

Tragedy after Darwin

by

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Abstract

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*Tragedy after Darwin* is the first study to recognize novelistic tragedy as a sub-genre of British and European modernism. I argue that in response to secularizing science, authors across Europe revive the worldview of the ancient tragedians. Hardy, Woolf, Pessoa, Camus, and Beckett picture a Darwinian natural world that has taken the gods' place as tragic antagonist. If Greek tragic drama communicated the amorality of the cosmos via its divinities and its plots, the novel does so via its characters' confrontations with an atheistic nature alien to redemptive narrative. While the critical consensus is that Darwinism, secularization, and modernist fiction itself spell the "death of tragedy," I understand these writers' oft-cited rejection of teleological form and their aesthetics of the momentary to be responses to Darwinism and expressions of their tragic philosophy: characters' short-lived moments of being stand in insoluble conflict with the expansive time of natural and cosmological history.

The fiction in this study adopts an anti-Aristotelian view of tragedy, in which character is *not* fate; character is instead the victim, the casualty, of fate. And just as the Greek tragedians depict externally wrought necessity that is also divorced from mercy, from justice, from theodicy, Darwin's natural selection adapts species to their environments, preserving and destroying organisms, with no conscious volition and no further end in mind – only because of chance differences among them. The variations upon which natural selection acts are matters of chance: they cannot be fully predicted and occur regardless of their adaptive benefit to the creatures involved. In both tragic drama and evolutionary biology, one cannot work backward from fortune to foresight. As a result, tragedy and evolutionary theory have faced analogous interpretive distortion. Chance, the signature of the Greek gods, has also appeared to underwrite the evolution of life – and yet a preponderance of theorists have sought to banish the aleatory from narratives of individual and species-wide destiny. When Hardy, Woolf, Pessoa, Camus, and Beckett therefore reprise Attic tragedy's worldview – constituting a literary backlash against comforting, anthropocentric narratives of human origins and human fates – they recast the Greek gods of tragedy as Darwin's godless nature.

My project opens by contrasting philosophy's and anthropology's readings of Greek tragedy and the natural world with this fiction's own. I show that Darwin himself grappled with the notion of a cosmic lottery of fate in the biosphere, in which no moral, loving, or teleological power determined each organism's lot or the future of species. My first chapter argues that Hardy's tragic novels proceed to indict manmade narratives that cast mortal luck and the

cruelties of men as the victim's wrongdoing. The impassioned narrator of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and the titular character of *Jude the Obscure* resist the Aristotelian notion that protagonists initiate their own catastrophes, are the causal agents of their demises; these defiant figures eschew, too, Christianized tragedy that understands heroes and heroines to be morally responsible for their misfortunes in a providential universe. Although Woolf is often seen as a comedic author, I contend in my second chapter that she develops Hardy's atheistic sense of the tragic – in her words, Hardy's aesthetic that allows us to “feel that we are backing human nature in an unequal contest” against “Nature as a force.” Woolf perfects a novelistic structure that accentuates rebellious subjectivity at odds with an affectless environment. Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* and Bernard in *The Waves* envy the longevity of wind and waves and seek to secure for their treasured moments the permanence of the “granite” (Woolf's elected noun) of logical universals – all the while knowing that their moments in time cannot possess such solidity. Representing the natural world, its forces and processes, elemental materials and organic growths, as a site of extrahuman persistence and unpredictable chance, Woolf rejects vitalist and theistic professions of the underlying security of human life within this larger totality. Woolf rejects as well ritualistic and mythical construals of tragedy as the genre that redeems our mortal fragility. Woolf's tragic form carries with it an ethics of human limitation and interdependence, and her characters do not equate their Sisyphean pursuit of happiness with the denial or subjugation of nonhuman otherness.

Reaching across the Channel in my third and fourth chapters, I turn more explicitly to a form of contrast – between tragedy's moments of affirmation and the siren song of negation – that emerges within the novels of Hardy and Woolf and is essential to the oeuvres of Pessoa, Camus, and Beckett. Pessoa's Baron of Teive composes his suicide note to silence the grief that attends tragedy. His foil is Pessoa's Darwinian nature poet, Alberto Caeiro, who expressly condemns Nietzsche's “wisdom of Silenus,” that never to have been born is best. Caeiro actively resists the impulse to merge with the insentient environment that time's passing on occasion inspires in him. Camus' magisterial negative examples of *The Stranger* and *The Fall* display characters who do cultivate states of ethical indifference akin to nature's own. These, in turn, stand in opposition to Camus' corpus of fiction based on Woolfian moments of being, and on the literary and ethical merits of resisting, not emulating or eluding, our tragic antagonists: the absurdity of the cosmos and the men who adopt its inhumanity. Individual and ideological denials of personhood and shared defenses of it prove the antimonies of the modernist response to a tragic universe. In my final chapter, therefore, what I argue to be Beckett's narrator's life-negating pursuit of nonhuman quiescence in *The Unnamable* finds its antidote in *Company's* resuscitating endeavor to people its solitude. I thus offer a fresh account of modernism's suicides, nihilists, and murderers; my work is unique in suggesting that such characters aim to suppress tragic knowledge with their strategies to deny life. A nihilistic posture toward existence – valuing nothing – serves to transform the very pains of tragic finitude, powerlessness, and inexplicable fortune into the calm of indifference. Yet characters rarely attain this degree of dispassion, fail to live a peril-free life, are disturbed by their still resurgent anguishes and attachments. Unconcern itself may also trouble them, feel distressingly vacuous or ethically remiss. I close my project with a theory of literary criticism: studying characters from whose behaviors we recoil, immersing ourselves in modernism's negative examples, we disclose our own ethical commitments.

For my mother

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## Introduction

### Attic Novelists

It has come to seem a critical commonplace that tragedy and the modernist novel are, formally and philosophically, antitheses. But why this purported chasm between genres? What in their reception histories – in their presumed worldviews – has committed them to antipathy, in the minds of many? This question is of particular saliency because novelists themselves contest such a schism. Thomas Hardy speaks of his novels' "tragic machinery" (*J* 7). Virginia Woolf is certain that there is "room in a novel for ... tragedy" (*GR* 141). Albert Camus labors to resolve "the problem of modern tragedy," that of its new "tragic language" (*LCE* 317, 307). Samuel Beckett determines that tragic characters commit the "original and eternal sin ... of having been born" and dramatizes their plight in his fiction (*P* 67).

In 1961, however, George Steiner publishes *The Death of Tragedy*, in which he argues that the genre has ceased to be. Steiner contends that so pervasive is post-Enlightenment cultural optimism it leaves little room for the Attic representation of "obscure fatalities and misjudgments" – insurmountable forces, insoluble conflicts, and undeserved losses (6). Steiner is largely correct: both Christianity and secular, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century progressivist narratives of history hew to anti-tragic "all's well that ends well" storylines. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpretations of natural history also endeavor, as we will see, to cast a cosmic lottery of fate as divine comedy. Likewise, the new field of anthropology, in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, claims to discover a redemptive mythic structure underlying ancient tragedy and all social productions: the sacrifice of the individual ensures the renewal of the group. Edward Tylor, James Frazer, and Jane Harrison in England make the case for this archetypal, regenerative ritual. Even philosophers of the tragic itself seek to contain or to transform the radical contingency at the heart of the Athenian plays; tragedy must fit the mold of cultural optimism as well. According to philosophers and literary critics, tragedy must stand as a testament to the grandeur, the solace of collective human destiny, as György Lukács maintains – whereas in his view it is the antisocial, pessimistic, even nihilistic modernist novel that communicates "transcendental homelessness" (*T* 41).

Countering this division, modernist critic F. L. Lucas writes witheringly of the tendency to whitewash the Greek tragedians. Lucas remarks in his 1927 *Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics*, which Virginia and Leonard Woolf published: "Does the world of tragedy or the tragedy of the world really bear any resemblance to this Universe squirted with philosophic rose-water?" (43). Speaking of Hegel in particular, Lucas remarks that "many another Dr. Pangloss has endeavored to make [us] swallow the world like a pill by coating it with sugar" (43). Lucas puts his finger on the reason for this philosophic need to make lemonade out of tragedy's lemons: "the problem of tragedy becomes one with the whole problem of evil. 'Poetic justice' – how hard the craving for it has died!" (99). Iconoclastically, Lucas asserts instead: "the Universe may proceed by law; but it knows no justice. For its laws are those of cause and effect, not of right and wrong. Similarly, in the life that tragedy pictures, there may or may not be justice: but there must be law, not figs growing on thistles, if we are to feel that inevitability which a play needs in order to convince" (105). Lucas likens tragic to natural law: the inevitability of both narrative and biological sequences can convince without proving moral or mindful of human interests. The novelists in this study, even more so, make such a connection between tragic necessity and the

natural world, resisting the conviction that the very secularism, science, and fiction of their moment are anathema to tragedy – rather than the breeding-ground for its neo-Greek revival.

Modernist novelists gravitate toward Greek tragic conflict, restaged within a Darwinian cosmos, precisely to elude consolatory, rose-tinted narratives. Pursuing the specter of life's unwarranted, uncompensated losses, they sound the depths of character by representing what lies outside of it – the inhumanity of the universe, and of persons, that menaces protagonists, and their resultant, valiant, ephemeral attempts at self-preservation. This fiction animates characters whose defiant subjectivities are pitted against annihilating external forces that they cannot overcome. The malleability of the novel allows Woolf, for instance, to present the natural world as a locus of impersonal fatality – not as a personified deity in a drama – that heralds the extinction of what she aptly calls characters' *moments* of being. Max Scheler, writing on tragedy in 1923, theorizes a similar tragic structure, illustrating it with Icarus' flight. The closer Icarus' wings bear him to the sun – the closer he comes to possessing what he most values – the more the sun melts his wings and ensures his fall ("On the Tragic" 22). Albert Camus, too, elaborates a comparable, a "Sisyphean" theory of tragedy – of paradises lost, of "this unseizable moment slipping through my fingers like a ball of quicksilver" (*Notebooks 1935-42* 9). Camus critiques Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) for portraying a central character who grieves because such "perfect moments" do not exist at all (*N* 63). Camus writes in response to Sartre that "it is the failing of a certain literature to believe life is tragic because it is wretched. ... Life can be magnificent and overwhelming – that is its whole tragedy. Without beauty, love, or danger, it would be almost easy to live" (*LCE* 201).

Hardy's late-Victorian fiction, Woolf's high modernism, and the modernist and post-war oeuvres of Fernando Pessoa, Camus, and Beckett thus rekindle a Greek perspective in which the universe is replete with love and danger, and devoid of salvation or poetic justice. Euripides' chorus in *Alcestis* paints this picture:

I find  
nothing stronger than Necessity.  
There is no cure –  
.....  
Lady, I pray you, do not come at me.  
For whenever Zeus nods yes  
you bring it to pass.  
Your will can crush iron.  
And your spirit is a cliff that knows not shame. (1.835-7, 1.845-849, trans. Carson)

Neither goddess Necessity nor precipitous cliff knows moral compunction, however lawfully each behaves; nor is fickle, nodding Zeus more than a personification of chance. This image of Zeus indeed suggests two Greek associations with the chance involved in tragic fate: Zeus' nod may be 1) a unique occurrence, outside of consistent, predictable causality, and 2) done without purpose or end in mind, or none we can discern. Thus chance events are allied with inscrutable motivation in two registers: that of cause and effect and that of right and wrong. It is this dual inexplicability, rational and moral, that attends the origins of tragic doom to which Sophocles' choruses allude also:

You see how little compassion the Gods

have shown in all that's happened; they  
who are called our fathers, who begot us,  
can look upon such suffering.

No one can foresee what is to come. (*Women of Trachis* 1266-70, trans. Jameson)

Euripides' irreverent characters insist, too, that "no one foresaw it" and that "time does not know how to keep our hopes safe" (*Hippolytos* 1.1573, trans. Carson; *Herakles* 1.487, trans. Carson).

For this reason, Socrates in Plato's *Republic* objects to the tragedians' presentation of life: not because it is false but because it is too revelatory and disquieting. Tragedy, says Socrates, showcases men who cannot "accept the fall of the dice" in all its arbitrariness, and behave "like children who have fallen and who hold on to the hurt place and spend their time in crying out" (604c). Tragedy depicts capricious dice-throwing gods who wound mortals and in doing so fuel their womanly lamentation. When the Greek gods throw dice, we have left the realm of predictable events and have entered the realm of chance. In the Greek view, chance, *tuchē*, the improbable, bears no relation to *eikos*, the probable or likely. *Tuchē* and *eikos* are ontologically distinct, different entities entirely. Chance names unforeseeable accidents and coincidences, inexplicable fluctuations in fortune. In traditional Greek religion, chance and divinity, then, are largely synonymous; this pagan perspective is the opposite of the Christian, in which Providence eliminates chance. Socrates therefore fears, as Allan Bloom writes, that the Athenian playwrights' emphasis upon "the promiscuity of fortune in this life" will "tend to make men believe that justice goes unrewarded and injustice unpunished" (435). If men are to avoid immobilizing woe and to continue to act ethically, Socrates contends, they ought to hold a non-tragic existential view.

