (the Christian apocalypse) rather than delay it (the Pauline *katechon*).

life by representing them, art and human activity should strive to construct habits conducive to human freedom.

Boris Groys explains the unexpected byways connecting religious thought, futurist machine-worship, and the Stalinist worldview that would swallow them both. Explaining the curious fact that LEF-contributor Nikolai Chuzhak draws upon the Christian thinker Vladimir Soloviev's conception of life-building, Groys writes:

following Hegel, Solov'ev maintained that the cognitive role of art had ended and that art must therefore be assigned a new goal—the transformation of reality— [...] According to Solov'ev, the artist must cease to be defined by 'inherited religious ideas' [...] rather than subscribing to popular conceptions of the aspect of things as they are, he [the artist or thinker] will show to everyone things as they will be at the end of time. (27)

Whether it was influenced by Christian religious searching or Marxist futurism, art's concern was no longer depicting humanity in its current state. Instead, practice sought to produce the human being as it should be "at the end of time"; a perfected subject endowed with freedom, creativity, rationality, and virtue. Defending Chuzhak's semi-religious constructivism in a review, Platonov summarizes the transformative ethic with zealous approval.¹⁵⁰

How futurist iconoclast Vladimir Mayakovsky as well as spiritual symbolist Alexander Blok both came to support the Revolution demonstrates the broad anti-realist attitudes of the era. Yet this faith in transformation, as redeployed cynically under Stalin, would go on to destroy the

¹⁵⁰ Platonov writes "it is not among my tasks to prove the correctness of the thesis of Comrade Chuzhak. He himself does so sufficiently convincingly" ("LEF" 259). For Platonov, Chuzhak's view that art constructs life is plainly superior to Lunarcharsky's and Trotsky's notion that art is a way to know life. A. Galushkin contests Platonov's authorship of this avant-gardist text, though the scholar is unable to furnish evidence. Critics often engage in denial when confronting the transformative ethic within Platonov's work.

very individuals who popularized it; those who believed in poesis's life-transforming potential.¹⁵¹

The ambition to perfect human life demanded a relation of willfulness and mastery over the environment and human nature: both were material to be shaped into superior forms. This bold desire elevates its proponents to heights from which tragic falls become a danger. Radical interventions into existing forms of life necessarily risk catastrophe. I will argue that this tragic political mentality, aiming for the best but prone to create the worst, was not an object of simple parody or satire for Platonov. Platonov self-consciously avows risky transformative ambitions to reorganize life in his 1934 essay "On the First Socialist Tragedy". It is here that one best sees the similarity as well as difference between Platonov's work and Stalinism. At a time in which socialist realism enforced epic as the mode for representing transformational biopolitical "successes", Platonov embraced the tragic and its sublimity, granting magnitude to Soviet ambitions that had thus far produced only a multitude of painful imperfections.¹⁵² Yet for Platonov, tragedy's hardships—extolled as political and spiritual trials—possessed redemptive greatness, justifying the grandeur of Soviet transformative ambitions.

Though Platonov wrote in many different registers, his contemporary reputation rests on his great prose works of the late-1920's and the 1930's. Due to the demystifying depictions of state violence and organizational incompetence, many of his texts could not be published in his lifetime. Platonov's literary works document the great missteps of Soviet policy, particularly the

¹⁵¹ Even the polemically opposed members of LEF and the Proletkult shared the desire to perfect human life: "the theoreticians of LEF and the Proletkult understood the goal of revolutionary art in the same way as the modeling of life and the new soviet man" (Malygina 195).

¹⁵² *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* details Stalinist push for epic art in the 1930's. Epic, within Socialist Realist circles, was favored for its celebration of the inauguration and preservation of communities. Platonov embraces a notion of tragic socialism despite the oxymoronic nature of such a concept to his Soviet contemporaries, as Tony Wood explains.

disastrous effects of dekulakization and collectivization that he witnessed as an engineer in the provinces. The state sought not to defend its citizens as they were. Its duty was to the potential rational subject, so-long theorized in liberal thought, that socialism believed it had the exclusive ability to produce. This ambition to “perfect” human beings produced imperfect consequences that Platonov was unwilling to ignore, a boldness that came at considerable risk to his family.

Platonov is celebrated as the meeting point between a great writer and a great social critic. Yet his lionized status as champion of human dignity against a dehumanizing regime comes into conflict with Platonov the historical individual. A proletarian raised on the revolution’s dreams, Platonov was a socialist who could inflate and deflate Soviet ambitions in writing that was sometimes propagandistic, sometimes critical, but most often some unfamiliar combination of opposing tendencies.

Critics often valorize the ethical and political insight of Platonov’s refusal to ignore Soviet imperfection: fewer listen to the voices in Platonov’s work that extoll the transformational aspirations of Stalinism. For example, Evgeny Dobrenko concludes Platonov’s finest creations are staunchly against the logics of the Soviet Union despite Platonov’s probable political loyalties. Though such a position appears sophisticated in its avoidance of the intentional fallacy, it founders in its excessively convenient opposition of “Platonov and Stalin” (as the title of his influential article reads). Dobrenko argues that Platonov finds “strictly aesthetic” (210) attraction to the deformations of language in Soviet life. Parodying, “estranging”, and “petrifying” (212) Stalinist speech empties its force, thereby “generating resistance” to political authorities (213). In other words, contemporary intellectuals can enjoy reading Platonov guilt-free. Keith Livers’s *Constructing the Stalinist Body: Fictional Representations of Corporeality in the Stalinist 1930’s* espouses a similar view, seeing Platonov’s emphasis on the endurance of the female body as a

site of resistance to political ambitions. Livers provides a redemptive reading which locates the female body's natural "immortality" as demanding respect even in its abject qualities. Marina Poltavtseva's declares that Platonov's "art itself is 'Other'" to Western reason; an enactment of the "demise of the Cartesian subject" in the scholar's terms (274).¹⁵³ Poltavtseva aligns Platonov's with a poststructuralist ethical injection to value alterity at odds with Stalinism's ambitions for totality and security, seeing Platonov's drama as staging people that share a "space without right and wrong—the revolutionary space of the event" (288).

Dobrenko, Livers, and Poltavtseva show how deeply Platonov's work engages with Soviet biopolitical and life-building ambitions. Yet none heed Groys's warning that Soviet artists of Platonov's period did not necessarily define themselves in contrast to politicians:

in the Soviet politician aspiring to transform the world or at least the country on the basis of a unitary artistic plan, the artist inevitable recognizes his alter ego, inevitably discovers his complicity with that which oppresses and negates him, and finds with that his own inspiration and the callousness of power share some common roots. On the contrary, they make this identity the central object of artistic reflection, demonstrating hidden kinship where one would like to see only morally comforting contrast. (12)

Finding in Platonov *only* resistance and no "hidden kinship" with transformative political ambitions offers moral comfort at the expense of Platonov's fascinating, if troubling, complexity. Platonov's haunting literary ambiguity is not just parody, nor is his tragic socialism necessarily a recantation of transformational biopolitical aspirations. Following a different route, I hope to

¹⁵³ Poltavtseva's "Power and the Other in the Dramatic Works of Andrei Platonov" is the only study of Platonov's nine dramatic works, arguing for their significance in his oeuvre. I am in agreement with Poltavtseva that tragedy's power to transform the body—"the theme of the body as a realm of transit" in her words—is the central theme of these texts (212).

build on readings that emphasize the sense of “danger” that Angela Livingstone describes as the dominant impression of reading Platonov’s work.¹⁵⁴

The reputation of Platonov should not be limited to his harrowing depictions of the absurdity of Soviet policy. The transformative ethic’s hostility towards existing forms—people, objects, ways of life—is stubbornly present in Platonov’s politico-aesthetics. Platonov was, perhaps, such a perceptive critic of the Soviet Union because he was also a powerful thinker of Soviet Marxism. Capable of dwelling with the most vulnerable aspects of ideology, Platonov’s work searches for dialectical solutions to impasses, never surrendering the hope that a way forward could be constructed from unlikely materials. It must be remembered that the dialectical solution is not the golden mean but the production of something that moves radically beyond all previous categories; a solution whose appearance of unlikelihood conceals a deeper necessity.¹⁵⁵

Rather than in the immediacy of the event as Poltavtseva argues, Platonov often seeks world-perfected efficacy in the ritual and dialectics of sacrifice. It is doubtful that Platonov’s thinking of sacrificial tragedy is solely a site of resistance to logocentric political desires. Platonov’s work should not be regarded as the *other to Western metaphysics* but instead the *other within Western metaphysics*. Pursuing the same goal of perfecting rational subjectivity without hiding this ambition’s madness, Platonov engages in metaphysics by other means. He refuses to disguise uncertain gambles as objective inevitabilities or acts of certain justice. Platonov’s work falls in the line of Pascal’s wager and Kierkegaard’s leap of faith, emphasizing

¹⁵⁴ Such as the readings offered by Annie Epelboin and Olga Meerson. Meerson argues Platonov’s “non-estranging” writing seems to normalize the horrors it describes, lulling the reader to participate in ethical attitudes that would normally inspire revulsion.

¹⁵⁵ Lenin’s “The Collapse of the Second International” (1915) argues that Kautsky’s seemingly prudent search for the “golden mean” conceals a “frightful and injurious” opportunism. Such a maxim against the “golden mean” becomes central to Soviet rhetoric. One might be reminded of Platonov’s propensity to castigate opportunistic bureaucrats more than quixotic radicals.

the unsure foundations beneath decisions aimed at future reward. It is not the demise of the Cartesian subject as Poltavtseva insists, but something akin to Pascal's exploration of the fallenness of his own faculties along with a refusal to disavow his projects and decisions.

If socialist realism simply obfuscated political realities, Platonov is a more sophisticated proponent of the transformative ethic. For Platonov, sacrificial policies might still prove their worth despite their terrible human costs; costs that could never be fully hidden with propaganda. Platonov recognizes the gamble as a political strategy to escape the aporias of Soviet Marxism: faith, again, enters the political arena as Bolshevism gains an aura of political theology. Platonov produces a sense of the sacred suited to the transformative ambitions of the political left, a group too often convinced of its own graduation from faith.

Just as Western biopolitics interiorizes death (incarceration, execution, war) to preserve life in its risky immunization efforts, Platonov shows how the Soviet perfection of life could only be achieved through capitalistic imperfections: forced labor, imperialist war, exploitation, and the bodies these methods produce. The threatening outside must be brought inside and domesticated. The Soviet Union, having only tools, mentalities, and bodies created by capitalism, must transform them in a way that overcomes their insidious power, an alchemical maneuver with the risk of becoming no better than what one hopes to defeat. In fact, one might even become far worse, as Stalinism showed. For Platonov's *азартные*¹⁵⁶ characters, it is a gamble that might justify communism's sacrificial demands.

¹⁵⁶ Bold, passionate, and recklessly-inclined toward risks and gambles, from the French word for *hasard* (chance).

With one's little dream of perfection and power: Platonov as Political Prophet

Platonov's article "About Our Religion" (1921) triumphantly declares the end of theism: a new era is dawning in which humanity's future rests in its own capable hands. Calling for political violence, he attacks all inherited forms of tradition and hierarchy. Marx's attitudes that "the criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that for man the supreme being is man, and thus with the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected and contemptible being" saturates the text (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* 257). Platonov continues the tradition of leftwing sociology of religion (notably, Feuerbach, Marx, and Lunacharsky): in worshiping god, humanity in actuality celebrates its own unrealized abilities and potential mastery.