In defending tragedy, then, Aristotle does not go so far as to transform the genre into moral fable, as later interpreters do, but he does seek to rescue the origins of tragic necessity from causal opacity. Aristotle weds tragedy to *eikos*, to convincing, comprehensible, terrestrial likelihood, rather than to *tuchē*, to chance, promiscuous fortune – to the outcome we can never anticipate or understand.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle integrates tragedy into the domain of the probable, its necessities stemming from rationally intelligible sequences – from characters' own actions – rather than from mysterious supernatural whim. In this light, Aristotle suggests that ethical behavior and susceptibility to tragic misfortune are not incompatible. Aristotle secularizes tragedy, as Stephen Halliwell argues, endeavoring to exclude divine agency's unfathomable terrors from the tragic stage, rendering the hero himself the source of his fate.<sup>2</sup> However unsought and surprising his destiny, it issues from himself, not even from other human actors.

The fiction in this study adopts an anti-Aristotelian view of tragedy, in which character is *not* fate; character is instead the victim, the casualty, of fate. And just as the Greek tragedians depict externally wrought necessity that is also divorced from mercy, from justice, from theodicy, Darwin's natural selection adapts species to their environments, preserving and destroying organisms, with no conscious volition and no further end in mind – only because of chance differences among them. The variations upon which the law of natural selection acts are

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Aristotle's conceptions of chance and probability, see *Probabilities, Hypotheticals, and Counterfactuals in Ancient Greek Thought*, particularly Victoria Wohl's essay "Play of the Improbable: Euripides' Unlikely Helen."

<sup>2</sup> Halliwell, "Plato and Aristotle on the Denial of Tragedy." See also Halliwell's commentary in his translation, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, and his separate volume of interpretation, *Aristotle's Poetics*. I discuss Aristotle's views in greater detail in chapter one.

matters of chance: they cannot be fully predicted and occur regardless of their adaptive benefit to the creatures involved. In both tragic drama and evolutionary biology, one cannot work backward from fortune to foresight. As a result, tragedy and evolutionary theory have faced analogous interpretive distortion. Chance, the signature of the Greek gods, has also appeared to underwrite the evolution of life – and yet a preponderance of theorists have sought to banish the unplanned from narratives of individual and species-wide destiny. When Hardy, Woolf, Camus, and Beckett therefore reprise Attic tragedy’s worldview – constituting a literary backlash against comforting, anthropocentric narratives of human origins and human fates – it is no coincidence that they recast the Greek gods of tragedy as Darwin’s godless nature.

### Rose-tinted Tragedy

Before turning to the fierce controversies over foreordained or aleatory evolution in biology, let us consider the debates over providence and chance in tragedy. Was tragedy a genre which feeds the “mournful part” of us, as Socrates said (606a)? Or was tragedy a genre which safeguards and uplifts our souls in the face of catastrophe, as Joseph Wood Krutch, in representative fashion, stipulated in 1929? Like Lukács, Krutch contends in “The Tragic Fallacy” that the ethos of the present moment snuffs out the significance of human destiny so essential to Greek tragedy and its attendant worldview; Krutch is far more optimistic than Steiner about the message of the Attic plays. Krutch regrets, then, that art can no longer depict a human community that “rises superior in soul to the outward calamities that befall it”; the world that the *Origin of Species* pictures is, in his view, in particular antithetical to ancient tragedy’s necessary “expression, not of despair, but of the triumph over despair and of confidence in the value of human life” (84). Yet modernist authors, having renounced the idea that nature consists in so many signs of a supernatural plan for men, do not pen paeans to despair and instead present individuals who do – albeit momentarily – rise superior in soul to outward calamity. Such short-lived defiance, however, is too little redemptive to satisfy Krutch’s expectations for tragedy: it must instead catalyze an experience akin to that of the Kantian sublime. Vulnerable human subjects must come to realize that they do hold pride of place in an intelligible cosmos, that Reason protects them even as their bodily senses are overwhelmed by the might or enormity of inhuman forces. Krutch, therefore, lucidly voices a school of critical thought in which tragedy and existential comfort – triumphalism in the face of fortune – must be paired.

The reception history of the Greek dramatists shows us how tragedy acquired this reassuring cast. Medieval English conceptions of the genre were generated by authors who had no direct access to the Attic plays, who did not read Greek. Medieval theorization of tragedy was based upon indirect paraphrases and limited Latin commentaries.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, a certain freedom attached to medieval notions of tragic fate; the Middle Ages in fact developed two understandings of tragedy’s causality. One model pictured human agency within a providential universe – great men who are punished for their vices. The other model evoked a pagan contingency outside of providential narrative.<sup>4</sup> This fundamental duality laid the groundwork for the ensuing Renaissance, neoclassical, Enlightenment, German Idealist, and Victorian battles

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<sup>3</sup> See Mary Marshall, “Theatre in the Middle Ages: Evidence from Dictionaries and Glosses.”

<sup>4</sup> See Maura Nolan, “‘Now wo, now gladnesse’: Ovidianism in the Fall of Princes” on contingent (as opposed to moral) causality in medieval tragedy. For more on medieval tragedy and its legacies, see also Nolan’s *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* and Willard Farnham’s *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*.

over the interpretation of the Greeks. Even *PMLA*'s recent special issue on tragedy opens with the acknowledgement of conflicting assumptions: a tragic universe is moral or it is amoral.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Lurie demonstrates in "Facing up to Tragedy" that these warring possibilities led to an animated and enduring interpretive struggle. Lurie shows that Renaissance thinkers Joachim Camerarius and Francesco Robortello promoted readings of Aristotle and Sophocles in which Greek characters' sufferings were demonstrably undeserved and did not testify to divine justice. These analyses stood opposed to a concerted Christianization of Aristotle and the Greek tragedians. Philippe Melanchthon and André Dacier, as Lurie writes, insisted that Attic drama did represent divine providence: plots that punish the wicked, characters whose own vices occasion their downfalls. Even during the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century refusal of the Renaissance and neo-classical impulse to Christianize the ancients, when thinkers such as Saint-Évremond, Fontenelle, and the Abbé de Terrasson argued for a decidedly non-Christian Attic worldview, they did so in order to disparage the amoral Greek perspective and to profess the superiority of a modern-day tragedy equal to performing moral work. Simon Goldhill also argues that German Idealism comes back round to the conflation of tragedy and theodicy.<sup>6</sup>

Thus Terry Eagleton, in his twenty-first-century investigation of the genre, gazes backward and finds that "tragic art for conservative theorists is a supremely affirmative affair" (14). Affirmative tragedy may seem a contradiction in terms, yet it is true that for a majority of thinkers, tragedy must dramatize suffering that is morally justified, socially productive, or aesthetically gratifying. Aristotle, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Lukács subscribe to versions of this view. In the Aristotelian model, as we have seen, heroes' own inadvertent but comprehensible missteps inaugurate their dooms; Aristotle founds the credo that each work of art should be an intelligible, self-contained whole. A Christian re-envisioning of the Greeks and of Aristotle's *Poetics* then re-sees both ancient and modern tragic characters as the culpable agents of their own misfortune, rightly punished for their immoral passions; such suffering is their route to salvation. What was a matter of artistic integrity in Aristotle – the fully wrought, self-sufficient storyline – becomes a matter of moral inculcation in Christianized tragedy. Victorian, religiously-inflected tragedy also sees innocent, Christ-like, female suffering as a heroine's badge of honor: the price of her goodness and the proof of her redemption hereafter.<sup>7</sup>

In Hegel's treatment of the genre in his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1835), tragedy is further transmuted into the formal structure that advances world spirit. Hegel contends that Antigone cleaves to divine law, Creon to human law, and so the substance of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) is ruptured. Yet he determines that both Antigone and Creon have right on their side; these rights are components of a metaphysical totality. Whether tragedy's dialectical divisions and reunifications, therefore, tend toward a particular *telos* or progress open-endedly, they bespeak a meaningful design that comes ever more sharply into focus as time passes. Hegel's dialectical oppositions between concrete and universal, human and divine, are destined to resolve themselves into unity – such is the movement of history, as the conflicts of tragedy pave the way for the reconciliations of philosophy.

Even Nietzsche reads tragedy, first, as therapeutic narrative, making our pains bearable for us, and then as the apology for our pains themselves. He initially writes in *The Birth of*

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<sup>5</sup> Helene Foley and Jean Howard write: "For those who are morally inclined, it [tragedy] demonstrates the punishment that befalls the proud or the flawed; for those more fatalistic, it suggests humanity's unmerited but inevitable suffering in an indifferent universe" (617).

<sup>6</sup> Goldhill, "The Ends of Tragedy: Schelling, Hegel, and Oedipus."

<sup>7</sup> See Dale Kramer's "Hardy: The Driftiness of Tragedy" for a brief history of Victorian tragedy.

*Tragedy* (1872) that the genre stages heroes' life-negating face-à-face with a nauseating cosmos, only to rescue them from its own truth:

... everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of these states.

In this sense, the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. (*B* 59-60)

Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity. (*B* 60)

There is no theodicy in Nietzsche's view – only absurdity and horror – yet art produces a *trompe l'oeil* vindication or relaxation of our suffering. Secondly, a later Nietzsche comes to deem *desire* for the sufferings of tragedy the very mark of a healthy psyche. Tragedy becomes the preferred experiential register of those with sufficient strength of character to relish all aspects of fate:

“How much truth can a spirit *endure*, how much truth does a spirit *dare*?” – this became for me the real standard of value. ... a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection .... The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence – my formula for this is *amor fati*.

It is part of this state to perceive not merely the necessity of those sides of existence hitherto denied, but their desirability; and not their desirability merely in relation to the sides hitherto affirmed (perhaps as their complement or precondition), but for their own sake, as the more powerful, more fruitful, *truer* sides of existence, in which its will finds clearer expression. (*WP* 536-537)

Both of Nietzsche's approaches to tragedy aim for life's wholesale affirmation, via heroic stories or heroic psychology. Indeed, Nietzsche's methodologies foreshadow modernism's own non-tragic “mythical method,” in which presumed narrative or mental archetypes, supposedly foundational structures of thought, are marshalled to counteract, and perhaps to vanquish, catastrophe and sorrow. Indebted to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), T. S. Eliot particularly warms to the idea of such primal and primary forms, involving sacrifice and rebirth, and sees them as the newly disclosed blueprints of culture. He finds them to lie at the heart of his own poetry, W. B. Yeats', and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is this novel's mythical scaffolding, Eliot argues, that affords Joyce “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177).

As we will see, however, precisely what “tragedy” means to Woolf is the refusal of such regenerative, stabilizing *mythos*. Just as Hardy’s tragic novels contest nineteenth-century anthropology’s romance of the sacrificial victim, Woolf’s fiction challenges this twentieth-century recourse to consolatory re-readings and redeployments of ancient ritual and myth. Following Nietzsche’s glorification of tragic fate, for instance, classicist Gilbert Murray in 1912 interprets the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides as so many retellings of the life story of Dionysus, of this fertility spirit of pre-Classical religion, whom he describes as cyclically sacrificed and resurrected. Murray finds that Greek tragedy, replaying variations of Dionysus’ story, demonstrates a guiding supernatural order, operating without caprice or disregard for individual fates – signifying divine reason rather than the precariousness of the single human lifespan within cyclical nature. And in accord with Nietzsche’s idea of tragic *mythos* as “saving sorceress,” anthropologist Jane Harrison also suggests in the early decades of the twentieth century that Greek tragedy descends from – but exists at a remove from – Dionysian enactments of violence, sacrificial death, and communal renewal, and must therefore rely upon the triumphalist tales of epic to reassure its audiences of social and metaphysical order. Nietzsche’s Dionysian tide of onrushing life, that engulfs and horrifies the individual, is made safe by redemptive narratives of individual destiny, by regenerative structures of ritual, or by a re-envisioning of human psychology itself – such that life is no longer nauseatingly absurd and terrifying to individuated consciousness. Yet Woolf’s and Hardy’s novels, like Scheler’s myth of Icarus and Camus’ myth of Sisyphus, present a tragic perspective and method distinct from the anthropological and mythical methods: characters brave incurable fates, mutinously achieving moments of reprieve in the face of their intractable antagonists. Not only do these moments constitute resistance to fate, but characters marshal their energies to oppose the compounding, the exacerbating of fate; endorsement of the tragic status quo is not their way.

Therefore nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropological and mythical readings of life, along with a long history of philosophy’s “affirmative” construals of tragedy, present a world that can and should be embraced in its entirety – wherein tragedy’s agonies and seeming impasses are enfolded, Russian doll-like, within non-tragic supernatural or natural schemas. However, for writers such as Hardy Woolf, Camus, and Beckett, tragedy is the outermost existential frame, indicative of a cosmos bereft of innately directive, rational, meaningful structure. It is nonetheless true that characters may affirm lives set within such chaotic confines. But rather than loving fate per se (*amor fati*), including its unpredictable terrors, they experience life as a disorienting hodgepodge of chances, coincidences, and surprises, many wrenching and others joyous. Against an onslaught of uninvited sorrows, they collect and prize moments of fortifying stability, forging a protective enclosure – a citadel, as Bertrand Russell calls it, that is not promised to them in advance, but painstakingly constructed from happenstance materials, just as Darwin describes, using an architectural metaphor, the work that natural selection performs in order to craft species from chance variations. Here we have the Eliotic “fragments I have shored against my ruins” without religious rites’ assurance of “Shantih shantih shantih” (430, 433). Here we see the difference between loving the totality of fate, believing it to possess, in its entirety, benefit or justification, and the affirmation of rare intervals of peace that irradiate an otherwise lamentable condition.