Despite Platonov's ebullience for the Soviet project, a reviewer had suspicions about the paean. There was something strange in the enthusiasm of the young communist convert:

"About our Religion" can be printed, but it needs a few editorial changes; the risqué and unaesthetic contrast of the blue heavens with a pile of horse droppings; the incorrect assertion that the new man's 'head will begin to work after everything', for it has begun already and is still working. (*Андрей Платонов: Сочинения* 342)

Readers correctly assume that the young writer already developed a willingness to compare the lofty heavens (idealizations) and lowly waste products (material realities). This estranging device would go on to make increasingly philistine Soviet editors bristle. However, the editor's second criticism raises important questions: if our heads are not yet working, who could trust us with the construction of the New Soviet Man? If Platonov suggests we must begin building the future world without yet possessing full consciousness, the editor's ears rightly detect a note of accidental subversiveness. Platonov's article suggests that the "engineer of the human soul"¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Yuri Olesha had not yet coined this term, which Stalin popularized in 1932. Yet related tropes already dominated discourse of the 1920's.

might be a bricoleur constructing by *hasard*; not a comforting thought for those who are shaped by his designs.

The reviewer's complaint—that Platonov suggests that humankind's rationality will arrive only once circumstances are such as to cultivate it—does not make Platonov an untalented thinker of Marxism. In fact, his flaw may be that he was too perceptive an adherent: Platonov's faithful work sought to affirm Soviet Marxism on the territory of its most crucial mysteries. In developmental accounts of reason, such as Marx's, how exactly will the human animal perfect its rationality? If the human being needs appropriate schools, institutions, and economic relations to be shaped into a rational agent, who among the presently incomplete or imperfect men can design the institutions that will mold the New Soviet Man?

Platonov utilizes a striking figure to describe the Soviet task: the artist of the new religion who must destroy previous idols—God, Satan, good, evil—to draw a new "image" of the human being.¹⁵⁸ This image should depict a creature who will now act in "his own name" rather than in the name of deities or transhistorical virtues. The artist will, hopefully, predict and produce new values that better correspond to the "perfection" and "completion" of human potential. The days of reinforcing humankind's one-sided development through mimesis are numbered; today's portrait painters must create, rather than reflect, their idealized subjects.

If the artist produces an image that transforms those who see it, "life will find a yet more worthy appearance of itself" free of the one-dimensionality that currently hinders human flourishing.¹⁵⁹ The article contends that human life must engage in transformative action to fulfill

¹⁵⁸ In the early Soviet Union, the construction of the artistic image (*образ*) was to play a significant role in transforming those who were damaged by capitalism; workers' theatres proliferated, literacy groups abounded, proletarian writers discovered, and *стенгазеты* popularized.

¹⁵⁹ Platonov continues in the tradition of early-Marx's "total man" or "complete person". For description of this figure, see Henri Lefebvre's *Dialectical Materialism* (161).

this still-unknown potential, making it part of the theme of transformation that Heidari Marzieh identifies as the unifying characteristic of Platonov's early writings. Not merely symptoms of youthful naivete, these themes appear again with the *whole* or *complete* person invoked in Platonov's mature work.

Describing humanity's journey, previous artists created images to oppose the "dark powerful forces" of nature. But currently, inherited images haunt more than help. The artist should break the population's enthralment to outdated gods and mystifications. As Marx states in an 1843 letter, the task of critical thought and art is to look at these former images and to make a realization: "It will then become evident that the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality" ("Marx to Ruge"). Platonov's essay performs what Marx calls "analyzing the mystical consciousness that is unintelligible to itself" ("Marx to Ruge"). Platonov discovers in past idols that the human being is "insignificant, with his little dream of perfection and power" (Андрей Платонов: Сочинения 76).¹⁶⁰ The various dream-images humanity has inherited suggest that freedom, completion, and capability are the telos of the human being. Now that the dreamwork of human perfection is revealed and made intelligible, it can inspire transformative labor to incarnate the sacred New Soviet Man.

Platonov suggests a dialectic— man creates images to help life achieve new, higher forms, while a nature resists human control over life. Nature is an enemy: "if we don't destroy it, it will destroy us" (Андрей Платонов: Сочинения 76). His scheme pits "life" against "nature".

¹⁶⁰ As in English, the perfection of the human being (совершенствование or совершенство) implies the completion of its development; the achievement of its telos. In Soviet thought, the artistic image (*образ*) plays a role in the quest for completion and perfection. Yet education (*образование*), transformation (*преобразование*), and new way of life (*образ жизни*) contain in Platonov the dual-potential of perfection as well as tragic ugliness, deformity, and disgrace (*безобразие*, or, etymologically translated, imagelessness).

The former encompasses humanity, history, and the endless "happiness" of creation and transformation: nature is argued to be dull materiality that allows for projects while twisting results beyond human intentionality.

Platonov, channeling Feuerbach, describes how the artist must transform himself and his idols through artistic labor:

Man is the father of god. Man, life struggling within him, is the only power of the universe from the beginning to the end of time.

God is an image, drawn by the hand of man in the free desire to fill life with the happiness of creation.

The artist draws the picture and takes pleasure in it, but there will come the day, and artist will turn his hand to a different picture—the old is not necessary to him, he already achieved higher mastery in work, he creates a new picture, more beautiful than the old.

The old image fades [...]

But there will come the day, when the artist himself will disappear, he too just an image [...]

We live in that time, when all images created by humanity long ago are disappearing. God, the bourgeoisie, power, mystery, the impossible, weakness are the images of those departing.

Man alone is the image of those arriving. (76)

Platonov's artist finally creates an image of all of humanity: gone will be partial views that the factions of his class, nationality, or religion manifest. As Feuerbach claimed, humanity will realize the powerfulness and capability once attributed to God; it was a premonition of the power that humankind itself possesses. The old terms—including “the impossible”—must be cast aside for progress to proceed. Notably, the image of present-day forms of life will fade: Platonov suggests in the essay and others of the period that this “fading” occurs through violence and murder.

These invigorating, if also threatening, sentiments celebrate humanity’s destined omnipotence. But the attempt to draw this future image has only examples from the past: the artist cannot necessarily look inside himself for direction since he too is another imperfect image.

Current craftsmanship can thus be trusted only through faith, a central tenet of the Platonov's religious Bolshevism.

Humankind is free, all-powerful, and subject to no notion of impossibility. Nevertheless, as capable as human life is, it exists within a nature that thwarts its plans. Platonov works within the tragic *topos* to show wild swings between capability and incapability; between triumph and catastrophe. Efforts to construct a better human being are *headless* and uncertain, though they are devoted to the fulfillment of our rational potential.

Defending this risky plan becomes the focus of Part II of the essay. In this section, Platonov foresees objections from the "bourgeoisie intelligentsia, people with a White spirit" (Андрей Платонов: Сочинения 77). These critics believe the Russian people need religion since their souls are attracted to the mysterious. Platonov counters that though communism will eventually overcome the unknown, the path to build it will still be a matter of faith.

Platonov answers that Bolshevism is threatening to Christianity since "the revolution is the daughter of science, and science is hostile to any faith, any darkness, any unclarified movement of the soul and passion, flowing not from consciousness, not from thoughts, but from the dark depths of man" (Андрей Платонов: Сочинения 77). He likewise affirms that communism cannot take place of religion in a simple swap: it cannot yet provide "higher sense" and "all-consuming ideas" that could "fill the person entirely and move him to any sacrifice" (77-78). Yet constructing communism demands sacrifices that must be taken without full understanding. Socialism will achieve its heights later, building from material realities (that are often bloody):

Yes, it's true [that communism, as of now, lacks "higher sense" and "all-consuming ideas"]. We begin to build our truth from the bottom, we are only placing the foundation, we at first give life to people, and only then we will

demand, that in life will be truth and sense. We are going step by step, the **head** of the merged, united humanity will begin to work after everything. (78)

Platonov's logic strikes one as bizarre, yet it is also devoted to Marxian sociological thought. Communism is the enemy of faith and all sentiments arising from the "darkness" of the unconscious; nevertheless, the task for the current generation is to lay uncertain foundations through sacrificial acts of passion and irrationality. Only outdated superstition and prejudice can move contemporary humanity, for its intellectual faculties were formed in a world of contradictions. Communism, which is working to invest life with "truth and sense", will eventually produce fully rational human beings—completely "merged" in his strange phrasing. They will be capable of determining what truth and sense fully entails in *a posteriori* fashion, justifying today's acts that appear irrational. For now, humanity must have faith that it builds the worldview that will abolish the need for faith. The adherent of the new religion must sacrifice herself, without yet knowing exactly why, to the rational God of communism that will later no longer demand any barbaric sacrifices.

Platonov embraces an ideal of science and reason as unknown domains that humanity currently only intuits in ecstatic passions. The labor and sacrifices aimed to please Bolshevik gods will be more ancient, sacred, and mysterious than utilitarian.¹⁶¹ Though it confused the Soviet journal reviewer, Platonov's claim that only "after everything" will "the head of the merged, united humanity will begin to work" is rigorously true to Marxism. Platonov's logocentrism is total until the late 1920's, though somewhat strangely it is a *logos* located in a future frontier rather than in humanity's core. Bolshevism aspires to intelligibly and logic, though without yet knowing where to look for them.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ The humanist socialist George Orwell was not wrong to see something archaic and frightening in Soviet ambitions, warning against "the quasi-religious appeal of the Communist myth" (315).

¹⁶² One might be reminded of Meno's Paradox.

In other articles of the period, Platonov foresees the coming “kingdom of consciousness in place of the current kingdom of feelings” (*Андрей Платонов: Сочинения* 143). Comparing the classless society with the Christian heaven, the kingdom of consciousness will provide intelligible explanations for the past and present actions. While Platonov defers to future men on questions of truth and virtue, he provides emotive sense of what can provide people with an “idea for which they can live” during an era of transition (143). For now:

communism gives people that idea, that general guiding thought. We have already reached this idea, we discover a religion of those who will come, we find the sense of the life of humanity. We found that god, for which communist humanity will live. Only that 'god' will not be love, but hate, and with such a passionate hate, that from her there will be born the sense (meaning) of life for all. (78)

Hatred— an emotional rather than rational motivation— spurs “headless” humanity to pursue its ascension. The body politic and the body of the citizen double down on pathological feelings in hopes that they lead to intelligence. The human being must perform sacrifices now: these ventures are not purely economic transactions with the gods.

Overturning Pauline values of love and the *katechon*, Pauline goals of human fraternity and unity in a single body (whether in Christ or the body politic) are to be pursued through hatred; through negation of what currently exists. Communism must temporarily engage in the irrational to achieve the world that would no longer be plagued by the irrational. If in Jesus the rationalistic law of Judaism is brought to its end by Jesus’s love for each individual, for Platonov the false rationality of tradition will be destroyed by hate for all existing particularity. Marx’s universal class should act from a passionate hatred rather than already-realized virtues. Hate will eventually transform into a higher law through a dialectical reversal. While *reproduction* might arise from love and creation, transformative *production* of a new humanity arises from destruction.

Platonov embraces sacrifice, the sacred, the alchemical, and the tragic in his quest to annul them in a counter-intuitive plan. He declares there is no god while also arguing that a divine gift or miracle is necessary to make secular plans succeed; his “new religion” of Bolshevism is one of faith rather than knowledge. Might Platonov be a madman? Like Alyosha from *The Hurdy-Gurdy*, could he be a “a gift from God— but there is no God” (73)?

Platonov inherits the early avant-garde’s belief in the inherit imperfection of any fetishized image. Nevertheless, he insists on the production of new images. Mikhail Epstein explains a strange process by which twentieth-century Russian thought and art sought to destroy spirituality but instead reconnected modern experience with Orthodox religiosity.¹⁶³ According to such logic, Platonov might continue the negative theology of the Russian avant-garde whose desire to destroy sacralized idols accidentally finds itself well within the religious tradition of apophatic. The anti-mimetic ambitions of the avant-garde cause the divine utopia to become more real by the very fact that it cannot be represented, like the God of the Old Testament who is more real due to his absence. The figure of the painter who must create a better image of the human being— yet falling short since man is an imperfect image of an infinite god— dates to Gregory of Nyssa’s *Song of Songs*. Gregory of Nyssa was the lone church father to refuse slavery in all forms: he argued, like some leftists would millennia later, that it reduces the enslaved to a partial image of their rational potential.

The human being must embrace hatred in hopes of abolishing emotionality itself. Though Platonov does not doubt his goal, the method he suggests seems full of risk, contradiction, and danger. Indeed, if currently headless, one must wonder what part of the body will chart humankind's course?

¹⁶³ See *Вера и образ: Религиозное бессознательное в русской культуре XX-ого века* [Faith and Image: The Religious Unconscious in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture].

I contend that something of Platonov's early extreme views continues in the authors' mature work. Rather than espousing strictly humanist impulses that resist the sacrificial exploitation of Soviet lives, Platonov's strange deployments of the language of sentimentality—the “heart,” the “soul,” the “soulful poor man”—do not mechanically repeat old associations. Rather, sentimental terms belong to a series that includes stranger Platonovian figures like “the torso,” “the spine,” and “boredom”: all of which name some mysterious place that moves imperfect human actors towards “wholeness,” “perfection,” and “completion”.

Platonov's eighth notebook, composed in the early 1930's, invites speculation that “hatred” still lurks within Platonov's political vision. Alternating between calls for the transformative liberation and anti-humanist rhetoric, Platonov's journal includes radical views about man's figurative headlessness and the importance of hatred:

Very important!! All art is completed in order to leave beyond the limits of one's own head, filled with a pathetic, runny, worn-out substance. (Записные книжки: Материалы к биографии 101)

Under socialism [the transitional phase to communism], there will be no malice and despair, but deep suffering will remain; there will be no contempt, but there will be hatred. (103)

The radicals who act from hatred in Platonov's mature work might not be wholly condemned or parodied by their author. Indeed, Platonov's “On the First Socialist Tragedy” (1934) and the contemporaneous *Happy Moscow* both oppose notions of happiness, believing contentment to be something that human beings do not yet deserve. These stances recapitulate the early essay “Equality in Suffering”: Platonov declares proudly that the Soviet Union so far has achieved equal suffering from Lenin to the simplest worker rather than liberation; an important step on the circuitous path to communism (168). After declaring “down with the human”, Platonov contends

that “we will become humanity, but not actual human beings” (168). Platonov affirms human life and the body based on their potential, rather than their current forms.

Inheriting the teleological principles of Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx, Platonov advocates that the endpoint of life is the rational human subject.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, nature's brute materiality, humanity's pathological nature, and the historical oppression prevent this "image" or "form" from achieving itself. The task of the artist of the new political theology is seemingly impossible, despite his enthusiastic insistence that it must be accomplished. Characteristic of tragic thought, Platonov explores the nexus of the impossible and the necessary.

Hatred will not act alone: Platonov's “soulful seekers” look for the organ that will drive us to overcome a headless condition. An aporia— how the imperfect emotions and bodily constitutions will guide us to a better political world— becomes central to Platonov's tragic vision of Soviet Marxism.¹⁶⁵

Thought from my torso: The Soviet Union's Faustian Gambles

Platonov's first extent notebook begins with a mistranslation of Nietzsche's disavowal of fatalism: “god died, now we want for the superman to live” (Записные книжки: Материалы к биографии 17). The engineer mixes Nietzschean demands for the individual to transform itself and empirio-criticism's monistic belief that any body—human or object—can transform into any other (18).¹⁶⁶ Calls for human beings to transform their organs allow Nietzsche's metaphors to weave into Bogdanov's technological desires to engineer a communist human body.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Such attitudes abound in his early ideological essays "About our Religion," "Battle of the Brains," "At the Beginning of the Kingdom of Consciousness," "Transformation," and "In Order to Become a Genius of the Future".

¹⁶⁵ Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" declares that only action can educate the educators: human agents must act before possessing full understanding.

¹⁶⁶ All forms are manifestations of a universal energy in empirico-criticism: they are thus controvertible.

¹⁶⁷ Famously, the doctor and ideologue Bogdanov, founder of the world's first blood bank, died from his attempts at collectivizing the body. Testing his theories about the potential for blood transfusion to allow human bodies to

Towards the end of the first notebook, Platonov shows interest in that which is neither pure mind nor pure body. Under the heading "About the Intellect," Platonov commands:

Explain and describe to me in simple terms spinal and cranial brains (their function), specifically the place of their meeting under the back of the head (in detail). Completely in detail—that part of the brain, where spinal brains transition into cranial, the particularity of this transitional brain in comparison with cranial and spinal brains, and so on. (22)

Demanding clear explanation of the cerebrospinal system, Platonov knows he that he is not yet able to give it. His interest in the anatomy belies a more traditional concern: he wishes to know how the body transitions into the mind; to clarify the relation between the seemingly opposing forces of feeling and thinking. Platonov is very interested in the parts of the body—hearts, stomachs, spinal columns abound—but his attraction shows a strange hovering between materialist and traditional metaphysical understandings. Just as readers notice something out of place when Platonov engages in scientific reflection, a strange friction occurs in his moments of sentimentalism and lyricism.

Sentimental language repeats in Platonov's mature work. The pervasive temptation to assume his work is a humanistic retort to Soviet violence does not account for its complexity.¹⁶⁸ In this section, Platonov's 1930 tragedy *The Hurdy-Gurdy* will serve as a test case: it was composed directly after his most purportedly anti-sacrificial and anti-Soviet work *The Foundation Pit*.

move closer to one another, the leader of the Proletkult contracted a fatal illness from a fellow citizen participating in rejuvenation experiments. See Nikolai Krementsov's *A Martian Stranded on Earth: Alexandre Bogdanov, Blood Transfusions, and Proletarian Science*.

¹⁶⁸ Instead, I follow Leonid Poliakov's brief suggestions concerning Platonov in the well-titled "Totalitarianism 'With a Human Face': A Methodological Essay": the outward appearance of humanism conceals something darker and more complicated.

The postscript to *The Foundation Pit* serves as frequent evidence for humanist readings of Platonov. The novel is named for the suicidal task of building a foundation pit for a Babelian, communist tower to house all the homeless orphans of the world. Speaking of one of the casualties, the beloved Nastya adopted by the workers who labor until their “transformation” into corpses,¹⁶⁹ the postscript seemingly criticizes the sacrifices of Stalinism:

Will our soviet socialist republic perish like Nastya or will she grow up into a whole human being, into a new historical society? This alarming feeling is what constituted the theme of the work, when the author was writing it. The author may have been mistaken to portray in the form of the little girl's death the end of the socialist generation, but this mistake occurred only as a result of excessive alarm on behalf of something beloved, whose loss is tantamount to the destruction of not only of all the past but also of the future. (130)

Though readers sense harsh criticism in Platonov's words, one can read his question as sincere rather than strictly rhetorical. As Platonov indicates, it can be asked from belief that the Soviet project alone can produce the future and redeem past suffering and sacrifice. His unusual phrase—“the whole human being”—builds upon his long-standing interest in imagining humanity's perfected form. Readers jump too hastily to see Menippean criticism.

Unlike most critics, French Platonov translator Annie Epelboin reads *The Foundation Pit* as an attempted apology for Soviet sacrificial policies that only accidentally emerges as ambiguous criticism. She castigates Igor Sats and Platonov for the extremism they had once supported, such as the dekulakization orders they helped carry out, events immortalized in the haunting boat scene in *The Foundation Pit*. Epelboin admires Platonov as writer of his times,

¹⁶⁹ Reforging or reforming labor (перековка) was a major ideological term of the period, eventually justifying the GULAG's modern slavery. Soviet power glorified its demands following Marx's optimism in work and transformation. “Changing nature, man changes himself” was a slogan attributed to Marx, appearing beneath propagandistic images of prison labor in the now infamous *The I.V. Stalin White Sea – Baltic Sea Canal* (206). Carol Gould explains that, for Marx, the idea “of self-creation through labor” (xiv) is the human being's defining characteristic.

though she views him as having committed and valorized Soviet crimes against humanity.¹⁷⁰ She argues that Platonov “like many of his contemporaries, was led astray by a mixture of generosity and revolutionary enthusiasm to the point of becoming complicit in terrible crimes. Platonov – more than any other writer – found the words to embody this ambivalence” (“I too was there”). Epelboin deserves credit for exploring the dimensions of Platonov that sided with Soviet ambitions. Yet, like those who see only resistance in Platonov, moral concerns overwhelm analysis: Platonov’s gambles have value primarily as a cautionary tale against political radicalism for Epelboin.

The risk-taking compulsion of Platonov’s characters is identified as the heart or soul aching for something beyond “boredom”.¹⁷¹ *The Hurdy-Gurdy*, detailing the mass starvation that resulted from Soviet attempts to transform agriculture, displaces the language of sentimentality very clearly: Platonov’s “humanism” again relies on “hate,” preferring the future Soviet Man to existing human bodies. In the play, thought and decision emanate not from the mind but from the *torso*, the physicality of the latter replacing the play’s initial concern with the heart. Reading the play in tandem with his essay “On the First Socialist Tragedy” (1933) emphasizes the degree to which Platonov’s work represents the transformative aims of Bolshevism as a salvific gamble with hazardous potentials. Soviet biopolitics alone, as the postscript to *The Foundation Pit* states, are the means to realize corporeal and intellectual perfection. This wager accepts tragedy as potential, and even likely, outcome that nevertheless should be taken.

¹⁷⁰ Sats, an old Bolshevik, used his status to protect Platonov for several decades. Platonov needed the defense, finding himself under attack by Soviet critics and writers after Stalin’s personal censorship of “For Future Use”.

¹⁷¹ Mark Amusin’s word-frequency analysis reveals the centrality of “boredom” and “yearning” in Platonov’s works (11-12). Tora Lane notes “Platonov draws our attention to how this state of limbo [waiting for the arrival of communism] creates constant boredom and longing in his characters” (56).

The play opens on the outskirts of a town. Three cultural workers, two human and one robotic, express their impatient desire to accelerate the arrival of socialism. N. Duzhinaya dates the play's composition to the final months of 1930, making it a response the cultural brigades sent to the provinces to incite enthusiasm for transformative agricultural policies. Though the play was begun as a comedy, tragedy overwhelms the text that centers upon a comparison between Soviet biopolitical policies and the Faust legend. Miud, bearing a name enticing to satirists,¹⁷² is a child of the revolution motivated by strong sentimental feelings. The play opens with concern for her "bored heart" that longs for utopia. She sings lovingly of future communism as a member of a cultural brigade. Alyosha, fellow wandering bard of communist values, shares her politics. However, despite overwhelming longing, his stated relationship to the sentiments is one of mistrust bordering on hatred. Upon hearing that Miud's heart aches, Alyosha affirms that under socialism "it doesn't matter. It [her heart] will be cut out of you, to save you from torment" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 3).¹⁷³

In a notebook, Platonov describes this sort of strange character type. They combine fanaticism with boredom:

How nice it would be to depict, create a person, who goes to all the protests—yells "fascist" at Mr. Vanderbilt, hates the pope, never rests, believes in everything that is hysterical, tormenting, tortured, dying for the future, but himself—(intolerably) bored (internally)" (*Записные книжки* 102)

Miud continues to express her longing in a sentimental song. Alyosha's extreme position remains steadfast and uncompromising: "you live unscientifically. That's why something's always aching

¹⁷² Miud was the acronym for the Soviet holiday "International Youth Day".