## *Affirmative Tragedy in Lukács*

Geörgy Lukács, one of the most influential modernist theorists of genre and the novel, presumes a fundamental division between aesthetically and ethically laudable art forms, those which include ancient tragedy and nineteenth-century realism, and the aesthetically and ethically reprehensible modernist novel. Lukács serves as our most detailed case study in the counter-tragic construal of tragedy itself. In the same way that T. S. Eliot reads myth, Lukács reads tragedy: as a form for taming the horrors and contingencies of lived experience into meaningful order. It is Lukács' resolutely rosy-hued characterization of both tragedy and epic that leads him to disseminate the notion that neither can have ties to the novel in the modernist period. Later we will see Lukács' specific objections to novelists from Kafka to Joyce and Beckett; here we will focus on Lukács' sanguine account of Greek tragic drama, in which he portrays it as a representational form with which to transcend the seeming "anarchy and futility" of human fortunes.

For Lukács in his pre-Marxist period, during which he composes *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), tragedy and all novels possess incompatible worldviews. For a Marxist Lukács, it is the specifically modernist novel that bears little resemblance to tragedy and to other preceding and superior art forms. Across his writings, therefore, Lukács ranges epic, tragic, and realist modes against modernism and, in his view, its spiritual primer, naturalism: the former are "the closed and total forms which stem from a rounded totality of being," whereas the latter have "nothing more to do with any world of forms that is immanently complete in itself" (*T* 17). For all that Lukács' interpretation of the novel undergoes substantial change – so much so that he can recall "a somewhat grotesque situation in which Ernst Bloch invoked *The Theory of the Novel* in his polemic against the Marxist, Georg Lukács" – his methodology remains consistent (*T* 18). In "The Ideology of Modernism" (1958), Lukács describes his enduring practice as follows: to identify the "opposing principles actually underlying and determining contrasting styles" (*I* 395). He presumes that existential outlook is to be deciphered in aesthetics: "it is the view of the world, the ideology or *weltanschauung* underlying a writer's work, that counts" (*I* 396).

In his typography of genres, Lukács therefore categorizes their means of representing (or failure to represent) "at-homeness" in the world. In the Greek epic, "the world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars" (*T* 29). Character and her environs are imbued with the same immanent meaning (possess a shared "essential nature"). With the advent of the novel, however – and Lukács will amend his critique to target the modernist novel only – "transcendental homelessness" is the reigning paradigm and "the problems of the novel form [are] the mirror-image of a world gone out of joint" (*T* 41, 17). Lukács echoes Hamlet for whom "time is out of joint" – Hamlet for whom, as Nietzsche also notes, it is impossible to "set right a world that is out of joint" – and indeed it is Shakespearean drama, in Lukács' view, that has too much of the muddy, human, terrestrial element in it: the world's "multiplicity of colors and events," "the colorful variegation of real life" (*Ham.* 1.5.188; *B* 60; *SF* 187, 195). Shakespearean art, in Lukács' estimation, is too novelistic to lay claim to the "simple monumentality ... of the Greeks" "thrusting through to the deeper, non-sensual beauty of the ultimate sense of life" (*SF* 187). Still, Lukács vastly admires Shakespeare, seeing him on the whole not as the regrettable, Hamlet-style modernist, whose world is perennially disjointed, but as the perspicacious realist whose world still coheres and possesses ultimate meaning. *Vis à vis* the essence of tragedy, however, Lukács concurs with Schiller who, he recounts, "wrote to Goethe ... that individual character does not belong to drama, and that the 'ideal masks' of

Greek tragedy were more suitable than the human beings to be found in Shakespeare or in Goethe himself" (*SF* 142).

Between his two existential poles, then, that of the ancient epic and that of the modernist novel, Lukács locates Shakespearean and Greek tragedy and Platonic philosophy. It is Greek tragedy that does, in Lukács' view, come to demonstrate "at-homeness" in the world by the drama's close. Plato's philosophy, too, achieves "at-homeness" by way of its theorizing. Lukács holds that the very presence of philosophy is "always a symptom of the rift between 'inside' and 'outside', a sign of the essential difference between the self and the world" (*T* 29). Yet in his view, Plato succeeds, unlike the modernists, in closing the rift and professing a continued "totality of being"; Lukács proclaims "Plato's likewise absolute yet tangible and graspable transcendence" (*T* 18, 35). Bridging the divide, Plato communicates the "reality of the world made to our measure" (*T* 37). In Plato, Lukács says, essence (ultimate meaning) has receded to the metaphysical sphere of Forms, and we now require the philosopher to teach us of Forms' existence, but they are, ontologically, real. Lukács observes this same structural totality in Christianity. It, too, places the source of stable, objective meaning in a transcendental beyond; it goes so far as to "transform the world into a wound of Philoctetus," into a fallen, debased place – yet so compelling is its promise of redemption that the wound of the world is swiftly "forgotten" (*T* 38).

Most striking for our purposes is Lukács careful distinction between Greek tragedy and Platonic philosophy. Never voicing his dissent openly, Lukács parts ways from Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. Socrates in Book X calls Homer the first of the tragic poets, and contends that he, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides paint the world in so unpalatable, so mournful a light – as a place teeming with chance, undeserved wounds, like those of Sophocles' Philoctetes – that the task of philosophy is to counter and to supplant the tragedians' worldview. Lukács, however, claims instead that it is the philosopher, not the tragedian, who imputes to the world an insoluble chasm between wounded mortals and their unjust, chaotic fortunes. Only "philosophy had revealed tragic destiny as the cruel and senseless arbitrariness of the empirical," Lukács writes (*T* 35). Yet cruel and senseless arbitrariness is precisely what Socrates identifies as the basis of the tragedians' *weltanschauung*, and against which he elaborates an alternative vision of poetic justice in the afterlife, in the myth of Er with which he closes the *Republic*. In contrast, Lukács finds that such brutal, reasonless fatality, befalling the "contingent subject," is what Greek tragedy proves illusory, consigns to unreality (*T* 36). Lukács argues that ancient tragedy demonstrates, by way of its dénouement, that the messiness of mortal existence, "mere life" in all its seeming thrall to chance, "sinks into not-being in the face of the only true reality of the essence; a level of being beyond life, full of richly blossoming plentitude, has been reached, to which ordinary life cannot serve even as an antithesis" (*T* 35). Tragedy may begin with everyday, empirical life – its formlessness, arbitrariness, contingency – but it ends with decisive action, often with death, that crystallizes a character's meaning within his community once and for all. His "essence" emerges. Like Aristotle, that is, Lukács conceives the end (aim and conclusion) of tragedy to be the supreme revelation of character – freezing all protagonists in a latticework of irreversible relations. Fluid, open-ended life, the bread and butter of the novel, becomes now-and-forever essence. The protean, yearning, unmoored selfhood of novelistic characters, in Lukács' view, finds its corrective in the statuesque fixity of tragedy's figures.

In his earliest and most sustained treatment of the genre, "The Metaphysics of Tragedy" (1910), published in the essay collection *Soul and Form*, Lukács already treats quotidian experience as the disguise which tragic death removes. From Aeschylus to Hebbel, Ernst, and

Ibsen, Lukács finds that such ideal tragedy's individuals have never been, at base, floundering this-worldly subjects; they have always been fixed tokens of fate, whose "every stroke of the sword is still part of the divine plan of providence" (*SF* 178). In "The Metaphysics of Tragedy," Lukács argues that flesh and feeling, quirks and fears, are immaterial to tragic characters' true and preordained identities:

The human beings in whom destiny becomes form are split into two fundamentally different parts: the ordinary human being standing in the midst of real life is turned suddenly, in a single instant, into a symbol, the vector of a suprapersonal, historical necessity.... They become essential indeed, and their souls, relieved of the oppression of ordinary reality, breathe deeply and happily, but an alien being becomes real within them when the final forces are released. Death is the return, the first and only attainment of their own essence. ... History appears as a profound symbol of fate – of the regular accidentality of fate, its arbitrariness and tyranny which, in the last analysis, is always just. (*SF* 194)

For Lukács, tragedy purges characters of their trivial life-trappings, and restores them to their prescribed places in a well-ordered cosmos. Chance, injustice, and inexplicable suffering are mere appearances; soothing, plotted necessity is the proven reality. History is not, in the end, a series of un-designed accidents (as if a testament to tyrannical, irreversible arbitrariness), but the medium through which "always just" Fate expresses itself. Lukács therefore avers in *The Theory of the Novel* that "happy ages," epic and tragic ages, "have no philosophy" (*T* 29). He cites Novalis as his ally: "'Philosophy is really homesickness,' says Novalis: 'it is the urge to be at home everywhere'" (*T* 29). Philosophy is compensatory labor, reconciling us to the world; tragedy, in Lukács rose-tinted view, does not need to perform such work.

By the time of modernism, Bertrand Russell can also echo Novalis, saying that in much previous philosophy "mind, or some aspect of it – thought or will or sentience – has been regarded as the pattern after which the universe is to be conceived, for no better reason, at bottom, than that such a universe would not seem strange, and would give us the cosy feeling that every place is like home" (*ML* 22). But as the novelists of his lifetime do, Russell sees in the impersonal, non-anthropocentric, non-teleological natural world the new oracle of both terrestrial and transcendental homelessness – and the reemergence of the Greek divinities of tragedy. Russell reads in both ancient drama and modern science "the empire of chance," the "wanton tyranny that rules ... outward life," and "the trampling march of unconscious power" (*ML* 27, 28). Because tragedy pits overwhelming force against resistant but breakable human bodies, Russell repeatedly calls it the literary genre that best fits a universe void of thought or will or sentience. He characterizes a modern tragic fate as follows: "Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way" (*ML* 27).

### Rose-Tinted Nature

Lukács, as we will discuss in the following section, associates such a perspective with *fin de siècle* nihilism. But Russell's strain of thought, developed among novelists, more properly reprises an oft-denied view of tragedy, the Greeks', and a much-maligned view of nature – Darwin's. A stalwart Darwinian, Hardy in his novels rails against the Christian imposition of

moral precepts onto tragedy's accidents and injustices. Woolf signs her name to a personal copy of H.G. Wells's and Julian Huxley's 1930 tour de force, *The Science of Life*; "Huxley's discussion of evolution was the single most encompassing presentation of a neo-Darwinian viewpoint available in 1930," writes William Provine (332). Woolf herself pictures moments of stilled, intersubjective intimacy against the backdrop of an endlessly unfurling deep time, a nature heedless of the chance extinctions of individual consciousnesses. Darwinian geneticist Jacques Monod makes Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" the epigraph of his exegesis of evolution, *Chance and Necessity*. Camus, too, pictures a natural world both beautiful and threatening, not made in the likeness of persons – seething with uncontrollable fortune and overlaid with manmade atrocity. Beckett captures the Darwinian *zeitgeist* in lines of *How It Is* – "long past vast stretch of time that moment and following not all a selection natural order vast tracts of time" (9). His characters rage against both Christian certainties and pagan contingencies.

Surveying the scientific milieu in which such modernists lived, Allen Thiher contends in *Fiction Refracts Science* (2005) that not only had James Hutton's and Charles Lyell's late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "geology contested the mythic construction of the cosmos that envisaged the earth as a home in which humanity was destined to live," but that by the advent of the twentieth century "every modernist writer had to come to grips with the great historical hypothesis called evolution, now biology's fundamental theory, and hence the fundamental theory of how humanity came to exist in a cosmos which did not seem overly concerned about whether humanity was there or not" (36, 37).<sup>8</sup> Yet such an understanding of evolution was by no means the norm. Peter Bowler calls the period 1875 to 1925 "the eclipse of Darwinism," adopting Julian Huxley's phrase – Peter Morton says "Darwinism on the Deathbed" – and it is true that despite the widespread approval Darwin enjoyed in the decade following his 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*, his theory was increasingly challenged, vindicated only with the modern evolutionary synthesis of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.<sup>9</sup> Provine writes that in "the early 1910s ... England had no experimental geneticist who was a Darwinian, and no Darwinian naturalist who incorporated the new science of heredity into his work" (330). In Germany in 1932, Richard Woltereck characteristically surmised that "chance plus selection as creator of the diversity and the well-planned order of organisms ... will be recorded in the future as one of the strangest errors of the human propensity for causal explanation" (qtd. in Rensch

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<sup>8</sup> Thiher writes further of the early twentieth-century's scientific outlook: "Thermodynamics radically undoes any sense that the cosmos might have a *telos*, and in this regard it has probably had greater impact on literature and philosophy than any analogous influence the one could later assign to, say, relativity theory or quantum mechanics. Only evolutionary theory has upset a far greater number of people, since the abstract calculations demonstrating entropy are comprehensible only to the scientifically literate. ... When time came to be defined as the measure of irreversible growth of disorder, the stability of the Newtonian cosmos seemed to have disappeared forever. This was the new physics in which the first modernists were educated" (35-36). Thiher also considers relativity's and quantum mechanics' undoing of the clockwork universe: "On the one hand, the methods used for the 'classical' level of macroscopic reality are Einstein's relativity theory, Maxwell's equations for electromagnetic phenomenon, and classical Newtonian mechanics; on the other hand, physics at the quantum level relies upon Heisenberg's matrix mechanics, Schrödinger's wave equation, Feynman's quantum electrodynamics, and other formalisms to describe the world of particles. Einstein's realism posits that a cosmic causal order transcendent of mind awaits discovery. By contrast, Bohr's quantum mechanics proposes that order is a function of the formalism constructed by the scientific mind. Einstein's relativity theory is thoroughly causal, whereas Bohr and Heisenberg's quantum mechanics allow seemingly paradoxical indeterminacy" (57).

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Bowler's *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, "The Eclipse of Darwinism: Scientific Evolutionism 1875-1925," and *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades around 1900*. See also Peter Morton, *The Vital Science Biology and the Literary Imagination, 1860-1900*, "Darwinism on the Deathbed, 1870-1900: The Failings of Natural Selection."

289). Ernest Boesiger tells us that in France prominent anti-Darwinist “Bergson heavily criticized the mechanistic theorists. He said it was unthinkable that a series of accidents, maintained by selection if they were advantageous, could produce in two different evolutionary lines the construction of identical structures” (315). As late as 1941, French geneticist Lucien Cuénot, as Boesiger details, finds that “living matter is certainly regulated by physicochemical laws – but it also requires for its evolution an anti-chance factor. The Cartesian machine needs an inventor, a conductor, some ‘obscure’ profound and unknown cause of the biological finality” (317). Cuénot is obliged to “admit a transcendental force, a will, an intelligence that guided nature” (Boesiger 317).

Strikingly, then, it is the literature of the period, more than its philosophy and its fraught evolutionary science, that channels Darwinism’s “underlying ideology or *weltanschauung*,” in Lukács’ phrase. Far from a programmatic, Social Darwinist application of the struggle for existence to human society, this fiction takes seriously the existential premise to which Joseph Conrad gives voice in 1897: that human life has come into being “without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident – and it has happened” (425).

### *Evolution before Darwin*

At the close of the eighteenth century, two theories of embryological development were vying for ascendancy. First came the established “preexistence” or “preformation” model, in which divinely created, miniature and fully formed creatures (microscopic homunculi) were presumed to grow larger in utero. Secondly, there was the new “epigenesist” or “organicist” model, in which complex forms were said to develop out of formless, undifferentiated matter.<sup>10</sup> The question that beset the latter, increasingly credible view was that of what fueled and guided such transformations. How did organisms of the same species so consistently achieve mature shape (always a dog, a horse, a person)? Physiologist Albrecht van Haller voices the prevailing concern: such development “needs a force which has foresight, which can make a choice, which has a goal which, against all the laws of blind combination, always and unfailingly brings about the same end” (qtd. in Mensch 5).

But could foresight be reduced to unconscious mechanism? Georges Buffon suggested that “internal moulds,” ready-made replicable parts, along with their assembly instructions, were passed from parents to offspring (178). He proposed a version of mechanical epigenesis: “living organic particles” that automatically combine in specific ways (187). As Denise Gigante writes, Erasmus Darwin likewise conceived of ““molecules with formative propensities,”” envisioning ““self-generation on chemical grounds”” (15, 16).<sup>11</sup> Carl Friedrich Wolff argued for a nutritive force that precipitates the gradual emergence of defined form from formless matter.<sup>12</sup> Kant also suggested that we imagine (simply as a mode of conceiving a yet to be explained physical phenomenon) that such a force inheres in matter, renders it organic, and directs the development of individuals within a species. For Kant, however, each species form must be, in itself, supernaturally and inalterably created by God.

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<sup>10</sup> See Jennifer Mensch, *Kant's Organicism: Epigenesis and the Development of Critical Philosophy*.

<sup>11</sup> Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism*.

<sup>12</sup> For more on epigenesis and formative drives (physical and spiritual), see François Duchesneau on Wolff and Blumenbach, “‘Essential Force’ and ‘Formative Force’: Models for Epigenesis in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.”

A second school of theorists insisted upon an immanent “vital” force at work in epigenesis. Johan Blumenbach notably put the guiding soul, the Aristotelian entelechy back into living matter.<sup>13</sup> But once the door was opened to mutable form within species, the same battles between blind law and foresight were poised to arise vis à vis the history of species per se. As Loren Eiseley writes in *Darwin’s Century*:

To accept development, an emergence by degrees, in the case of the single individual makes it possible to accept with greater equanimity the conception that a species itself may have come into existence by some more extended process of phylogenetic change. Thus, indirectly, epigenesis, or the developmental theory of embryonic growth, fitted, analogically, the theory of evolution, just as the older preformationist doctrine – of the fully formed but microscopic homunculus – coincided more satisfactorily with the idea of special creation. (37)<sup>14</sup>

### *The Darwinian Threat*

Indeed, both special creation and artificial selection are matters of conscious design – God creates immutable species, or farmers and planters breed favored specimens to arrive at a preferred stock. Darwin’s natural selection, on the contrary, proceeds without plan or foresight. Nature’s selection is insentient, automatic – mechanistic law rather than intentional, goal-oriented activity. It was Darwin who grasped, for the first time, the unconscious procedure that could produce descent with modification, myriad species from a common ancestor. He saw that given variations within a population – variations that could be inherited, and that conferred reproductive advantage – certain individuals within a species would prove, fortuitously, better adapted to their local environments than others. With environmental pressures (limited food supply, competition for food, alterations in climate), the natural world would preserve those variations that rendered its denizens ever more suited to their particular niches. Whereas Buffon had imagined that the environment itself alters creatures’ biological makeups, fitting them to their living conditions, instead unwitting “selection” did so. Whereas Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Erasmus Darwin had imagined that creatures’ instinctive use or disuse of organs, as their environments dictated, led to transmissible changes in structure, Darwin pieced the puzzle together anew: individuals were not themselves changed by their surroundings, nor the principal effecters of evolutionary change, so much as winners and losers in a cosmic lottery of variation. Nature’s privileging of minute differences would cause population-wide alterations, and over immense swaths of time, grow new branches on the tree of life.

Yet natural selection, as Darwin outlined it, troubled even him. It appeared too wasteful and too cruel – for all that he emphasized adaptation’s clear benefits at the species level – to attest to a benevolent Creator. And the problem of origins ran deeper still: not only was the mechanism morally dubious, but it acted upon phenotypic fluctuations which gave no sign of guiding the process. Variations seemed to arise unpredictably, following no consistent causal logic, and pointed toward no particular effects for which they arose (e.g., to serve the good of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Timothy Lenoir, “Kant, Blumenbach, and Vital Materialism in German Biology.” See also Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature*.

<sup>14</sup> For further studies of evolutionary thought prior to Darwin, including analyses of Lamarck’s *Philosophie Zoologique* and Robert Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, see Eiseley’s *Darwin’s Century: Evolution and the Men Who Discovered It* and Leo Henkin’s *Darwinism in the English Novel*.

organism). Thus the lawful, nonrandom work of natural selection could not take its cue from any trends set by variation itself. Rather, natural selection encountered a motley crew of differences and weighed the fitness of each within a given environment. Never knowing the exact constitution of its variation pool, natural selection pushed species in no singular, prefigured direction. As Bowler writes: “it seemed obvious that natural selection’s reliance on random variation made it incompatible with the argument from design: how could God control a process which incorporated chance rather than law at every step?” (204). Were it the case that God, the environment, or creatures’ own habits directed evolution, then variation should be more reliably adaptive. Because variation was not, Darwin instead suggested that the environment must indirectly and unsystematically occasion changes in the parental reproductive organs; parents must pass new, not necessarily adaptive traits to their offspring at the time of conception. As John Curtis explains in *Darwin’s Dice*: “the ‘indirect’ action of physical conditions on the reproductive system is so mysterious that we may as well say changes induced this way are ‘by chance.’ In other words, ‘chance’ and ‘reproductive system’ are systematically related in Darwin’s thought” (65). It was the chance-based nature of Darwin’s evolution, pointing to independence from theistic design, that was (and remains) so unpalatable to audiences.

American botanist Asa Gray, one of Darwin’s firmest apologists, therefore strove to make natural selection align with divine foresight. The greatest stumbling block was the arbitrariness of variation and Gray felt obliged to refuse it: “We must advise Mr. Darwin to assume, in the philosophy of his hypothesis, that variation has been led along certain beneficial lines,” Gray wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly* in October, 1860 (rpt. In *Darwiniana* 78). Yet Darwin himself saw no grounds for such certainty, and responded to Gray in November, 1860:

But I grieve to say that I cannot honestly go as far as you do about Design. I am conscious that I am in an utterly hopeless muddle. I cannot think that the world, as we see it, is the result of chance; & yet I cannot look at each separate thing as the result of Design.— To take a crucial example, you lead me to infer (p. 414) that you believe “that variation has been led along certain beneficial lines”.— I cannot believe this.

(Darwin Correspondence Database, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-2998>)

Darwin could not discern in variation any methodical responsiveness to creatures’ needs. While Gray determined that the requirements of faith must trump any uncertainty resulting from observation, Darwin could not dismiss the apparently contingent nature of each variation’s occurring at all, of its value to its host, and of the environmental conditions at the time, all of which paved the way for natural selection. Although Darwin recoils from the logical extension of his contention – “that the world, as we see it, is the result of chance” – he does not shy away from the trouble.

In his stirring conclusion to *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868), Darwin raises the same concerns. He owns that the exact causes of variation are as yet unknown. But he likens these same variations to the fragments of stone with which a builder constructs his edifice. Each fragment, says Darwin, has been caused by a “long sequence of events” unique to its formation, but “in regard to the use to which the fragments may be put, their shape may be strictly said to be *accidental*” (my emphasis). Was the stone so formed as to guide the builder’s employment of it? Darwin does not think so:

The shape of the fragments of stone at the base of our precipice may be called accidental, but this is not strictly correct; for the shape of each depends on a long sequence of events, all obeying natural laws; on the nature of the rock, on the lines of deposition or cleavage, on the form of the mountain which depends on its upheaval and subsequent denudation, and lastly on the storm or earthquake which threw down the fragments. But in regard to the use to which the fragments may be put, their shape may be strictly said to be accidental. And here we are led to face a great difficulty, in alluding to which I am aware that I am travelling beyond my proper province. An omniscient Creator must have foreseen every consequence which results from the laws imposed by Him. But can it be reasonably maintained that the Creator intentionally ordered, if we use the words in any ordinary sense, that certain fragments of rock should assume certain shapes so that the builder might erect his edifice? If the various laws which have determined the shape of each fragment were not predetermined for the builder's sake, can it with any greater probability be maintained that He specially ordained for the sake of the breeder each of the innumerable variations in our domestic animals and plants;—many of these variations being of no service to man, and not beneficial, far more often injurious, to the creatures themselves? Did He ordain that the crop and tail-feathers of the pigeon should vary in order that the fancier might make his grotesque pouter and fantail breeds? Did He cause the frame and mental qualities of the dog to vary in order that a breed might be formed of indomitable ferocity, with jaws fitted to pin down the bull for man's brutal sport? But if we give up the principle in one case,—if we do not admit that the variations of the primeval dog were intentionally guided in order that the greyhound, for instance, that perfect image of symmetry and vigour, might be formed,—no shadow of reason can be assigned for the belief that variations, alike in nature and the result of the same general laws, which have been the groundwork through natural selection of the formation of the most perfectly adapted animals in the world, man included, were intentionally and specially guided. However much we may wish it, we can hardly follow Professor Asa Gray in his belief “that variation has been led along certain beneficial lines,” like a stream “along definite and useful lines of irrigation.” If we assume that each particular variation was from the beginning of all time preordained, the plasticity of organisation, which leads to many injurious deviations of structure, as well as that redundant power of reproduction which inevitably leads to a struggle for existence, and, as a consequence, to the natural selection or survival of the fittest, must appear to us superfluous laws of nature. On the other hand, an omnipotent and omniscient Creator ordains everything and foresees everything. Thus we are brought face to face with a difficulty as insoluble as is that of free will and predestination. (V 321)

Darwin stands firm in perilous waters: “no shadow of reason can be assigned” to the idea that variations “were intentionally and specially guided,” no matter “the most perfectly adapted animals in the world, man included” that natural selection, the unwitting architect, has built. Variations must obey the natural laws to which they are subject, but because their effects possess no uniformity, Darwin doubts that any lawful regularity can be assigned to their intricate causes. Darwin dares to dwell in and to specify a greater difficulty still: for what reason should an

omnipotent and all-foreseeing Creator make use of hardly efficient, “superfluous laws of nature,” those that entail a “struggle for existence” as well as innumerable ill-adaptive and “injurious deviations in structure”? Darwin sees that were variations already in the main adaptive, we should not need natural selection to discriminate among them.

If as Lucas said “the problem of tragedy becomes one with the whole problem of evil,” for Darwin the problem of natural selection becomes one with the whole problem of evil: one with the question of the “Origin of evil,” as Darwin says, of ill luck and undeserved suffering (Darwin Correspondence Database, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-2713>). Thus Darwin closes a letter of July 1860 to Gray:

One word more on “designed laws” & “undesigned results.” I see a bird which I want for food, take my gun & kill it, I do this *designedly*.—An innocent & good man stands under tree & is killed by flash of lightning. Do you believe (& I really sh<sup>d</sup> like to hear) that God *designedly* killed this man? Many or most person do believe this; I can't & don't.—If you believe so, do you believe that when a swallow snaps up a gnat that God designed that that particular swallow sh<sup>d</sup> snap up that particular gnat at that particular instant? I believe that the man & the gnat are in same predicament.—If the death of neither man or gnat are designed, I see no good reason to believe that their *first* birth or production sh<sup>d</sup> be necessarily designed. Yet, as I said before, I cannot persuade myself that electricity acts, that the tree grows, that man aspires to loftiest conceptions all from blind, brute force.