¹⁷³ Epstein suggests the Platonov is an "ambiutopian" writer: he possesses a heightened sensitivity to the future that ambiguously merges utopian hopes with dystopian doubts and anxieties ("Ambiutopia, ambiutopianism"). For Epstein, Platonov's characters, such as Miud and Alyosha, are "warrior-dreamers" showing simultaneous fear and hope for the future, enacting Russian culture's collective bipolar disorder (*The Irony of the Ideal: Paradoxes of Russian Literature* 256, 261).

inside of you—first one thing, then another. As soon as socialism sets in, I will invent you all over again, from square one" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 4). The play's opening dialogue thus stages an opposition between current sentimentality and future scientificness. The vestigial heart will one day be removed through drastic intervention. As Alyosha brags, the human body will be reinvented without sensitivity to previous attachments. Humanity for now is headless but heartful: its future depends on reversing this state of affairs.

The anti-naturalism of Soviet Marxism is shown to be complete. Speaking of nature as being a "saboteur", Alyosha declares "soon we'll liquidate it [nature] too [...] We didn't construct it, so why does it exist" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 6). Only that which labor and the human mind could someday produce has value: the potential has greater ontological status than the existent. Miud agrees with these transformative ambitions, stating memorably that nature currently is a "fascist" that must be formed into a "Bolshevik Nature" (5).

Alyosha's violent dialogue does not place him within the list of over-confident bureaucrats that Platonov lampoons. Instead, he is a "wanderer" (2), another of the *душиевые бедняки*—soulful and poor dreamers—that are Platonov's most rich characters. His desire to cut out the hearts of others arises from a sense of longing and enslavement to his own irrational construction; he wishes for transformation and liberation for himself and others. Alyosha's early radicality alienates viewers and readers, though he becomes a tragic hero by the play's conclusion.

To recognize Alyosha's heroism, one must look to "On the First Socialist Tragedy". Here, Platonov defines the "very serious task" of humanity (*Happy Moscow* 32). It must renounce all happiness and enjoyment in the name of future reward. It is necessary to defeat nature's "miserliness" and "daunting harshness" through the development of technology (31-32). This

condition is a “tragic picture” (31). Platonov warns famously in the final sentences the stronger the efforts to master nature, the more nature resists; its effects, though not divinely fated, begin to resemble the sublime punishments of the gods. The essay concludes with a declaration that it is necessary to “cut the tragic knot” without denying the possibly catastrophic consequences of this heroic attempt: “The tragedy of man, armed with machinery and a heart, and with the dialectic of nature, must be resolved in our country by means of socialism. But it must be understood that this is a very serious task [...] we are making our way inside the world, and in response it is pressing down upon us with equivalent force” (32).¹⁷⁴ This terrifying trial is undertaken not by someone rational, for laws and institutions to produce a rational subject do not yet exist. Instead, it is someone “hysterical, tormenting, tortured, dying for the future, but himself—(intolerably) bored (internally), empty, dead tool of beneficial history” (*Записные книжки* 102): a person who sacrifices and is sacrificed, willing to be a dead tool and willing to make others such within the violence that motors historical progress.

While ancient peoples could live on the “scraps of nature” (*Happy Moscow* 32) contemporary heroes must intervene in nature, provoking the possibility of catastrophe. As commentators have noted, Platonov's own career as a land ameliorator confronted how modern agricultural and industrial policy produces unforeseen consequences, such as desertification, in its attempts to produce greater bounty.

Alyosha's disavowal of love and consolation embodies the Platonovian tragic ideal. The essay's strange anti-sentimental examples argue for disavowing pleasure in food, sex, and romantic love. He places his whole faith in developing a technology of unknown efficacy. Rather

¹⁷⁴ Two differing versions of the essay have been published: one from a written manuscript and another from a typescript.

than the liberal and conservative notions that the human being possesses a nature, Platonov views man as a technological being fighting to overcome nature inside and outside itself:

The truth, in my view, lies in the fact that ‘technology . . . decides everything’. Technology is, indeed, the subject of the contemporary historical tragedy, if by technology we understand not only the complex of man-made instruments of production, but also the organization of society, solidly founded on the technology of production, and even ideology. Ideology, incidentally, is located not in the superstructure, not ‘on high’, but within, in the middle of society’s sense of itself. To be precise, one needs to include in technology the technician himself—the person. (*Happy Moscow* 31)

Referring without apparent irony to Stalin's notion that “technology decides everything”, Platonov emphasizes that humanity produces itself. Ideology is not external to the human being, but rather a tool that makes its way inside those who use it.¹⁷⁵ Constructions are not superficial but rather “in the middle of society”: “technology is the technician itself” (31). It is Platonov's tragic heroes—necessarily Soviet since capitalists and fascists would consume everything—who accelerate conflict. The pursuit of happiness, rationality, and comradery rely on those “armed with machinery and a heart”; both of which are still imperfect. We have not arrived at that society in which we can, as Alyosha hopes, make cardiodectomies routine procedures. Alyosha embodies the transformative ethic of Soviet Marxism, both in its potential for greatness and horror.

The third member of the cultural brigade—Kuzma the robot—is testament to the transformative ethic's hope that humanity will overcome its pathological construction. Alyosha built Kuzma to be the perfect ideological worker who incites enthusiasm without being afflicted by doubts and feelings. After hearing a cavalcade of incoherent slogans emanating from the robot, Miud balances affection for this “rational” construction with awareness of its current

¹⁷⁵ Regarding the hero of *Chevengur*, A. A. Antipov persuasively argues “we see that the hero [of Platonov] is both personally and cosmologically subordinated to technology; technology for him mixes into his soul and metaphysics” (150).

malfuncting status: "I love you, Kuzma! You, after all, are only poor iron! You look so important, but your heart is broken down, and you were thought up by Alyosha!" (5). Rather than overcoming the heart, Alyosha accidentally gave the robot a "broken" one in its creator's own image and likeness. Recalling "About Our Religion", Alyosha is an artist designing the future human being without yet knowing what it should look like.

The play fixates on Soviet Marxism's most vexing aporia: how is it that imperfect, irrational human beings can construct a rational human being? Alyosha, a poet so attuned to human suffering that he aches to eliminate it, plays the role of engineer working to develop "scientificness" and "consciousness" that Soviet discourse demanded. Yet Alyosha's efforts demonstrate difficulties of such a path. Kuzma's eventual deconstruction into his constituent parts reveals Alyosha as moved more by the spirit of bricolage than rational design: Kuzma is dissembled on stage into a "*primus stove, radio, and other everyday objects*" that were incorporated but never transformed (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 69).

Kuzma's fate embodies a boring, hopeless return to the same. Platonov suggests the worst possibilities from the standpoint of the revolutionary: constituent parts, both human and institutional, of the body politic remain what they were. The play's title *Шарманка* (barrel organ) features in Russian idioms concerning tiring repetition. Platonov's work often features droning music as an image of hopeless stasis: failure to revolution to break free into a new era. His description of the jazz club, full of new Stakhanovite elites, in *Happy Moscow* depicts repetitious suffering:

the band was playing some insane European music that contained centrifugal forces; after dancing to this music you wanted to curl your body up into warmth and lie down for a long time in a cramped secluded coffin. [...] The spherical hall of the restaurant deafened by the music and the howls of people [...] seemed to revolve; every voice in it sounded twice, and suffering kept being repeated. There was no why here for anyone to break free from the habitual—from the round

sphere of his own head, where thoughts rolled along tracks laid down long before, from the bag of the heart, where old feelings thrashed about as if netted, not letting anything new, not in letting go of the customary. (70)

The trio of “strolling Bolsheviks” (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 18) attempt to spread joy and commitment to the future through music; however, Platonov warns of “the bag of the heart, where old feelings thrashed about as if netted, not letting in anything new”. Pleasing music that stimulates the heart sentimentally might feel good but also runs the risk of reifying audiences, eliminating the chance of “anything new” ever occurring.

The cultural workers eventually stumble upon the regional administrative office of a network of collective farms. The world-weary director, upon hearing they are heading towards socialism, responds with pensive irony “a fine, far away district” (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 18). Indeed, the director is fully aware that the Soviet ideal currently departs from economic realities: he is trying to navigate the famines and ecological disasters resulting from collectivization. Under stress from above to “complete the five year plan in four” and to “catch up and surpass” capitalism, Shchoev has nightmares that his superiors yell at him “your tempos aren't enough” (59). In turn, he exhorts workers to maintain a backbreaking rhythm as if still under capitalism's barrel organ-like demands. Countless missteps show that Shchoev and Soviet power have tried to wring more out of the land and population than they could safely offer.

The play repeatedly refers to how efforts to organize nature have led to catastrophe. Culling the birds in one region produces too many bugs in another (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 14): the ripple effect of unintended consequences of central planning produces numerous difficulties coded as biblical plagues and pestilence. Such setbacks require even more drastic intervening measures to make up for losses. As “On the First Socialist Tragedy” affirms, overcoming nature with human intelligence can only be achieved through socialism (34). Yet the more one fights

nature, the more nature fights back through unexpected consequences. The Soviet bet has great possible rewards should it win, but catastrophe is likely in case of defeat.

Like a middle manager within capitalism, Shchoev exploits those under him from fear of those above him, rationalizing his decisions in cynical terms utterly opposite to the transformative ethic. Speaking of Alyosha, Shcheov makes clear the contrast between the ideological worker's apparent selfless devotion to progress and his own fatalism: "What is he, some sort of enthusiast for every kind of construction? [...] Never in my life have I seen a true enthusiast. Ten thousand members I unite, and they're all like animals—day and night, all they want to do is eat" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 16). Shchoev is a cynical, fatalistic, and opportunistic bureaucrat who believes humanity is doomed to repeat animal stupidity; doomed to timeless suffering without transformation. His post-revolutionary malaise makes him wonder if he "would be happier if I'd been an object of some sort, or simply a consumer" (24); that is to say, existing without freedom in accordance to naturalized economic forces that capitalist science declares to be universal. At one point, he even hopes to automatize all jobs—"to set our course towards peoplessness" (31)—since machines can keep any work tempo. Such would be the complete inversion of socialism's hopes to realize human potential through technological aid.¹⁷⁶

Nevertheless, the cynical Shchoev suffers, finding solace in the songs of the cultural workers and their unfamiliar sincerity. Shchoev hires the trio as "comforters" to the regional leadership: he wants "some tenderness from the superstructure" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 59). He is moved by Miud's utopian ballads even if he does not believe their promises of freedom.

¹⁷⁶ These dystopian fantasies include a scene in an early manuscript in which he plans the liquidation of his workers to free himself from the costs of food and housing.

As comforters, Alyosha and his companions now decorate rather than construct life.¹⁷⁷ They must play the repetitive and intelligible music that *Happy Moscow* warns against. It is a Faustian deal. Platonov's play shows how the arts temporarily join with a cynical administration in hopes of a greater influence.

Alyosha and Miud seem aware of the possibility that they have compromised themselves in taking a greater role in the direction of the state. Recognizing their complicity with a regime that has lost its vigor, the pair seeks to inject their work and labor with transformative excitement. Ambition leads them to biopolitical projects.