Your *muddled* & affectionate friend | Ch. Darwin (Darwin Correspondence Database, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-2855>)

Here again is the question of designed or chance fate, of Zeus who deals either in planned death by lightning or in random bolts: “An innocent & good man stands under tree & is killed by flash of lightning. Do you believe (& I really sh<sup>d</sup> like to hear) that God *designedly* killed this man?” And if such deaths are a matter of “blind, brute” necessity, Darwin speculates, why should individual or species births have a less fortuitous origin? Darwin had posed the same question to Gray a little over a month before, in May:

With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me.— I am bewildered.— I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I sh<sup>d</sup> wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonida* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed. On the other hand I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe & especially the nature of man, & to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. Not that this notion *at all* satisfies me. I feel most deeply that the whole

subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.— Let each man hope & believe what he can.—

Certainly I agree with you that my views are not at all necessarily atheistical. The lightning kills a man, whether a good one or bad one, owing to the excessively complex action of natural laws,—a child (who may turn out an idiot) is born by action of even more complex laws,—and I can see no reason, why a man, or other animal, may not have been aboriginally produced by other laws; & that all these laws may have been expressly designed by an omniscient Creator, who foresaw every future event & consequence. But the more I think the more bewildered I become; as indeed I have probably shown by this letter. (Darwin Correspondence Database, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-2814>)

Lightning kills good and bad men indiscriminately, and birth doles out varying fates to children, as a result of “even more complex” causality – laws that, if regular, could be traced back to a planning Creator. But do such laws, ascribable to divinity, govern all aspects of evolution? And even if we grant such all-encompassing laws, do their effects – the desirability, the justice of their outcomes – point to foresight? Darwin is exceedingly aware of differential fates; he marks an ethical disparity between the “details” of a given destiny (“whether good or bad”) and its seeming deservedness (whether it befell “a good one or bad one”). He therefore comes to chance, and not to a loving God, as the author of the *Ichneumonidæ*, of one creature’s predation upon another, of the death of the man who is good, of the deleterious birth defect that pains the child who is innocent.<sup>15</sup>

Yet while Darwin saw too much chance and “too much misery” to assent to theistic design, Gray held a decidedly counter-tragic view of creation. In his initial March 1860 review of Darwin’s *Origin* for *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, Gray writes of “our profound conviction that there is order in the universe; that order presupposes mind; design, will; and mind or will, personality” (D 26). Gray maintains that his readers can accept natural selection and still view the “whole system of nature as one which had received at its first formation the impress of the will of its Author, foreseeing the varied yet necessary laws of its action throughout the whole of its existence, ordaining when and how each particular of the stupendous plan should be realized in effect” (D 25). Causes and effects, for Gray, are both lawful and guided by a loving personality. Gray’s sentiment ruled the day: “we cannot think the Cosmos a series which began

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Talbott is a representative, modern-day opponent of the idea that blind mechanism and chance variation play a role in the evolution of life; he suggests that such a view denies the purposeful strivings of organisms themselves, and that so elusive a term is “fitness” we cannot say for certain that a given variation is ever random in relation to its adaptive value. He writes in “Evolution and the Illusion of Randomness”: “If organisms participate in a higher life, it is a participation that works from within – at a deep level the ancients recognized as that of the *logos* informing all things. ... Dawkins and Dennett’s [Darwinian] stance is bizarre above all, because everything in the drama of evolution presupposes the meaning-soaked activity of the organisms whose meaning is said to be explained away” (41). Yet not only are chance (amoral, meaningless) fates and motivated (meaning-soaked) creatures compatible, what Darwin here discloses is that – for all that fitness may elude quantification – individual creatures’ interests or intentions, in his view, do not consistently carry the day. Darwin does not see their bodies and behaviors invariably protecting them from harm. He views nature, in this light, as tragic, as a site of unpredictable fortunes, and not as a moral God’s best of all possible worlds. If species as a whole fare well, as he believes, they owe such well-being in part to a lifeless law that “selects” what conduces to survival, and not solely to an inner constitution that affords them a taste for life; such an appetite cannot entirely determine their fates.

with chaos and ends with mind, or of which mind is a result”; there are no “events which mind does not order and shape to destined ends” (D 26). Even Alfred Russel Wallace, who elaborated the principle of natural selection alongside Darwin, is not a staunch selectionist when it comes to the spiritual and intellectual faculties of his own species. Humanity, he asserts, could not have arisen gradually and fortuitously. Thus in his 1910 *The World of Life: A Manifestation of Creative Power, Directive Mind and Ultimate Purpose*, Wallace writes of the “directive agency” and “organising power” that we must understand as the causes of variation and the guides of selection where man is concerned (WL 359). Contra Darwin, Wallace concludes *The World of Life*:

In accordance with the views expounded in a former work, *Man's Place in the Universe*, I have fully discussed the evidences in plant and animal life indicating a prevision and definite preparation of the earth for Man – an old doctrine, supposed to be exploded, but which, to all who accept the view that the universe is not a chance product, will, I hope, no longer seem to be outside the realm of scientific inquiry. (WL 430)

He ends his 1889 *Darwinism* with comparable remarks:

... we, who accept the existence of a spiritual world, can look upon the universe as a grand consistent whole adapted in all its parts to the development of spiritual beings capable of indefinite life and perfectibility. To us, the whole purpose, the only *raison d'être* of the world – with all its complexities of physical structure, with its grand geological progress, the slow evolution of the vegetable and animal kingdoms, and the ultimate appearance of man – was the development of the human spirit in association with the human body. From the fact that the spirit of man – the man himself – *is* so developed, we may well believe that this is the only, or at least the best, way for its development; and we may even see in what is usually termed “evil” on the earth, one of the most efficient means of its growth. (D 477)

Wallace’s penultimate chapter in *The World of Life* is indeed entitled “Is Nature Cruel?” and – against the prevailing “yesses,” including Darwin’s – Wallace answers in the negative. He considers Darwin’s concerns to be ill-founded. Darwin, that is, as he revealingly writes to T. H. Farrer in 1881, cannot make sense of “the infinite sufferings of animals – not only those of the body, but those of the mind – as when a mother loses her offspring” (*More Letters* 395). Darwin writes that if a proposed solution to the problem of evil does not satisfy us vis à vis animals, “will it suffice for man?” (395) As if a non sequitur, he then speaks of “the very heavy loss” of his brother Erasmus (395). Wallace, however, claims to reassure his readers that suffering is justified on both nonhuman and human fronts. He views “pain as having been developed in the animal world for a *purpose*; as being strictly subordinated to the law of *utility*; and therefore never developed beyond what was actually *needed* for the preservation of life” (WL 401). Lower animals, he maintains, are increasingly less sensitive to pain as we descend the ladder of life; what minimal pain creatures do feel is strictly adaptive, fosters their survival. Wallace then extends this logic to human beings: we suffer only the minimum pain (“what is usually termed

‘evil’’) requisite to the inciting of our own self-protective energies, as well as of our moral and spiritual development. Such reasoning is essential to Wallace’s principal conclusion:

We thus find that the Darwinian theory, even when carried out to its extreme logical conclusion, not only does not oppose, but lends a decided support to, a belief in the spiritual nature of man. It shows us how man's body may have been developed from that of a lower animal form under the law of natural selection; but it also teaches us that we possess intellectual and moral faculties which could not have been so developed, but must have had another origin; and for this origin we can only find an adequate cause in the unseen universe of Spirit. (*D* 478)

Only *this* goal, mankind, over and above the aim that Darwin ascribes to natural selection – simply adaptation to an environmental niche – makes whatever pain occurs in the service of its realization worthwhile and “the only, or at least the best, way” to such an end. Man has “another origin” in the “unseen universe of Spirit,” where chance plays no part.

This same commitment to anthropocentric teleology leads myriad theorists to advance entirely anti-Darwinian evolutionary mechanisms, in order to quash both the ruthlessness of the Darwinian winnowing process (so it still seems to them), and the unpredictability upon which it rests. They seek to afford evolution more deterministic and moral means, and more definite ends. Overlapping strains of anti-Darwinian evolutionism arise: new brands of Lamarckism and vitalism, of orthogenesis and theistic evolution. Let us take each school in turn. Neo-Lamarckisms held pride of place, contending that traits acquired during a creature’s lifetime were passed to its progeny. Herbert Spencer maintained that Lamarckian use-inheritance accelerated and directed the moral and physical progress of humankind; he afforded Lamarckism a *telos* which it had not had. Neo-vitalisms, too, took both more and less teleological forms. Hans Driesch’s late nineteenth-century, goal-oriented vitalism suggested that immaterial spirit, Mind within matter, guided organic processes, the movements of natural history. Explicitly siding with entelechy over mechanism, Driesch especially disparaged Darwinism’s opening of the door to chance. Francis Sumner, reviewer of Driesch’s *The History and Theory of Vitalism* in 1916, points to Driesch’s scorn for natural selection; Sumner quotes Driesch’s illustrative criticism of “Darwinism, which explained how by throwing stones one could build houses of a typical style” (105). Driesch seems not to have grasped Darwin’s own house-building metaphor: the architect, natural selection, does not act at random with relation to adaptation (he does aim for “typical style” in creatures); yet his building blocks, although their formation is the result of natural laws and complex causal sequences, are thrown into being without a specified architectural purpose. Sumner comments tellingly: “Driesch is singularly indifferent to the great scientific awakening which followed the publication of the ‘Origin of Species.’ To him its only results of consequence were to have been the apotheosis of chance and an insensate desire to trace out genealogical trees” (105). New iterations of Lamarckism and vitalism, then, were often, as countermeasure to the “apotheosis of chance,” theories of orthogenesis: theories that hold that evolution, arrow-like, moved toward a particular endpoint because of guiding, internal forces, and did not depend upon the adaptive value of happenstance variations. Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin attributed such an internal force and planned outcome to the cosmos as a whole, organic and inorganic. Like Gray, he insisted upon a necessarily God-guided, theistic version of such evolution. Wallace’s own specific suggestion was that saltations – macro-mutations,

evolutionary leaps – created the human mind, marking God’s intervention in an otherwise Darwinian biosphere.

Darwin himself was neither orthogenesisist, vitalist, nor theist; he rejected saltation and allowed only minimally, in his initial formulation of evolution, for Lamarckian use-inheritance. Instead, he increasingly came to suggest that the environment must indirectly change the reproductive systems of all creatures, causing unforeseen variations that only appear in offspring. Yet as Darwin developed his fledgling theory of blended inheritance, pangenesis, he came to require an ever larger wellspring of variation in order to counter objections that such blending would quickly homogenize populations and that natural selection worked too slowly to account for life’s plenitude. Engineer Fleeming Jenkin mistakenly maintained that variation could not survive the merging of inherited traits. More damagingly, devout physicist William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) concluded that the ages of the sun and the Earth – which he greatly underestimated, working prior to the turn-of-the-century discovery of radioactive isotopes and atomic energy – could not allow sufficient time for the descent with modification that Darwin envisioned. Darwin was pressed into supplementing his theory of inborn, chance differences with the plethora of variations that would be supplied by Lamarckian acquired characters – so that natural selection could accomplish its work in a vastly reduced time scale. Darwin would never see the great vindication of his original hypothesis among both field naturalists and geneticists over half a century later.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> What Darwin suspected to be the environment’s effects upon creatures’ reproductive organs – his working explanation for what he recognized to be irregular, novel changes in progeny – we would now think of as the genetic mutations that occur during reproduction, for whatever reasons. But such “spelling errors” in the genetic language are not, of course, the only contributors to species’ phenotypic diversity and evolution. Migration (gene flow) and genetic drift (the spreading of certain genes purely by luck, not because of any benefit they might confer upon organisms) can also greatly affect the gene pool of a species. Recent studies in epigenetics – the field that for over half a century has studied the ways in which the environment affects an organism’s own development – have also begun to suggest that characteristics acquired during parents’ lifetimes, as Lamarck thought, may be passed down to offspring. This mode of inheritance does not involve changes in the DNA sequence, in the genetic code itself, but environmentally induced modifications to gene expression. It is not de novo germline mutations that are at issue, but the parental “instruction manual” for gene regulation – the bequeathal to the next generation of chemical tags, directions for DNA’s shaping itself inside cells. Studies of plants, worms, and mammals demonstrate that such epigenetic changes, caused by the environment (by climate, diet, toxins, or stress, for instance), can indeed be inherited – yet in human beings these changes have not been shown to persist through more than two generations. Such short-lived inheritance would suggest that epigenetic variation in animals does not serve as raw material for natural selection. See Heard and Martienssen, “Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance: Myths and Mechanisms.” Their work also addresses germline reprogramming in mammals, which serves to clear away epigenetic markers and to prevent their travelling to the next generation (whereas plants show a much greater retention of epigenetic changes); Heard and Martienssen conclude furthermore that in neither animals nor plants do “epimutations” show themselves to be adaptive. See also Virginia Hughes’ “Epigenetics: The Sins of the Father” for a discussion of how epimutations might “escape reprogramming” for a few generations in mammals, and of how exactly they might occur – via RNA, or environmentally induced changes to histones or DNA methylation (24). As Robert Schmitz describes epimutations that arise from the methylation of DNA: “In contrast to the widespread, albeit incomplete, erasure and reprogramming that happens in animals, DNA methylation is inherited across generations in plant genomes” (1082). Yet Claude Becker et. al.’s “Spontaneous Epigenetic Variation in the *Arabidopsis thaliana* methylome” contends that even in plants “[p]erhaps our most important finding is that the number of epimutations does not increase linearly with time, indicating that many are not stably inherited over the long term. ... Such sites [of demethylation and re-methylation] can be considered as going through recurrent cycles of forward and reverse epimutation, which is very different from what is found at the level of the genome sequence, where reverse mutations are exceedingly rare. Importantly, reversion rates directly determine the ability of any type of allele to be subject to Darwinian selection” (248). On the other hand, Jablonka and Lamb make the case for epigenetics’ role in evolution, in *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History*

## *Chance with God*

American pragmatist Charles Sander Peirce offers us a particularly revelatory reception of Darwin in his essay “Evolutionary Love,” published in *The Monist* in 1893. Peirce does not attempt to eliminate chance from evolution, but to accommodate chance to his own type of theistic evolution. Peirce squarely acknowledges that Darwinian natural selection relies upon variation that is random with respect to its adaptive value. He understands “the idea that chance begets order,” “the idea that fortuitous events may result in a physical law” (190). Peirce refers to the fact that a lawful response (natural selection) answers to unforeseen and non-directive events (variations). For Peirce, as fellow philosopher Charles Hartshorne writes:

... it is logically impossible that deterministic laws, which are all ‘conservative’ in character, should explain evolution, which is creation of the novel, production of variety from prior uniformity. The basic laws of physics are reversible: they make past and future equally a part of the logical content of the present, and they cannot increase variety. (53)

Yet Peirce then devises and names his own alternative notion of chance-based evolution: an “agapastic theory of evolution” in which the cultivation of sympathy, in response to unexpected stimuli, is the force driving the evolutionary process. The law of love replaces the law of natural selection. Peirce proposes “the formula of an evolutionary philosophy, which teaches that growth comes only from love” (189). He theorizes “a love which embraces hatred as an imperfect stage of it” – a love strengthened and advanced by encounters with less developed forms of itself – whose healing operation “discloses for the problem of evil its everlasting solution” (185).

Prior to outlining his own position, Peirce catalogues those that have come before. He first describes Darwinism:

Natural selection, as conceived by Darwin, is a mode of evolution in which the only positive agent of change in the whole passage from moner to man is fortuitous variation. (190)

Peirce then contrasts this lawful adaptive process, possessed of no further *telos*, with theories of preordained evolution, those that “makes development go through certain phases, having its inevitable ebbs and flows, yet tending on the whole to a foreordained perfection” (195). He points to both mechanistic and vitalist forms of this “necessitarian” view. Either “physical force,” in the form of heredity or environment, determines a particular future, or vital force does:

Evolution by sporting and evolution by mechanical necessity are conceptions warring against one another.

Diametrically opposed to evolution by chance are those theories which attribute all progress to an inward necessary principle, or other form of necessity. (192, 191)

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*of Life*. Finally, Massimo Pigliucci has predicted, not the overturning of the modern evolutionary synthesis (the synthesis of natural selection and genetics), but an “Extended Evolutionary Synthesis” equal to addressing the interrelations among several more fields, including “genetics, developmental biology, and ... ecology” (2747).

Peirce's own evolutionary view, neither Darwinian nor determinist, provides "a third method, which supersedes their strife, [and] lies enwrapped in the theory of Lamarck" (192). Peirce proffers a "Lamarckian evolution of mind" in which love is the "inward necessary principle," a "psychical" engine of "progress" (192, 193). What distinguishes his view from Hegel's, Peirce says – for both are idealisms in which "the cosmos, only so far as it yet is mind, and so has life, is ... capable of further evolution" – is that he understands Hegel to be the quintessential necessitarian, convinced of a fully deterministic, orthogenetic arc to evolution (186). Peirce's Lamarckian mind, however, passing its advances to the next generation, instead feeds on a "succession of surprises," feasts on chance occurrences as opportunities to practice love (193). Peirce summarizes:

Three modes of evolution have thus been brought before us: evolution by fortuitous variation, evolution by mechanical [or vitalist] necessity, and evolution by creative love. We may term them tychastic evolution, or tychasm, anancastic evolution, or anancasm, and agapastic evolution, or agapasm. ... [The] propositions that absolute chance, mechanical necessity, and the law of love are severally operative in the cosmos may receive the names of tychism, anancism, and agapism. (194)

Behind Peirce's objection to Darwinism is not, then, its inclusion of chance, but its blind favoritism. The effect of privileging fitness, he believes, is to cement ideas from political economy into pseudo-scientific Social Darwinist dictates for society. Peirce does not share with Hardy the conviction that Darwinism must inspire the opposite ethical posture: the feeling that "to model our conduct on Nature's apparent conduct ... can only bring disaster to humanity" (qtd. in Bonica 858). Rather, he finds that the "ruthless theory" indeed suggests that "greed is the great agent in the elevation of the human race and in the evolution of the universe" (191, 186). He shares with Friedrich Engels a repulsion toward Social Darwinist interpretation, writing:

*The Origin of Species* of Darwin merely extends politico-economical views of progress to the entire realm of animal and vegetable life. ... Here, then, is the issue. The gospel of Christ says that progress comes from every individual merging his individuality in sympathy with his neighbors. On the other side, the conviction of the nineteenth century is that progress takes place by virtue of every individual's striving for himself with all his might and trampling his neighbor under foot whenever he gets a chance to do so. This may accurately be called the Gospel of Greed. (189)

[Darwin's] hypothesis, while without dispute one of the most ingenious and pretty ever devised, and while argued with a wealth of knowledge, a strength of logic, a charm of rhetoric, and above all with a certain magnetic genuineness that was almost irresistible, did not appear, at first, at all near to being proved; and to a sober mind its case looks less hopeful now than it did twenty years ago; but the extraordinarily favorable reception it met with was plainly owing, in large measure, to its ideas being those toward which the age was favorably disposed, especially, because of the encouragement it gave to the greed-philosophy. (191)

Peirce objects to the picture, even among nonhuman animals, of a loveless lottery of fate. He likens its operations to those in which “ruined gamblers leave their money on the table to make those not yet ruined so much the richer. It makes the felicity of the lambs just the damnation of the goats, transposed to the other side of the equation” (195). He sees a sacrificial logic in Darwinism that promises nothing of the collective renewals of nineteenth-century anthropological theory – and has everything to do with individualistic rapacity. Peirce shows that “in genuine agapasm, on the other hand, advance takes place by virtue of a positive sympathy among the created springing from continuity of mind. This is the idea which tychasticism knows not how to manage” (195). It is true that *tuchē* is without compassion, is morally opaque. It is true that it only fosters “continuity of mind,” intersubjective sympathy, among those who recognize and share a horror of it.

### *Further Non-Darwinian Views of Chance*

Charles Hartshorne reminds us that the Laplacian determinist of 1800 “says that chance is only a name for our ignorance” (54). But by 1900, as Ian Hacking contends in *The Taming of Chance*, Peirce can express the now pervasive view that chance is both real and unavoidable:

The only question is where chance is to be located. Either we put all the chances, all the non-rational characters of existence, “back of the beginning,” outside of time, in one dose of creation by God (or of the “it is so because it is so”); or we distribute chance throughout the temporal process, making each event in some slight degree a creative, unpredictable novelty, even from the point of view of ideal knowledge of its antecedents. In still other words, either we make chance supernatural, outside the world of time and space, or we naturalize it, making it an ingredient of all process. (Hartshorne 54)

Aristotle chooses, in writing the *Poetics*, to “make chance supernatural” – only to banish the dice-throwing gods from the tragic stage. In contrast, Darwin surmises that the causes of variation are unsystematic and unpredictable, and in so doing naturalizes chance. But unlike Darwin and like Peirce, Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead respond to such chance by making it dovetail with an anthropocentric cosmic process.

Bertrand Russell recognizes such non-Darwinian “evolutionism” as “the prevailing creed of our time. It dominates our politics, our literature, and not least our philosophy. Nietzsche, pragmatism, Bergson, are phases in its philosophic development, and their popularity far beyond the circles of professional philosophers shows its consonance with the spirit of the age” (*OK* 8). Russell is highly skeptical of such evolutionism – whether necessitarian or allowing for chance – because he finds that “the predominant interest of evolutionism is in the question of human destiny” and its general self-centeredness and progressivism pander to “mundane hopes” (*OK* 13, 8). He sums up the trouble:

Darwin's *Origin of Species* persuaded the world that the difference between different species of animals and plants is not the fixed, immutable difference that it appears to be. The doctrine of natural kinds, which had rendered classification easy and definite, which was enshrined in the Aristotelian tradition, and protected

by its supposed necessity for orthodox dogma, was suddenly swept away for ever out of the biological world. The difference between man and the lower animals, which to our human conceit appears enormous, was shown to be a gradual achievement, involving intermediate beings who could not with certainty be placed either within or without the human family. The sun and planets had already been shown by Laplace to be very probably derived from a primitive more or less undifferentiated nebula. Thus the old fixed landmarks became wavering and indistinct, and all sharp outlines were blurred. Things and species lost their boundaries, and none could say where they began or where they ended.

But if human conceit was staggered for a moment by its kinship with the ape, it soon found a way to reassert itself, and that way is the “philosophy” of evolution. A process which led from the amœba to man appeared to the philosophers to be obviously a progress – though whether the amœba would agree with this opinion is not known. Hence the cycle of changes which science had shown to be the probable history of the past was welcomed as revealing a law of development towards good in the universe – an evolution or unfolding of an ideal slowly embodying itself in the actual. But such a view, though it might satisfy Spencer and those whom we may call Hegelian evolutionists, could not be accepted as adequate by the more whole-hearted votaries of change. An ideal to which the world continuously approaches is, to these minds, too dead and static to be inspiring. Not only the aspirations, but the ideal too, must change and develop with the course of evolution; there must be no fixed goal, but a continual fashioning of fresh needs by the impulse which is life and which alone gives unity to the process. (OK 8-9)

Russell therefore observes that “the older kind of teleology ... which regarded the End as a fixed goal, already partially visible, towards which we were gradually approaching, is rejected by M. Bergson as not allowing enough for the absolute dominion of change” (OK 10).

Yet Russell is particularly sensitive to the fact that even this latest brand of evolutionism, that admits of chance, makes such chance serve a further purpose, beyond the fostering of natural selection. Whereas Peirce casts chance as the stimulus to express *agape*, Nietzsche, as we have seen, makes it the opportunity to express power. And Bergson in *Creative Evolution* (1907), for all that he praises ceaseless Dionysian movement as the engine and *raison d'être* of life, nonetheless sees a concerted meaning in this tireless creation; life itself is its own guiding principle. Russell aptly notes that in Bergson “somehow, without explicit statement, the assurance is slipped in that the future, though we cannot foresee it, will be better than the past or the present” (OK 11). As Donna Jones also writes of Bergson’s vitalism, with its “impulse which is life and which alone gives unity to the process,” it aims to re-establish human beings as denizens of a welcoming nature:

Man was to become once again one with the universe through intuition .... Through the philosophic elaboration of the conception of intuition, Bergson, working in the idealist tradition of *Naturphilosophie*, had hoped to provide a connection between man and the natural world so that the individual need not regard himself as living in, on the whole, an alien natural environment but rather

as having arisen out of and thus being one with nature, every bit of which is now imbued with cosmic significance. (92)

### *Panpsychist Nature*

Alfred North Whitehead perhaps epitomizes not only modernism's anti-Darwinian conception of nature, but its accompanying, rose-tinted conception of tragedy. At first glance, however, Whitehead's 1925 *Science and the Modern World* seems to share Russell's literary historical insight that science's *weltanschauung* has revived Greek tragedy's. Whitehead writes:

The pilgrim fathers of the scientific imagination as it exists today are the great tragedians of ancient Athens, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides. Their vision of fate, remorseless and indifferent, urging a tragic incident to its inevitable issue, is the vision possessed by science. Fate in Greek Tragedy becomes the order of nature in modern thought. (10)

Whitehead proceeds to liken the inevitability of a tragic plot to that of a decisive scientific experiment. He numbers himself among the rapt members of the chorus who find that the Einsteinian oracle does not lie, that prophesy becomes history, hypothesis fact:

The absorbing interest in the particular heroic incidents, as an example and a verification of the workings of fate, reappears in our epoch as concentration of interest on the crucial experiments. It was my good fortune to be present at the meeting of the Royal Society in London when the Astronomer Royal for England announced that the photographic plates of the famous eclipse, as measured by his colleagues in Greenwich Observatory, had verified the prediction of Einstein that rays of light are bent as they pass in the neighbourhood of the sun. The whole atmosphere of tense interest was exactly that of the Greek drama: we were the chorus commenting on the decree of destiny as disclosed in the development of a supreme incident. There was dramatic quality in the very staging: – the traditional ceremonial, and in the background the picture of Newton to remind us that the greatest of scientific generalisations was now, after more than two centuries, to receive its first modification. Nor was the personal interest wanting: a great adventure in thought had at length come safe to shore.