The first of these projects is to “rationalize” food to make up for shortages. Parodying efforts such as the Higher Institute of Nutrition, Alyosha helps engineer a new human diet from materials not usually deemed edible. He hopes to prove Shchoev's desperate hope that “food is really just a social convention” that can be altered (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 35). Alyosha, the meeting point between the soulful wandering pilgrim and an engineer, is a typical Platonov protagonist.¹⁷⁸

Once again, Alyosha's faith in transforming life founders upon his own irrational nature. However, the intellectual shortcomings that produced Kuzma's now has immediate biopolitical consequences. The parallel between episodes is made explicit: Alyosha again designs a strange mechanical system from spare parts to produce and serve food. The hurdy-gurdy now emits music throughout dinner as Alyosha repurposed parts of Kuzma for the conveyor belt. “On the First Socialist Tragedy” emphasizes that engineering the soul is the “hidden theme” of tragedy (*Happy Moscow* 156). The heroic poet-engineer faces the “center of tragedy”: the fact that “man

¹⁷⁷ Platonov followed Chuzhak in condemning art that decorates life, viewing it as the lowest of all artistic aims.

¹⁷⁸ According to M. Iosohara, Platonov's stories show the deep connection between art and science as engineers begin to search and seekers begin to engineer.

changes himself more slowly than he changes the world" (155). The tragic hero attempts to change the world and himself, but he is not equipped for this task. He is:

not armed with the kind of soul, the kind of heart and consciousness that will allow him, finding himself at the head of nature, to fulfill his duty and heroic deed to the end and not destroy, for the sake of some psychological game, the entire construction of the world and his own self. Here the dramatic situation has a purely Soviet content, a content that is purely 'ours.' Socialism can be seen as the tragedy of the soul under tension, trying to overcome its own wretched poverty, in order that the most distant future should be insured against tragedy. (156)

The hero will likely not succeed to be the "head" of nature. His mind adapts too slowly to consider all the consequences his actions, depriving him of the very control he seeks to acquire. Later described as "imperfect Man" in allegorical fashion (156), this heroic figure wishes to transform inherited intellectual "poverty" into "insurance" against hardships for later generations.

Shchoev gambles on Alyosha's project: a plan to transform man through his belly à la Feuerbach's materialist credo "man is what he eats". The opportunistic bureaucrat needs a miracle to extricate the cooperative and his career from catastrophe. The result is a grotesque banquet in which the guests must swallow down noxious poisons without complaint. The hierarchy that terrifies Shchoev into submission also terrifies those beneath him: all succumb to paroxysms of pain and vomiting as result. Alyosha, aching "to achieve socialism more quickly," gets sharp retort from Shchoev's overconfident assistant: "Socialism will set in for the rational elements of society, but you will vanish without a trace. You are nothing, you need someone at your head" (37). Alyosha once again resembles the artist from "About Our Religion"; the "headless" bricoleur of the human soul.

Platonov's play highlights how capitalism's moral dangers have been interiorized within socialism. In an attempt to catch up and surpass capitalism, the Soviet Union has relied on

capitalism's hierarchies and exploitation. The mania for increasing productivity leads to counterproductive mistakes. Platonov rejects Soviet theatre's celebration of heroic, Stakhanovite work efforts; his plays criticize popular successes that hide the dangers of Soviet policies rather than affirm a fragile faith in socialist promises.

After the failure to invent "new forms of food"—a measure that would free the Soviet Union's agricultural production for international sale—the desperate Shchoev reconsiders the offers from European visitors to buy the Soviet Union's superstructure or "superstretched soul" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 10). The vulnerable state needs cash. The vulnerable Shchoev, whose high position cannot save him from higher authorities, needs to prove his practical abilities.

Platonov draws attention to the Faustian maneuvers of the Soviet Union: to survive outside pressures from capitalism, the Soviet Union must achieve economic, military, and scientific parity with Europe. However, the only means to do so is to sell its "natural" labor-intensive commodities to Europe in exchange for hard currency. This currency would then be reinvested in Western technologies and specialists who could help the Soviet Union develop its "head". To overcome the market, socialism heads head first into market practices, a gamble that threatens to transform the Soviet Union into a capitalist state.

Stervetsen and his daughter Serena, Danish representatives in the Soviet Union to acquire the "shock-working soul for Western Europe" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 10), first approach the trio of cultural workers. The most valuable product of Soviet industry is not a product in any straightforward sense. It is the soulful "superstructure" that moves workers to labor steadfastly; to endure their own exploitation with enthusiasm. Serena states "we need your celestial joy of terrestrial labor", her father adding "here you have a shock-working psyche. Enthusiasm is visible in every face" (10). The embodiment of ideology becomes central to this initial failed

negotiation: the committed artists are initially unmoved by promises of Western currency, arms, and technology. Not even the Professor Stervetsen's Marxist argument moves Alyosha and Miud: "where around here are we permitted to purchase the superstructure? [...] What do you need it for? You have the base, after all—so you can live for a time being on the foundation" (11).

A faithful devotion to work attracts the Westerners. Serena's language of the heart is telling:

The superstructure! The spirit of motion in the citizens's heart of hearts. The warmth above the icy landscape of your poverty! The superstructure!!! We want to purchase it here in your tsardom or swap it for our precise and sorrowful science. [...] The wind cries straight into our bored heart [...]our heart is no shock worker. (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 10)

Serena's hope to exchange Soviet transformative ethic's zeal for the "precise and sorrowful science" has no attraction to Miud. For Miud, this economic maneuver would not just be a betrayal, but also an impossibility due to the deep penetration of history into life. The embodiment of ideology constitutes the Soviet form of life; what she calls a "class face". She states that selling a party line is impossible for each individual thought only exists within its dialectical context: "how will they purchase an idea, when its inside our whole body?" (12).

However, circumstances change, demanding Shchoev to take drastic measures. Shchoev's monologue at the start of the banquet emphasizes his dire state:

I want to say something special to you, but I have grown unaccustomed to happiness of mood. I am tormented by worries about providing adequate food for the masses. Perplexity languishes within me... In view of the increased tempo of the masses' appetites, our cooperative system is confronted with one evident necessity— namely, to overcome some sort of evident underestimation of something... and so you just have to swallow your food, and when it lands in your stomach— well, let it sort things out for itself, let it feel bored there or rejoice. Now we must test in the depth of our torsos a new form of nourishment, one we have procured from the impetuously produced materials of raw Nature. Long Live the Five-Year-Plan-Now-Being-Fulfilled-in-Four. (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 41)

Shchoev proposes a sort of experiment, a test "in the depths of our torsos" to determine if agricultural engineering will be a viable strategy. His speech shows doubts as he haltingly explains the plan. Alyosha similarly reports that he has "put forth much thought from my torso" in designing the replacement food, a premonition of the food's dangerous misengineered qualities (37).

The failure of this desperate measure leads Shchoev to accept a gamble with even longer odds and treasonous overtones: the sale of the superstructure to the Western visitors. As A.A. Kretenin suggests, tragedy in Platonov results from the method of "trial and error" (68): humanity attempts to restore harmony between human beings and nature by guesswork. Shchoev and Alyosha must endure another trial in hopes of productive error.

Platonov reimagines Faust's economic transaction in a Soviet context. In Goethe's romantic retelling that rejects the Enlightenment rationalism of his era, Faust's sale cannot be a rational choice. If Faust had absolute knowledge necessary to make an informed decision, he would not need to consider Mephistopheles's offer. Likewise, for Christopher Marlowe within his time of post-Reformation rationalism, the medieval German myth emphasizes the degree of irrationality engaged to pursue rationality. Against the overwhelming scientism, certainty, and epic triumphalism of his times, Platonov invokes the Faust legend to explain that the pursuit of rationality and happiness is not itself rational or happy. In Goethe's *Faust*, the scholar justifies his deal with the devil with logic similar to Pascal's wager: if Faust remains as unhappy as he always has been despite the aid of the devil, he will remain free of bondage.¹⁷⁹ But if he experiences happiness, he will enter bondage with the benefit of having experienced positive feelings that he could not achieve on his own. Platonov's hazardous gamble is much the same. If

¹⁷⁹ Goldmann makes Goethe's *Faust* a paradigmatic example of a dialectical risk that either overcomes tragedy or repeats it (*The Hidden God* 301).

Soviet sacrifices bring forth human suffering, no major loss occurs as human history has always been synonymous with suffering. If the dangerous maneuvers bring forth rationality and prosperity, much has been won. Even if the gamble itself arose from demonic disregard for communist values.

How will Alyosha and Shchoev, each headless, negotiate the risky capitalist sale needed to save the cash-strapped socialist state? Strangely, the characters who favored the language of the heart switch their phrasings to the idiosyncratic “torso”. Watching Shchoev's negotiate, Alyosha alternates between sentimentalism and leftist radicalism:

Why is it, Comrade Shchoev, that when I look at you, and almost everyone, my heart starts to ache?" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 59)
 drive a harder bargain with the bourgeoisie for your torso, in which your ideological soul is quivering! Or have you stopped loving the republic, you bastard? (61).

Despite the upbraiding, Shchoev explains the difficulties of producing the superstructure and the expense of storing it in Soviet bodies. Speaking to his assistant, he affirms “all animals, Yevsei, love one another. But what we need now isn't love, it's the Party line” (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 49). Devaluing the sentiments unites the otherwise oppositional figures of Alyosha and Shchoev (49). As a negotiator, Shchoev seeks the largest sum of foreign currency possible, though he is still uncertain how feelings, habits, and beliefs can be shipped.

Bulgakov's famous retelling of the Faust myth builds upon Mephistopheles's pronouncement that he is “part of that force which would do evil evermore, yet creates the good” (*Faust* 159). Mephistopheles continues in the original “I am the spirit that negates. / And rightly so, for all that comes to be / Deserves to perish wretchedly; / 'Twere nothing better would begin. / [...] Thus everything your terms, sin, / Destruction, evil represent-- / that is my proper element” (161). Bulgakov's attraction to aestheticized evil arises from an attempt to find something eternal

that could outlive contemporary political powers. In contrast, Platonov's embrace of Mephistopheles finds a stronger resonance with the Goethean dialectical belief in the pursuit of life through death; of the good life through evil decisions. Faust's desire to strike such a dangerous bargain is the hope for some possibility to escape "the never-ending drone/ Which we must, our life long, hear, / Which hoarsely all our hours intone/ and grind into our ears" (175), reminding of the grinding repetitions that Platonov emphasizes.

Platonov returns to the salvific and counterintuitive Pauline hopes to "enslave slavery" or "take captivity captive" that dialectical thought inherits from Christian theologies. This hope to achieve good demands evil means. Shchoev's decision to set aside love and to embrace capitalistic exploitation is typical in Platonov's work. Though these counterintuitive plans are at times ironized and at others valorized, the endorsement of evil, imperfection, and irrationality as means to a dialectical transformation is central. Lola Debuser explains that Platonov's "agents of progress" must exert "inhuman efforts for the realization of the project, like Faust depends on the rightless slaves of hell" (Debuser). In Part Two of *Faust*, the blinded hero attempts to construct a perfect world through the terrible means of slavery.¹⁸⁰ Miud suggests similar dynamics: "Don't cry, Alyosha. Just close your eyes tight and I will lead you to socialism as if you were blind" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 70).

As negotiations progress, the difference between Shchoev and Alyosha becomes clear. Though circumstances move both toward transformative gambles, Alyosha's willingness to assume personal risk contrasts with the self-interest of Stalinist administrators. But it is not so much that Alyosha's goodness contrasts with Shchoev's banal evil: for Platonov, the good must

¹⁸⁰ Had Stalin struck a Faustian bargain? Did he too blindly embrace the slavery of the GULAG to prove "the labor of a thousand hands will achieve the higher goal / designed by a single mind" as the famed Pasternak translation emphasizes?

be pursued through diabolical ways as extreme as hatred. Instead, what separates the foils of *The Hurdy-Gurdy* is that Alyosha makes the bargain, putting his own body up as collateral. Alyosha agrees to marry the Westerner and serve as the container of the superstructure. Alyosha risks his Soviet humanity, knowing he might transform into the capitalist animal he abhors.