Let me here remind you that the essence of dramatic tragedy is not unhappiness. It resides in the solemnity of the remorseless working of things. This inevitableness of destiny can only be illustrated in terms of human life by incidents which in fact involve unhappiness. For it is only by them that the futility of escape can be made evident in the drama. This remorseless inevitableness is what pervades scientific thought. The laws of physics are the decrees of fate. (S 10-11)

Whitehead seems, as iconoclastically as Lucas, to make amoral inevitability the signature of both tragedy and science. And in so doing, he implicitly raises the questions that exercised Plato and Aristotle and the readership of Darwin: does such necessity stem from chance or from rational causality, and does even a rational, mechanistic explanation make moral sense? Is rational

mechanism, devoid of sentient purpose, any less alien to human hopes than chance? Now relativity, if amorally rational, seems innocuously so. But the materialism of astronomy, physics, and geology had long been more tolerable to audiences – easier to reconcile to faith – than the specter of the same impersonal, physical law governing biology, especially if it were reacting to innumerable surprises.

When it came to tragedy and science, therefore, Whitehead himself concluded that both were testaments to an all-inclusive psychical and moral order. Against Russell and Lucas, he determines:

The conception of the moral order in the Greek plays was certainly not a discovery of the dramatists. It must have passed into the literary tradition from the general serious opinion of the times. But in finding this magnificent expression, it thereby deepened the stream of thought from which it arose. The spectacle of a moral order was impressed upon the imagination of a classical civilization. (*S* 11)

Whitehead's own philosophy comes to oppose the "bifurcation" of nature": a division between unfeeling, mindless matter, on the one hand, and mental states on the other, a division that led certain philosophers (although not Russell) to reduce consciousness to an epiphenomenon (*PR* 289). But Whitehead does more than assert the reality of subjective experience: he infuses value and mind into the whole of nature. While for Russell, Lucas, and the novelists, therefore, tragedy in fact requires, in Russell's words, "the irresistible forces whose puppets we seem to be – Death and change, the irrevocableness of the past, and the powerlessness of man before the blind hurry of the universe," Whitehead proves an affirmative theorist of tragedy and evolution both (*ML* 27). If fate is unstoppably (indifferently) obdurate in its unfurling, "remorseless," it is morally so. Whitehead refuses the notion that "nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly" (*S* 54). He writes that nature is nowhere blind mechanism or aimless spontaneity, but "a structure of evolving processes. The reality is the process" (*S* 72). Necessity is inalterable ("the futility of escape"), but it is not purely mechanical; necessity and panpsychist consciousness go hand in hand. Like Samuel Alexander in *Time, Space, and Deity* (1920) and Lloyd Morgan in *Emergent Evolution* (1923), Whitehead suggests that human consciousness arises on the world stage as an inevitable level of evolutionary complexity.<sup>17</sup> Thus the "remorseless inevitability" of the "decrees of fate" in tragedy and of the "laws of physics" in Einsteinian theory are, for Whitehead, inseparable from all-pervading Mind and "moral order."

It is stochastic, non-teleological chance that Darwin could reconcile to an all-foreknowing and foreordaining God, yet Whitehead now re-imagines God as a being who needn't stand outside of time and determine its course, but can change with time, as the world does. Both Whitehead and Peirce share the conviction that all matter possesses mind, to varying degrees, and can therefore transform the world purposefully – making nature's history one of striving consciousness rather than unconscious mechanism. On such a reading of life, the future is indeterminate, because of chance, but "evolutionary love" (Peirce) or panpsychist "process" (Whitehead) guides the movements of existence. Fellow process philosopher Hartshorne writes that "one can well imagine Plato or Leibnitz being greatly impressed by the arguments of Peirce and Whitehead for an evolutionary version of idealism" (62).

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<sup>17</sup> For a philosophical overview of theories of emergence today, see Robert Van Gulick's "Reduction, Emergence, and Other Recent Options on the Mind/Body Problem." Also Stephen Talbott's "Getting Over the Code Delusion."

## *The Return of Darwinian Chance in the Modern Synthesis*

Hardy was as much Darwin's faithful disciple as Huxley, and Hardy laments in 1922 that "belief in the witches of Endor" – belief in machinating spirit of whatever stripe, possessed of a plan for man – "is displacing the Darwinian theory" (*CP* 561). Yet the modern evolutionary synthesis commences in the late 1920s. The succeeding three decades see the confirmation of the Darwinian model, despite its fifty years' disparagement and the early Mendelians' belief that gradual Darwinian change was incompatible with particulate inheritance. Bowler affirms that by mid-century "genetics had eliminated all of the alternative mechanisms of evolution" (272). The new Darwinian synthesis spread with varying degrees of swiftness and diffusion through England, France, Germany, America, and the Soviet Union, but inside the laboratory fruit fly experiments showed "a whole range of apparently random mutations ... suggesting that Darwin had been right to suppose that variation by itself imposed no direction on evolution" (Bowler 272).

Experimentally, variation proved not to be fully predictable and to be without object, evincing the dual causal and motivational impenetrability characteristic of the Greek gods' irreversible fiat. Variation was nonetheless lawful in that it followed Mendelian rules of inheritance. In the 1930s, geneticist Thomas Hunt Morgan continued to find, as Garland Allen writes, "that one of the most difficult problems in evolutionary theory was the question of chance versus purpose. ... Although Darwin did not know the causes of these variations, his use of the term 'chance' did not imply that they had no cause but only that they did not originate for the purpose of fulfilling a specific need" (365, 366). Genetics confirmed, as Darwin had supposed, not only that variations, with their physical causes, did not arise expressly to improve organisms' lots, but that an individual's phenotype was the luck of the hereditary draw – and that because new, transmissible mutations could occur contingently and regardless of their adaptive value, these genetic changes might be unforeseeable in principle.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, which variations occur and in which environments are as Morgan saw "two independent sets of chance events, both of which must be considered in discussing the role of chance in evolution" (365).

We can see how far the acceptance and theorizing of chance has come, looking once again at the beginnings of nineteenth-century evolutionary thought. As Easley writes:

One may venture that Lamarck, in particular, failed to grasp the possible significance of chance variation because he was unsure of extinction on any major scale. If he had been in a position to abandon the Scale of Nature concept sufficiently to accept the dying out of numerous species, Lamarck might have been led at least to consider some fortuitous element at work in life. ... Thus his conception of organic development appeared so directly controlled that chance and extinction could play, at best, but little part in it. (54)

Yet in 1931, population geneticist Sewall Wright, as Richard Lewontin finds, had recognized the explanatory power of chance that Darwin suspected:

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<sup>18</sup> See John Curtis, *Darwin's Dice: The Idea of Chance in the Thought of Charles Darwin* (15). Curtis clarifies that we can predict, probabilistically, statistically, the fitness of a given phenotype within a given environment; however, unlike matters of fitness, mutations, as well as their phenotypic effects, may be in theory unpredictable. Darwin routinely discussed chance in both of these ways.

Only in the synthetic work of Wright do we get hints (and only hints) of the way in which both speciation and extinction can flow mechanically from the processes of modulation and variation. This is the role of chance in evolution. For Wright, chance modifies and softens the directive effects of selection so that populations may find themselves with a genetic constitution different from the endpoint [adaptedness] to which selection is driving them at any particular moment. If populations find themselves at a different genotypic composition than selection is driving them toward, then extinction may occur. This is almost extinction by bad luck. (61)

Now an ill-adaptive variation (spread via genetic drift, or injurious because of environmental changes) can doom not only an individual organism, but its entire community.

Decidedly carrying Darwinian thought into genetics is French biochemist Jacques Monod. Monod contends in his 1970 *Chance and Necessity (Le Hasard et la Nécessité)*, a century after *The Descent of Man*, that not only does evolution proceed without humankind as its goal, but it would be mistaken to attribute the origin of life either to mechanistic determinism or to vital forces. Life itself has arisen by chance. Monod is, however, vocal in his acknowledgement of the apparent paradox which, as we have seen, perennially besets evolutionary and developmental biology. All life forms are indubitably, in Monod's coinage, "teleonomic" – exemplify purpose in their form and function, are designed for survival and reproduction – and yet life first comes into being and henceforward evolves under the auspices of no particular purpose. Monod's work is his Darwinian, post-synthesis answer to this riddle.

Monod details the elaborate chemical processes, autonomous, self-maintaining, and self-replicating, that sustain and copy the component parts of life. Revisiting embryogenesis, he insists upon its mechanical invariance. This invariance with which hereditary material is copied from parents to offspring constitutes the necessity of his title. Among his central premises is also the teleology-free – chance – nature of mutations:

... chance alone is at the source of every innovation, of all creation in the biosphere. Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, at the very root of the stupendous edifice of evolution .... There is no scientific concept, in any of the sciences, more destructive of anthropocentrism than this one, and no other so rouses an instinctive protest from the intensely teleonomic creatures that we are. (112-13)

Monod surmises that the very teleonomic drive, the seed of the tree of the life, has come to be by chance. Reaching back past the evolution of species to the origin of replicating organisms per se, he contends that the emergence of life was a singular occurrence. It led to the biosphere as we know it but was not a matter of necessity. Such an initiatory happening could come to pass, indeed did – obeying specific physical laws and under specific environmental conditions, and thus the activity of teleonomic creatures can be explained – but that first, foundational combination of amino acid sequences was the result of luck. Imagine a deck of cards, Monod says: amino acids are distributed throughout the deck in accordance with their average occurrence in nature. Say that we are forming a sequence of two hundred such polypeptide residues; Monod tells us that knowing the first one hundred and ninety-nine will not help us to determine the final draw (97). Every selection is independent, from a new, full deck. That a

particular amino acid sequence – one that will bundle itself such that a three-dimensional shape seeking its own likeness forms – is a possibility, not a certainty. But from such a chanceful event, necessity can be born. An ironclad fate – teleonomy, eventually consciousness – need not have sentient purpose behind it.

### *Darwinism, Modernism, Tragedy*

As a tragic novelist, Hardy repeatedly marks this distinction, registering that our widest array of sensations and values needn't have a cosmic counterpart. He distills such a heterodox sentiment into a few uncompromising lines of poetry: "Let me enjoy the earth no less / Because the all-enacting Might / That fashioned forth its loveliness / Had other aims than my delight" ("Let me Enjoy" 1-4). Even anti-Darwinist Victorian nature writer Richard Jefferies joins the chorus at the end of his life: "The old, old error: I love the earth, therefore the earth loves me – I am her child – I am Man, the favoured of all creatures. I am the centre, and all for me was made" (*FH* 6). Contrary to philosopher Thomas Nagel's recent apology for teleology and design in the universe, *Mind and Cosmos* (2012) – Nagel's case for the purposeful, planned emergence of human consciousness – the novelists of this study maintain the opposite view. Like Boethius and Pascal before them, they are fascinated by immensities of space and time in comparison to which the human lifespan and body seem very small; but like Buffon, Hume, and Darwin, they reject divine plotting, cosmic order in which humankind is the aim of creation.

The modernist turn away from creationism and from religion generally, which has been widely documented, has a decidedly Darwinian flavor; George Levine rightly evokes "the conventional understanding of [Darwin] as a primary disenchanter of the world" (22).<sup>19</sup> As a chance (as opposed to predetermined) evolutionary outcome, the teeming, time-bound human mind appears the exception to the universe's rule of iterable replication. As Gillian Beer writes in 2009: "the loss of belief in a personal eternity shifts the time-scale of human fears and brings everything within the single life span. ... Darwin accepted the short-lived nature of the human person and bypassed religious hope. He demonstrated how the imagination can nevertheless illuminate vast tracts of time before and beyond the human" ("Darwin and the Uses of Extinction" 326, 327). Authors come to inscribe "Darwin's plots," as Beer labels them, into their fiction: those which exceed "a scale for the human," are "without the needs of individual life in mind," accentuate "the absolute gap between our finite capacities and the infinite time and space of the universe," and set happiness "at odds with narrative" (*DP* 235, 223, 237, 229). For Darwin, Beer suggests, these nearly inconceivable temporal expanses did not necessarily induce terror and pity. Yet in late-Victorian and modernist, as well as in postmodern fiction, the specter of the Anthropocene – of a geological epoch marked by human lives, framed on either side by vast swaths of time without them, and given its name by ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer and chemist Paul J. Crutzen in 2000 – lodges in artists' imaginations as an existentially unsettling spur to creation. In 2012, Mark McGurl emphasizes the centrality of this telescopic, cosmic perspective to what he labels the "posthuman comedy" of science fiction and horror, which involves the "comic personification of the absolutely other":

[W]e are reminded that character is framed by something wholly other – an absolutely indifferent, starkly inhuman universe. Closer at hand, literature is set off against the literalism of science, whose pursuit of objective knowledge, even

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*.

of intensely “human” things like human cognition, could be described as a kind of antianthropomorphism, an effort to know what is true about the universe behind and beyond the self-interested projections of the human point of view. (548)

Thus for the very reasons that Darwinism leads a chorus of “affirmative” critics to bemoan a disenchanted world inhospitable to faith and tragedy both, Darwinism furnishes modernist novelists with a sure rebuttal to those who find the modernist period, on the contrary, too self-confident and optimistic to support the intractable pains of tragedy. For George Steiner and for George Harris in *Reason’s Grief: An Essay on Tragedy and Value* (2006), the essence of the ancient genre, far from existential consolation, is the immitigable grief, the sheer impotence and unredeemed torture of the tragic hero. This hero is decidedly subjected to forces “beyond the self-interested projections of the human point of view.” Anthropomorphized Greek divinities in fact represent such extrahuman sources of power. Thus for Harris and Steiner, as for Schopenhauer, a world susceptible to infinite amelioration, “led along certain beneficial lines” by gods, humankind, or natural selection itself is inimical to tragic art.