Shchoev also considers selling himself:

I'm to sell my soul for the sake for the Socialist Republic? Yes, I shall doom myself for the sake of socialism—so let socialism be content [...] I long to perish—the entire international proletariat will weep for me. Sad music will resound throughout Europe. (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 60)

But returning to self-interest, he decides to offer the “rational constituent element” and “pure idea” Kuzma (62, 65): Alyosha’s creation who is “firm, well seasoned, almost rational!” (65). The poet-engineer is thrown into the deal with his creation. In refusing to sell his own body, Shchoev walks away from the bargain that demands everything to be risked. Shchoev, a representative of the new class of Soviet administrators, is not willing to accept his own transformation, even into an honored martyr. Against Marxist doctrine, he foolishly believes he can work without being worked upon. He hopes to deliver transformation without experiencing the pains Stalin demanded.¹⁸¹

Heroism entails many crimes against reason, goodness, and humanity for Platonov’s tragic characters who are great in proportion to the immensity of their guilt. Shchoev acts as if he is not embarked on the Soviet experiment, trying to maintain a safe distance while outwardly performing his duties. Communism, for Platonov, makes common to every individual the great danger and suffering of transformation. As the play proves, all will be sacrificed in an ever-increasing sunk cost. Shchoev’s cowardice cannot save him.

¹⁸¹ V.C. Federov claims of both Goethe and Platonov, “only labor [...] the stressed spiritual work of every person [...] sometimes brings equilibrium to ‘thoughts and the world’; brings inner and outer harmony to the individual and Being” (266).

The play's falling action pits Alyosha and Shchoev against each other, despite their period of cooperation. Alyosha disassembles the malfunctioning Kuzma, thereby ruining the deal with the Westerners. Shchoev subsequently scapegoats Alyosha as a "class enemy" and "traitor" (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 70). The earnest Alyosha accepts this cynical displacement of blame, declaring his own crimes: "I wanted to create a hero, but he broke" (70). A chorus floods the stage, attacking Alyosha in a crowd scene. Shchoev's assistant declares that the poet-bricoleur was "a gift from God—but there is no God" (70). Alyosha castigates himself for not transforming into "iron"; for having been led astray by his own emotions and heart (73). His *hamartia* was his failed attempt to create the New Soviet Man. He is the tragic "broken hero" he believed Kuzma to be (70).

Goldmann's tragic Marxism demands that the dialectical thinker risk failure to prove humanity's heroic capability. The hero must bet on the "hidden God" that he cannot yet see or know with certainty. His fallen reason moves him to faith that communism alone can create rational human beings and the virtuous communities. For Goldmann, the tragic thinker fails to reconcile the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, destroying his material self in the process. The dialectical thinker takes the same risk in the name of the same goal: only the yet-unknown outcomes determine whether the sacrifices are successful sublations or superstitious sacrifices. Alyosha embodies this tragic Marxism.

The play could have ended with Alyosha's tragic downfall, satisfying Aristotelian principles. Each episode of the play moves necessarily from the previous, all demonstrating the contrast between Alyosha's heroic criminality and Shchoev's self-interested devotion to hierarchy. But the play continues beyond its logical conclusion. Miud's declaration of faith in

Stalin shifts the focus on a hero or criminal—doubles who each believe in destroying the existing moral order— who remains off-stage in the Politburo.¹⁸²

Rather than a tableau saturated with meaning, the play's final moments testify to uncertainty. A *coup de théâtre* occurs: the cliched messenger from the king arrives, Western theatre's most common *deus ex machina*. Shchoev, receiving the written message, must read aloud the news that all present, himself included, have already been sacrificed:

Stop, citizens. It seems we no longer exist. [now reading] ‘As of this April your Sandy Ravine Cooperative is scheduled for liquidation. [...] The reason: the above-mentioned inhabited locality is to be removed, in order to facilitate industrial exploitation of the subsoil, which contains deposits of carbon monoxide’ (*to the assembly*) I don’t understand. How come we’ve kept on being, when we haven’t existed for a long time? (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 80).

With no delay, a worker begins to disassemble (“liquidate” in the play’s terms) the set, stating that Moscow had determined this region to be “cleared out long ago [...] you were blocking the whole of our path” (81).

In contrived fashion, Platonov answers the socialist realist demand for realistic explanations. The mad behavior of the characters finds carbon monoxide poisoning as “objective cause of the district population's lack of consciousness” (*The Hurdy-Gurdy* 80). Platonov pays unsatisfying homage to the Marxist credo “being determines consciousness”: “do we exist because of consciousness, or because of carbon monoxide?” (80). But rather than making the play clearer through an ideological message, the final scene adds only confusion. The audience sits bewildered wondering whether the carbon monoxide explanation is joke at the expense of socialist realism or a genuine attempt at socialist realism. The fictional world unravels before the

¹⁸² Both *The Hurdy-Gurdy* and *Fourteen Little Red Huts* feature characters who declare unexpected faith in Stalin after the failure of Stalinist policies.

eyes of the audience: the set is spirited away and the characters stand pondering if they indeed are already dead.¹⁸³

As the play concludes, Miud sings a march about humanity's uncertain voyage into the future; “*touching a human being's bored and weary heart*” in Platonov's stage directions. But this heart is one of ancient sacrifice rather than humanist empathy. Alive in body but not in mind, the not-yet-human animals of the cooperative live out the final moments between the sacrificial blow and the loss of life. The triumphant marches of Soviet musical culture, notably Tretyakov's “Miud-March”, is transformed into a lamentation honoring those who must press onward beyond their own death; beyond the loss of traditional human sentiments.¹⁸⁴

Disavowing inherited terms of humanism, Platonov favors language of the body. To perfect the New Soviet Man and realize the ideal of communism, the beastly is purged in a tragic ceremony. Whether they give themselves freely to sacrifice (Alyosha) or reluctantly (Shchoev), the priestly-political class ordains them for simultaneous scapegoating and sacralization. These political decision makers, gambling demigods playing with the lives of others, never appear in the play.

This transformative path had already been embarked upon, but whether it was of material destruction or sacred transformation remained unknown. Maltseva describes that the characters:

not having agreed among themselves, not having understood nor accepted each other, all in the direct or figurative sense cease to exist as ‘defective goods,’ as

¹⁸³ T.V. Maltseva characterizes the ending as the destruction of the various schemes that had structured the play: “The community is destroyed [...] the systems of conflict are resolved, as noted, ‘in a mirage’ [...] with the equality of all characters in non-being” (176).

¹⁸⁴ As N.V. Kornienko notes, the lamentation had been excluded from the rituals of “Red Funerals” starting in the 1920's (107); Platonov's ending was an untimely gesture that insisted on the persistence of the tragic despite official Soviet optimism.

Platonov's first play co-authored with Boris Pilnyak, *Idiots on the Periphery*, has been read as response to Tretyakov's optimistic take on eugenics *I Want a Baby*. Following Thomas Lagernak's suggestion, E. Shubinaya explains the difference between these biopolitical works: “In *I Want a Baby* the new rational morality is contrasted with old, philistine one; the play concludes with positivity. In *Idiots on the Periphery*, the organizing, governmental beginning contrasts with disorganized, inert life: the play tragically concludes” (224).

‘improper superstructure’. But an opportunity for the positive resolution of the conflict is marked in the play: in the visible ‘emptiness of the world’ beyond the border of the destroyed institution there could begin a new life—there where the song of Miud is heard. (176)

For those willing to strain their eyes and ears, something of utopia is faintly perceptible in the emptiness of the stage. Platonov’s daring negation of his own artistic image apophatically gestures towards a communist utopia (no-place) apart from existing forms of life and policy. Epstein comments that even atheist twentieth-century Russian authors fall short of secularity, putting Platonov at the nexus of “demonic” and “apophatic” spirituality (*Russian Spirituality and the Secularization of Culture* 104). This characterization perfectly describes the play’s combination of the Faust myth with an avant-garde negation of its own representational qualities.

High Voltage: Falling Together with Soviet Power

Krashenina: the factory needs to be pushed faster, socialism won’t wait for us.
 Zhmyakov: We are afraid to risk the generator, comrade Krashenina. We could burn the coil.

Krashenina: Fine. But if you stop the factories, you ruin the plans— you risk not the generator, but the whole country.
 -----Andrei Platonov’s *High Voltage*

Platonov’s 1931 *Высокие напряжения* (*High Voltage*, though also translatable as *High Stress/Pressure/Tension*) shares a tragic chronotope with *The Hurdy-Gurdy*, though the setting shifts from the provinces to an urban factory.¹⁸⁵ The characters of the play both admire and fear the young Krashenina; the New Soviet Man is a woman, causing both excitement and resentment. Her indefatigableness reminds them of their own status as “defective products” (*Хөөөт Көөчөг* 150): “leftovers from wasted trivialities (*melochi*)” (138) and products of “that class that has

¹⁸⁵ Platonov began work on the play in 1929 under the title *Death Announcement* (*Объявление о смерти*), continuing with revisions of the text until 1940. The published version draws upon a 1931 draft, presumably that which was made available to RAPP and theatre workers. For a history of the text, see D. Moskovskaya’s “Первая редакция пьесы «Высокие напряжения»: «Объявление о смерти»” and Kornienko’s “Introduction and Notes” (316). The play remains untranslated into English.

already perished" (122). The young female engineer is testament to transformative potential: the revolutionary environment allows her to realize great capacities in a traditionally male-dominated field. Nevertheless, her commitment to the five-year plan of national transformation is absolute, demanding more from herself, her coworkers, and their equipment than they can give without risk. A notebook entry written contemporaneously with the play describes this type of character, emphasizing her "half-consciousness":

Here is the person:

Such a rush, such tempos, such motion of construction, of happiness, that the person rushes along the hallway of its life, being conscious of nothing, living in half-consciousness [полпамять], touching work, not accomplishing it, brushing aside people and the mind—and rushing, rushing, rushing" (Записные книжки: Материалы к биографии 99).

The frantic tragedy itself brushes aside the mind, leaving readers and audiences confused. The play, intended for production on Meyerhold's stage, sought to be a tragic take on the epic celebrations of Stakhanovite labor that enjoyed great popularity in the Soviet Union. Platonov's dramaturgy complicates theatrical successes such as Nikolai Pogodin's *Tempo* and *Poem of the Axe*.¹⁸⁶ Gambling for the fate of the whole country, the characters put both equipment and human lives at risk in a play that uses pounding rhythms, action sequences, and visual spectacle to create an environment of considerable pressure and confusion.

The play depicts the young engineer Krashenina's commitment to reforging labor. She believes that work can transform the power station and its older male engineers into useful parts of the Soviet Union. Of the plays triad of major characters, Krashenina is associated with a longing for communism, the heart, the torso, and a willingness to invite risk. Meshkov, whose name inspires associations of an empty container, is a superfluous engineer formed by the old world. He

¹⁸⁶ Platonov's *Fourteen Little Red Huts* overtly mocks Pogodin's triumphant *Poem of the Axe*, as Robert Chandler notes in his annotations to the English translation.

feels surpassed technically and emotionally in the Soviet Union despite his admiration for it, only deferring his suicide due to a series of tragic-comic mishaps. He expresses heartache, yearning, and other sentimental tropes in his frequent self-pitying depression. A notebook entry from the mid 1930's captures this sort of tragic figure: "The tragedy of being rubbed out, the tragedy of the 'left behind,' of he who is unneeded when building the sparkling world, the tragedy of the retiree—great anguish" (Андрей Платонов: Государственный житель 581). Finally, Abramentov, a former reactionary white-guardsman, returns from the capitalist world that he once embraced but now recognizes as a menace. He is associated with the mind and with bourgeois expertise. The director of the power station offers him work, despite his past sympathies: "Well, alright. We need your head. The heart you can keep sacred for remembrance, if you will be able to" (*Хоэс Ковчег* 122).

The older engineers have a strong devotion to the Soviet Union. Meshkov, believing almost naively in the capability of the New Soviet Man, hopes to help national transformation by purging the factory of his own defectiveness. He plans his sacrificial suicide with careful attention, comedically delaying it as the newspaper fails to print his obituary. Abramentov's relationship is more complicated. Like Kirilov of Dostoyevsky's *Demons*, Abramentov returns from the capitalist world eager for an opportunity to sacrifice himself so humanity can achieve its god-like potential. But with anguish and humor, Abramentov expresses serious doubts about whether his sacrifice will be for naught.

Meshkov's sincerity wonders why Abramentov had supported counter-revolution and lived in the hardships of the capitalist world: "The bourgeoisie—that's the world of the lonely, Serezha. There it is hard to be a person" (*Хоэс Ковчег* 119). Abramentov replies to this humanist concern "And I want it to be hard for the person—he is better, when he suffers" (119). Only transformative,

crushing pain offers the opportunity to be something better than man. Nevertheless, Abramentov affirms he is now firmly committed to the richness of Soviet suffering, having grown disgusted with capitalism's shallow cruelty. He wishes to dedicate his labor to the construction of Socialism in which suffering might be made useful. Answering Meshkov's question if he has returned as a spy or saboteur, Abramentov affirms:

No. I personally examined the whole world and acknowledged that communism is necessary. But I acknowledged only in thought, by artificial pressure. Now I want to know socialism in feeling and in action... Soviet power still hasn't convinced me, and I have already stopped wanting to convince it. Perhaps, we will hug and fall together onto the empty earth. (120)

Abramentov strives for a synthesis of practical and theoretical knowledge. He wishes to know in his heart what he knows rationally: that socialism is humanity's only chance to transcend its current form. He understands this position leaves him at a remove from the Soviet power. He aims for a partial reconciliation that will not be a triumphant homecoming but instead a tragic mutual "hug and fall". He and Soviet power will finally struggle together towards self-transcendence, though they will like fail.

The play focuses on the contrast of these two men of the old world. Meshkov hopes to sacrifice himself for the Soviet order that seems strong and just, while Abramentov throws himself into back-breaking labor to aid risky attempts at transformation. Abramentov, seeing how his old friend Meshkov who cannot cope with Soviet work expectations, declares: "in this space lives one little Soviet fool, and it's not so good for him. Capitalism, the bastard, didn't save him and socialism, probably, helps poorly" (*Хөөв Көөчөг* 120).

Quickly, the difference between the two men becomes apparent. Mocking Meshkov's inability to contribute to the Soviet state, Abramentov declares "you are of course a soft-hearted person, a liberal, a humanist. And such always pity themselves most of all" (*Хөөв Көөчөг* 121).

Not believing the Soviet Union is already morally good, Abramentov shows allegiance to a hazardous socialism that disavows existing humanism.

Nevertheless, the New Soviet Woman Krashenina views both of their commitments to socialism as reactionary and unduly fixated on tragic fatalism. She insists that the older men need not sacrifice themselves for the Bolshevik cause despite their fantasies, telling Abramentov that he needs to fulfill the role of an “engineer” rather than a romantic “cavalier” (*Ноев Ковчег* 135). Upon hearing of Abramentov’s fantasy of dying for the Soviet cause, Krashenina affirms the anti-tragic beliefs of Marxism: “Why do you need to die, Abramentov? You know the science of the working class poorly. Why would it want your death? It needs you to become a comrade of the proletariat” (136). As the play progresses, Abramentov takes Krashenina’s advice, devoting himself to labor for the sake of both himself and the Soviet Union. He affirms his desire to live, being carried away with enthusiasm towards transformative labor: “I want to be a friend of the proletariat, I want to live hard and long with it” (138).

Despite taking this lesson from the science of Marxism, Abramentov and another engineer later sacrifice themselves to fix an overworked generator. The dialectic, building on the notion of tragic knowledge, demands Abramentov’s destruction at the very moment in which he secures an identity. At the moment he stops desiring self-negation, he must sacrifice the life he now cherishes. Both men are blinded during their on-stage death, cementing the association with tragedy.

In another reversal, Krashenina’s castigation of tragic, superstitious, and anti-Bolshevik fatalism disappears as she looks over her coworker’s corpse at the wake. She recognizes that his self-destruction might not have been cunningly avoided, despite her optimism about human capability. As a minor character states at the memorial, “the revolution has taken—and the revolution will give” (*Ноев Ковчег* 143). A verse from Job is subtly altered, ascribing to the

communism the mysterious indifference of the Old Testament God. Against the past tense of the Biblical verse, Platonov emphasizes that communism so far has only taken while its gifts are deferred.

Kornelii Zelinsky reprimanded the play on grounds of this fatalistic acceptance of tragic sacrifice in the now infamous literary evening devoted to Andrei Platonov at RAPP. The event—a public ambush in which Platonov was humiliated by the Stalinist literati—gave the critic and author Zelinsky a chance to endorse anti-tragic Marxism:

this note of self-sacrifice dominates the whole play. This is its main defect, its main ideological defect. The working class did make great sacrifices, but in the socialist construction it never felt encroached upon, that this was a burden, a lead weight on its shoulders. It lives in all directions and this tension is a creative act. (“Transcript of a Literary Evening” 67)

As M. Moskovskaya notes, Platonov wrote this text with explicit hopes of proving his ideological correctness after the harsh public rebuke from Stalin following Platonov’s “For Future Use” (186-187). Unable to earn a living, the matter was of existential importance, leading Platonov to a self-described “tactless” attempt to reconcile with Stalin (*Страна философов* 619-620). Platonov’s desperate letter to the leader in 1932 explicitly explains that Stalin’s blessing would end the suppression of Platonov’s work and to save him from conditions that “one human heart could not withstand” (*Страна философов* 619-620). In the pathos-filled letter, Platonov enclosed a peace offering: a manuscript of *High Pressure*.

But Platonov, whose conceptions were often slightly out of sync with the times, did not recognize the anti-tragic turn of official Soviet art. He was caught unaware that his own justification for the dangerous gambles of Stalinist transformational policies would be unacceptable: socialist realism demanded hiding realities, not endowing them with sense and

meaning. In his quest to prove his adherence to Soviet Marxism, Platonov further endangered himself.

Zelinsky, despite serving as a partisan hitman, correctly identifies an attraction to sacrifice in Platonov. For a humanity with a “tiny dream of perfection and power”, sacrifice is the means to purchase (*купить*) redemption (*искупление*). Zelinsky notes that labor and sacrifice are the means of transformation in the play. Zelinsky wishes for sacrifice that is purely productive and creative; sacrifice that risks nothing.

The fact that a former white guardsman, a “merry scoundrel”, performs the sacrifice irks the critic (a judgment shared by other critics at the time):

There is a young woman engineer, a Communist, who comes into the room of an old engineer. She is a relief engineer, and she is so exhausted that she falls asleep. While she is asleep a breakdown occurs, an electrical machine is overloaded. Workers keep coming to tell her ‘something is wrong,’ and in her sleep, like a somnambulist, she answers irrelevantly. This creates an impression of obsession, a labor obsession in which a person lives. Creative, volitional qualities are not emphasized, but rather a labor hopelessness, an obsession, which the workers exhibit in a lethargic state. There is even a ‘merry scoundrel’ figure, a potential saboteur... (“Transcript of a Literary Evening” 67)

Had the play been more like Vsevolod Vishnevskiy’s 1933 *Optimistic Tragedy*— the theatrical sensation that moved audiences with heroic sacrifice sure of their own success— Zelinsky might not have been so bothered by its ritualistic tones. Yet Zelinsky notes that even heroic Soviet labor appears like the alienated labor of capitalism. He writes “this element of deadness, of mechanical actions, as Platonov was saying, is stamped on these workers, too” and “there is a note of a certain depressedness, of the oppression of labor, rather than a note of optimism of labor” (68). The narrow-minded ideologue sees Platonov as critical of Bolshevik ambitions due to Platonov’s emphasis that current labor is not purely “volitional” and creative. But Platonov engages with his normal fixation: how are rational and virtuous human beings to arise from those who still labor

under directives and coercion during this necessarily imperfect transitional time? How will contemporary slavery serve as means of eventual liberation?

The play gives ample evidence that it is Platonov, not Zelinsky, who probes the aporias of Soviet Marxism with intelligence. Again, familiar Platonovian language of heart, mind, torso, and other embodied metaphors describes the difficult transition from animal to human; from body to mind. Like Alyosha and the “headless” prophet of the new religion, Krashenina represents the risk we must take in the name of the human reason we do not yet have. *Fourteen Little Red Huts*, the only self-identified tragedy of Platonov’s oeuvre, similarly features a similar capable young woman moved by a yet “unconscious heart” towards the Soviet ideal of “consciousness” (114). The “somnambulism” that Zelinsky disparages is the New Soviet Man’s complete commitment to transformation that allows her passionate “heart” to drive the body and mind beyond their limits. Krashenina mutters engineering directives during her onstage sleep. Her heart-felt refusal to abandon work leads her half-conscious self to insist “I’m obviously not sleeping, I only am pretending [...] No—only my mind has grown tired, but my heart still pounds” (*Ноев Ковчег* 124). Working to build the world that must be in place before full-wakefulness is possible, Krashenina is still more body than mind and thus error-prone.

While the foolish Meshkov admires this woman as a living ideal of the New Soviet Man, he still inspects her half-slumbering body with mysterious wonder that leads him to carefully taste “the surface of her torso”:

Sleeps the new man... sleeps in the old way. [...] Probably, there is something strange inside her. What a truly good creature-- demands nothing, complains about nothing, loves something distant and trades for that distant thing her passing youth. Poor new man, what gift is inside you? And in me there is no gift—I take pleasure in her, but I myself want to eat. She, probably, never remembers food [...] I eat and I yearn. (*Ноев Ковчег* 125)

Within the ostensibly realist play, Meshkov's strange interest in food, taste, and the torso amidst his self-pitying monologue alerts the audience to the displacement of sentimental as well as corporeal vocabularies. He admires her willingness to sacrifice her youth for the ideal, regretting his own lack of fortitude against animal desire. Nevertheless, he realizes she is still a "creature" that "sleeps in the old way". The New Soviet Man seems stuck in between the old and new—between body and mind—as Meshkov notes. Her exciting futuristic strength and cleanliness shocks him, as does her disappointingly atavistic abusive marriage.

Abrementov sees in Krashenina a driving impulse of rational consciousness attempting to assert itself from the unconscious: "what a strange creation—sleeps and thinks" (*Ноев Ковчег* 124). While Meshkov's socialist humanist recognizes a strange "creature," Abramentov's transformative ethic sees a "strange creation" that can strive toward its own reconstruction.

After Krashenina's criticism, Abramentov decides to attempt to be like her: to endorse the "risk" of pushing the generator and his own body beyond rational limitations in the name of a salvific reward. Meshkov initially envies the dead Abramentov who achieves the dignity he yearns for, lamenting his own lack of courage.

Nevertheless, Meshkov eventually commits himself to life and transformation after the head of the power station demands that Meshkov stop imagining his own "torso" to be bourgeois (150). Abandoning his language of "humanist" sentimentalism that Abramentov mocked, Meshkov's final lines emphasize that he is now alive, strong, and capable, having been reborn as someone Soviet and new "after the death" of his previous self (*Ноев Ковчег* 153).

The play, in some ways, provides an ideologically-acceptable ending. Abramentov is honored, Krashenina learns to temper her eagerness for socialism with appreciation for others, and Meshkov decides to devote himself to transformative labor. The factory leader, speaking in

Stalinist clichés, restores order, delivering pep talks with the aggressiveness that Soviet culture often mistook for wisdom and strength. He threatens the remaining characters, demanding that they shape up after the turmoil of the accident; he even offers to shoot Meshkov if the man feels too weak kill himself. The play appears ready to conclude with an understandable Soviet moral. The boss states with precise clarity that some characters will be offered a resort trip to recover: “It’s necessary to end this psychology in the factory. The dead will be preserved, and the living cured” (*Ноев Ковчег* 151).

But Aristotelian intelligibility is shattered in the play’s strange conclusion. With seemingly no role aside from providing comedic relief from the jagged rhythms of the factory, a strange mailman enters for a second time.¹⁸⁷ Acting as a stage fool earlier, the simple mailman delivers his mail under music played on a radio, disrupting the industrial noises with Chopin’s “Funeral March” (Piano Sonata N. 2).

His return is sudden a coup de théâtre, revealing answers to questions that had not concerned audience members. As in *The Hurdy-Gurdy*, the mailman becomes a stage messenger who delivers a letter from a higher power; the unseen political authorities in Moscow. But rather than simply delivering the message, the messenger highlights his own centrality to events. He states “Read [the letter] while I am here—what do they inform—a Soviet signalman should interest himself with the sense of the products his labor. But, perhaps, I walk without sense and waste for no reason the basic capital of my body: there it is—a defect!” (*Ноев Ковчег* 152). Cementing the laboring body as the “defective” capital of the state, Platonov interjects an unexpected reminder. Sacrifices might not bring rewards: they might aim forward “without sense”.

¹⁸⁷ He complains that the factory workers, having adopted the new Soviet tempo, never stand still enough for him to deliver their mail.

The message states that the factory should have received a radio apparatus in the mail. Had it been installed, the factory worker Zhmyakov concludes that the tragic deaths would have been averted. Realizing the device is the very radio that the mailman uses to entertain himself, Zhmyakov wishes to kill the mailman for his selfish oversight. The mailman defends himself rather than accepting fault:

I thought it was a nothing! Without addressee! And I love radioscience and technology and made myself a receiver, so I could have music, when I worry or when I'm bored. I already for five days walk under marches [...] There's already no reason to shoot anyone.... You yourselves are guilty: you inculcated in me a love to scientific-technological achievements, allowed me to go into the future—Here I am striving." (*Нөөз Көңчег* 153)

Another bricoleur, the mailman hopes for a triumphant march into the future, yet Soviet ideology had instilled in him a love of engineering that exceeded good sense. But the fault belongs to the Soviet authorities, cultural workers, and technical intelligentsia for giving a simple man love for transformation. The mailman, who has cost multiple lives, is guilty for the very same action that Platonov celebrates in others: the desire to transform oneself. Platonov's characters are tragic heroes: they are holy criminals, great and guilty for the exact same reason.

The final line of the play belongs to the mailman: "Live harmlessly and heroically, like I do... Well, then it's goodbye-- I am going to go be useful. Eh, Fate is a problem" (*Нөөз Көңчег* 153). Accepting the risk of his behavior as inevitable, he affirms his heroism. Rather than epically overcoming fate, he concedes fate as a problem that seems beyond solving, admitting a tragic condition for humanity. Nevertheless, he does not regret his failed experiments. The strange conclusion transforms the fool into the central figure of the play in a sudden reversal. Platonov's love for self-taught engineers whose ambitions exceed their skills makes the irresponsible character a tragic hero.

Seemingly obsequious, Platonov answered his persecutor Zelinsky with deference in likely hope of saving his publishing career: “I told comrade Zelinsky that this work—the play—was an experiment, it was written in haste, this haste was because of certain working conditions” (*Hoeß Koecher* 72). Soviet demands to work with haste—to complete more than one working day daily—moves Platonov and his heroes to attempt more than they can accomplish.

Platonov concedes his experiment failed, though this self-criticism conceals self-praise. Platonov views the engineer who must build something beyond his capabilities as a heroic figure. Continuing his answer to Zelinsky, Platonov distinguishes himself further in defiance of his persecutors:

My works, including some unpublished ones, are simply an attempt, perhaps poorly executed and therefore the critics did not sense it. Therein lies the difference between my work and all traditions. [...] this attempt was made, it sets apart, it atones for many things. I will continue this attempt by other means in the future; it constitutes the main idea in literary art—the establishment of communism itself. Though I have not succeeded, fruitless attempts were made. You will not find such attempts in traditional sources... (“Transcript of a Literary Evening” 73)

Platonov shows defiant pride in his attempts to create a new future, despite his failures. Understood as an attempt to incarnate the communism through trial and error, Platonov’s art embraces the transformative ethic, atoning in his view for whatever political shortcomings others attribute to him.

Tragic Prose: *Indefinite Transformation/Destruction*

In the novel *Happy Moscow*, Platonov depicts how his characters bodies and minds break down. The epic ambitions of cultural and intellectual leaders dissolve into restless searching for a life apart from previous conceptions of achievement. Such losses of limb and purpose are not coded as strictly irredeemable injuries. For Platonov, they are also the opening of another path for the transformative goals of Soviet Marxism. This route was unlikely to succeed, but so too

was the 1930's fixation on happiness. Sentimental tropes of head and heart, a fixation with the torso, and finally an investigation of the cerebrospinal system proliferate in the text.¹⁸⁸

Platonov charts a course for protagonist Sartorius, a once-renowned scientist who achieves a life of limping devotion to others. Though this existence seems imperfect, Platonov emphasizes its dignity with both sincerity and irony. Having renounced himself and happiness, the doctor Sambikin describes the changes in his former rival: "the reason for his eye-illness lay in the remote depth of his body, perhaps in his heart [...] Sartorius's constitution was, on the whole, in process of indefinite transformation" (*Happy Moscow* 102).

As the translators note, Platonov's manuscript has multiple complexities. Written during debates about the new Soviet constitution, usage of the term "constitution" implies both the body politic and the New Soviet Man. Platonov seeks health in what looks disaster for both the state and the human body. But textual editors face another difficulty. The word "transformation" is available, but so too does Platonov pencil an alternative: "destruction". The translators found themselves forced to make the decision that Platonov, writing without hope of publication, did not make. Deciding on the optimistic "transformation," the translation shrewdly recognizes that "indefinite" possibilities arise from tragic accidents.

But the full complexity of Platonov's art is in his indecision; in the lingering undecidability between "transformation" and "destruction". This tragic knot cannot be cut without certain interpretive recklessness. Bakhtin noted that the chronotope of epic included "closed-time" in which possibilities have already realized themselves: Platonov's tragic form is open, allowing the possibility of reversals both messianic and catastrophic. As Epstein suggests,

¹⁸⁸ A major storyline concerns Sambikin, a Soviet doctor and researcher, as he searches the human body for a mysterious substance that could play a role in overcoming of death.

ambiutopian writers like Platonov are “keenly aware of their dramatic interchangeability” of utopia and dystopian futures (“Ambiutopia, ambiutopianism”).

In classical economics, the sunk-cost fallacy dictates that costs already incurred should not affect future expenditures. Rather than saying “double or nothing”, the ideal rational actor leaves the table. Behavioral economics notes that human behavior is far from rational. The workers of *The Foundation Pit* feel greater urgency to succeed with each successive sunk Soviet cost. With every dead kulak and with every workplace maiming, the collateral of human bodies—the impoverished state had nothing else to wager—was put at stake in a string of terrible, losing bets. While Platonov makes us aware of this Soviet madness, his writing also shows how human beings might feel the pull to redeem lost lives and human suffering through increasingly long-shot gambles. Scribbling in his notebook, Platonov wrote “The Revolution is like a I.O.U. (when you have no money)” (Записные книжки: Материалы к биографии 99).

Platonov helps us see the flaws in revolutionary interventions, but so could he stoke desires for resurrection: to outcapitalize capitalism, to enslave slavery, to bring death to death, and to perform all the other Christo-Marxian miracles of transformation. Platonov is not guiltless, but criminality is precondition to heroism in the tragic political aesthetic tradition; a tradition that the easy moralism of contemporary thought too often neglects.

As the Western scholar says to the New Soviet Man figure in *Fourteen Little Red Huts*, “your heart is more intelligent than my head” (122). Platonov’s work moves us to consider the rationality of the seemingly irrational: the sacrifice of our cherished reason only to receive it back two-fold by the grace of Communism, a leap of political faith.

Platonov sought salvation through the unlikely cooperation of modern technologies, contemporary political ideologies, and ancient faith. In “Eternal Life” (1920), Platonov includes

an unattributed epigram: “we are dying for the last time” (*Андрей Платонов: Сочинения* 66).

Eternal life will not be achieved through Christianity’s “quiet, childish joy, but through labor, through millions of machines, through war, through death, through mistakes” (66). He concludes austerely: “we must die in order for those who follow us to be born and live [...] Labor until death, labor for all of life, from one’s toenails to flaming consciousness, work without end and without remembering— that is our meaning and our vindication, our payment for life” (67).

Observing the left tragic religion is difficult: the costs exceed what feels sensible to pay in the estimation of the unfaithful.

Postscript.

In Adorno's criticism, the "picture-book which Brecht needs to spell out his thesis prevents him from proving it" ("Commitment" 186). Communication is on the side of inherited meanings and grammars, ignoring the negative mimesis that is the task of art. For Adorno, "the notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world. The stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners, who could only be rescued from deception by refusing it" (193). Dismissing Brechtian theatre and Sartre's engagement as preaching to the choir (185), Adorno declares that committed art fails "to understand what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate" (180).

In an essay about Brecht, Blanchot also emphasizes the political potential of a theatre that disavows intelligibility. He claims that Brecht, for all his valorization of alienation and estrangement, believes in a "good" strangeness and a "bad strangeness" ("The Effect of Strangeness" 366).¹⁸⁹ Good strangeness rids an object of its conventional ideological mystifications. It grants power and knowledge over something outside us, "permitting us to name it, to make it signify, and to modify it: a mighty and reasonable power, the great driving force of human progress" (366). Such a strangeness conceives of distance as a necessary condition for knowledge.

However, Blanchot argues that the "bad strangeness" has more radical potential: it makes objects less known, thereby contesting reification even further. Such defamiliarizations, as if by hypnotism, lure audiences to go beyond common images of human progress that have grown suspicious. For Blanchot, fascination with the strange work of art, in which the viewer risks

¹⁸⁹ "une « bonne » et une « mauvaise » étrangeté" (*L'Entretien infini* 443).

losing herself, offers something better than political pedagogy: “through a leap, we move to encounter one another and to where the perilous metamorphosis is accomplished” (365).

Despite Blanchot’s appreciation for Brecht as a great artist, he contends that the ambition to communicate with the audience remained within bourgeois forms of drama and civic argument. Built on a “power of communication that is always yet to be born”, Brecht’s theatre reinforces the liberal art and politics he took as his enemy (367). Brecht, unlike Genet in Blanchot’s view, sought to make the audience a dispassionate “*third party*”, attentively witnessing the performance without risking investment (361).

Blanchot contends “the universal form of the bourgeois drama has made us forget [...] that the theatre is not in the least a place of conversation” (367). The strange other drama Blanchot envisions produces an “encounter that is unexpected, violent, and sudden” (367). Rather than intelligible and articulate, the performance would be a “rare event, marvelous and perilous” (367). In a characteristically cryptic concluding sentence, Blanchot calls it “a tragedy without a hero, a language almost without a subject” (367).

Could this theatre, without liberal or grammatical subject, be the *left tragic theatre*? Of the “community without community”—whose impossibility only increases its capacity to fascinate—that so many have strained to imagine and to incarnate?

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