In 1914, D. H. Lawrence laments, in this vein, that Hardy’s tragic characters “were not at war with God, only with Society”; social ills subject to reform, Lawrence maintains, constitute “the weakness of modern tragedy” (30). But not only do tragic novelists now make the case for “tragic machinery,” as Hardy calls it, of the cultural kind, which proves as destructive of character as any contestation with divinity – anticipating Raymond Williams’ defense of modern tragedy, as that which is social in origin and nonetheless uncontrollably catastrophic – novelists also consider a Darwinian cosmos as menacing to the individual, as corrosive to optimisms both religious and secular, as any sadistic cabal of gods (*J* 7). Not only social ideology, more intractable and lethal than a blithe reformist spirit would have it, but that which Lawrence himself posits as the tragic, “terrific action of unfathomed nature” now appears in the novel (29). With “Shakespeare or Sophocles,” Lawrence concedes, the modern novelist can set “a smaller system of morality, the one grasped and formulated by the human consciousness, within the vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself” (29).

What is, from the perspective of deep time, the “posthuman comedy” of characters’ pretensions to significance, may be, from the point of view of much-humbled character, the concomitant tragedy of ill luck, mortality, and human viciousness within this “absolutely indifferent, starkly inhuman universe.” Darwinism centrally contributes to this unmaking of the cosmos as a home specially designed for humanity. Jonathan Greenburg reminds us in his introduction to *Twentieth-Century Literature’s* special issue *Darwin and Literary Studies* that “[t]he great evolutionary theorist and historian of science Ernst Mayr maintains that Darwin dispelled not only the notion of divine creation but in fact five major philosophical tenets, principles that undergirded not only religion but nineteenth-century science as well: creationism, anthropocentrism, essentialism, physicalism, and teleology” (431). Greenburg remarks that, as we have seen, “Darwin’s antiphysicalism contributes to a shift from the clockwork model of the Newtonian universe to a view of science based on a ‘probabilism’ that recognizes temporal change, emergence, and stochastic processes” (431). The certainty of determinism and cosmic balance-sheets, long the hallmark of moralistic tragedy, gives way to the conviction of pitiless, chanceful, stochastic (e.g. unpredictable) outcomes – *tuchē* in lieu of *eikos*. Darwin himself engages in sufficiently meticulous observation, logical inference, and audacious reflection to find himself balking at his own conclusions. Writing to T. H. Farrer in 1881 that he does not believe in guided, purposeful variation, Darwin proceeds to remark, still rather heretically:

On the other hand, if we consider the whole universe, the mind refuses to look at it as the outcome of chance – that is, without design or purpose. The whole question seems to me insoluble, for I cannot put much or any faith in the so-called intuitions of the human mind, which have been developed, as I cannot doubt, from such a mind as animals possess; and what would their convictions or intuitions be worth? (*More Letters* 395)

Monod, too, like Darwin viewing selection as probabilistic and variation as fortuitous, reflects that “all religions, nearly all philosophies, and even a part of science” attest to humankind’s intuitively and “desperately denying its own contingency” (44). What, then, does a literature look like that does not balk at the explosive power of chance in human life, or deny such cosmic contingency?

Joshua Foa Dienstag, speaking of Camus, suggests that such fiction’s characters would recognize “the inherent contradictions of temporal life and [live] in moments, by multiplying them rather than by trying to assemble them into a false narrative” (142). The protagonist of such literature, writes Dienstag, “no longer relies on teleological narratives but still acts under the aegis of her time-consciousness” – neither denies time’s passing nor considers it the revelation of a plan for her (155). Patricia Waugh argues, too, that “modernist poetics is grounded, like the Darwinian view of mind, on a thoroughgoing rejection of dualism” and in this way “Darwinism has impinged upon the construction and representation of mind in modernism” (126). Thus tragedy after Darwin weds mortal human minds, the sole locus of meaning in a world devoid of transcendental stories, to a multiplicity of momentary affirmations. Modernist tragedy is one literary legacy of Darwinism, one reckoning with the vulnerabilities and chances that Darwinism naturalizes. Anti-Darwinian modernism is another such legacy, vitalistically or theistically envisioning the world as a secure homeland. So, too, a third legacy proves to be a still Darwinian, yet counter-tragic rendering of human kinship with all life and with the material world, emphasizing the pleasurable insights that evolutionary thought can afford.<sup>20</sup> Both tragic and non-tragic modes of response to Darwinism set humanity definitively within the animal kingdom, writing characters into terrestrial histories, ecologies, and destinies – and exploring, varyingly, the daunting and delighting implications of this view of life. With Greenburg we can “claim that Darwin makes possible modernism itself” (432).

### Modernism, Tragedy, Nihilism

Not only does the literature of this study bring Darwinian nature and Greek tragic philosophy together in the novel, but it also challenges the Weberian notion that Darwin’s disenchanted cosmos leads only to meaninglessness, paralysis, and despair – effectively to nihilism.<sup>21</sup> Returning to György Lukács as theorist of the novel, we see that among his arsenal of epithets for modernism is not “nihilistic,” and yet this qualifier seems essential to his critique.

Implicitly, Lukács’ writings on the novel suggest that because modernist prose fiction is antithetical to systematic *a priori* meanings, it must be nihilistic. It is Nietzsche who first

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<sup>20</sup> D. H. Lawrence’s fiction might epitomize such a view. See also Elizabeth Grosz’s work on Darwinism.

<sup>21</sup> As George Levine writes: “Disenchantment, Weber insists, consistently affirms that without magic, without God, without teleology, enchantment is purged from this world, and, with it, the world’s meaning and the world’s value. ... a mindless algorithm replaces an intelligent creator, and the world empties out of meaning” (23, 24).

elaborates for us the etiology of modern nihilism that Lukács has in mind. Because Christianity has devalued this world and placed meaning's source outside of it (as Lukács himself observes), when Christian faith erodes then meaning seems to have no point of origin, and the disenchanted Christian falls into crisis. As Simon Critchley elaborates the Nietzschean theory:

Nihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that was posited as a transcendent source of value becomes null and void, where there are no skyhooks upon which to hang a meaning for life. All transcendent claims for a meaning to life have been reduced to mere values and those values have become incredible, standing in need of what Nietzsche calls 'transvaluation' or 'revaluation'. (8)

Nietzsche advises that meaning be re-derived from a revalued here-below, for nihilists are not content with the wasteland they survey. In "The Ideology of Modernism," Lukács, however, appears to read modernist characters precisely as the "dissatisfied" nihilists who have yet to revalue anything – who are immobilized by the disappearance of religious truths and distraught before the void that confronts them – whom Nietzsche describes in *The Will to Power*:

The philosophical nihilist is convinced that all that happens is meaningless and in vain; and that there ought not to be anything meaningless and in vain. But whence this: there ought not to be? From where does one get *this* "meaning," *this* standard? At bottom, the nihilist thinks that the sight of such a bleak, useless existence makes a philosopher feel *dissatisfied*, bleak, desperate. (WP 23)

Kafka's characters, says Lukács, definitively inhabit this "nightmare world, whose function is to evoke *angst*" (I 400). For them, in Lukács' reading, all skyhooks have been retracted. In the absence of transcendental meaning, whatever transpires is opaque and incomprehensible, and as a result terrible:

[Kafka's] experience, this vision of a world dominated by *angst* and of man at the mercy of incomprehensible terrors, makes Kafka's work the very type of modernist art. (I 406)

Kafka remarks of Joseph K., as he is being led to execution: 'He thought of flies, their tiny limbs breaking as they struggle away from the fly-paper.' The mood of total impotence, of paralysis in the face of the unintelligible power of circumstances, informs all his work. (I 406)

In Lukács' analysis, modernist characters grow inert and hopeless in the face of this now illegible world in which the "unity of the metaphysical spheres has been lost forever" (T 37). Thus one of the primary neo-Greek formulations of tragedy, voiced in *King Lear* – "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods, / They kill us for their sport," requiring "incomprehensible terrors" and "unintelligible power" that wreak havoc upon characters and all they value – for Lukács amounts only to nihilistic defeatism (*Lear* 4.1.36-37).

Not only does Lukács conceive of tragedy in a wholly different way, as a genre that stabilizes and divulges character (as we have seen earlier), but he associates modernism so insistently with the absence of meaning, with bleak and dissatisfied nihilism, because he believes

that modernist authors turn a blind eye toward life's still existent totality. He treats modernism as crippled allegory in which the sphere of life is severed from the sphere of essence to which it ought, symbolically, to point. Modernism eschews the future hope that Lukács locates in dialectical materialism: the Marxist issue of "the Hegelian view that the inner and outer world form an objective dialectical unity and that they are indissolubly married despite their apparent opposition" (*I* 401). From this Marxist fortress of certitude, Lukács' principal charge against modernism is that it fails to acknowledge such a source of values, this "outside" world, and therefore lacks "perspective" (*I* 397, 405). Thus Lukács finds that Thomas Mann laudably hews to "traditional epic" principles, in fashioning narrative that is "dynamic and developmental" – bent on making the outer world once again a home for the inner soul – whereas James Joyce's modernist epic is "static and sensational," its hero "confined to momentary sense-impression," to his own incurably homesick subjectivity (*I* 396, 395). Lukács' preferred classical and realist characters conform instead, as he says, to Aristotle's image of the *zoon politikon*, the social animal who attests to intelligible, communal structures of meaning: "Achilles and Werther, Oedipus and Tom Jones, Antigone and Anna Karenina" (*I* 396). Even in their socially conditioned solitude, Lukács stipulates, Sophocles' Philoctetes, Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyitsch, and Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau still belong to the "life of the community as a whole" (*I* 397). Authors "from Homer to Thomas Mann and Gorky," "Moliere or the Greeks" – Shakespeare, Balzac, Stendhal, and Sholochov – are good Aristotelians, because they make the revelation of character one with the revelation of social order (*I* 406, 405). On the other hand, Lukács argues, Kafka, Proust, Musil, Joyce, Faulkner, and Beckett gravitate toward antisocial nihilism, as do André Gide, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, John dos Passos, T. S. Eliot, and Wolfgang Koeppen.

Darwinian deep time does not occur to Lukács as the harbinger of a viable corrective to subjectivism – as it does to many of the authors Lukács criticizes. Instead, just as Lukács finds that Henri Bergson renders "the rift between [subjective] time and that of the objective world ... complete," he does not embrace Russell's objective time sequence either, McGurl's antianthropomorphic outside (*I* 407). From the vantage point of Russell's abstract, impersonal "clock time," humanity appears to be, in Russell's words, "the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving" (*ML* 23). For Lukács such inhuman externality would only be a second form of "modernist' anti-realism," another denial of the "unbroken, upward evolution of mankind" that realism affirms (*I* 395; *ER* 382). Assuming the alterity of nature would be, for Lukács, a signal symptom of nihilism: of failed belief in objective, directive, external values. It is only the nihilist, implies Lukács, who looks outside himself and finds it "impossible to determine theoretically the origin and goal of human existence" (*I* 397). Such a modernist stance amounts to "the denial of history, of development, and thus of perspective" (*I* 405).

Lukács contends that such "anti-humanism," in which external conditions do not mirror internal conditions, is what permits Schmitt and Heidegger to outwardly practice Nazism and then claim inner immunity from judgment (*I* 404). Indeed, so inconceivable to Lukács is an "outside," even beyond the social sphere, that does not reflect human interiority that, in his view, the sole alternative to the "new order" to be glimpsed in realism is the "attenuation of actuality" (*I* 402, 400). Lukács sees this descent into solipsism in the "the German poet Gottfried Benn [who] informs us that 'there is no outer reality, there is only human consciousness, constantly building, modifying, rebuilding new worlds out of its own creativity'" (*I* 400). Lukács calls this modernism's "neurotic" response to "the quality of life under capitalism" (*I* 402). Modernism bespeaks "nausea, or discomfort, or longing," an antisocial "morbidity" of spirit, seeking to

elude all discomfiting outsides (*I* 403, 402). According to Lukács, modernism embraces idiocy and anarchy, an “escape into nothingness,” having found precious little to value in the real world (*I* 402). Lukács argues that modernism embraces as well a “perverted Rousseauism” that advocates atavistic degeneration to animal, vegetable, or mineral insentience, to feed its envy for “our primal ancestors / Small lumps of plasma in hot, sultry swamps,” again Benn’s words (*I* 404). Lukács instead commends “realistic literature” because “however violent its criticism of reality, [it] had always assumed the unity of the world it described and seen it as a living whole inseparable from man himself” (*I* 408). What is false, then, is any species of modernist conviction that “the individual’s subjectivity” is “alone in the universe, reflecting only itself” (*I* 408).

Although Lukács does not include Woolf among his modernists, he would certainly be loath to concur with her conclusion in *To the Lighthouse’s* “Time Passes” that “beauty outside” no longer “mirrored beauty within” (*TL* 134). Woolf expresses the view opposite of Lukács’:

As summer neared, as the evenings lengthened, there came to the wakeful, the hopeful, walking the beach, stirring the pool, imaginations of the strangest kind — of flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts, of cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within. In those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted, and it was impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules; or to resist the extraordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure. ... That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? Impatient, despairing yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations), to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken. (*TL* 131-132, 134)

From Woolf’s vantage point, Lukács is “the wakeful, the hopeful”; he would prefer his mind, mirror-like, to reflect an outside world that ineluctably progresses toward “some absolute good,” a world that makes “the possessor secure.” Such is the roadmap home, drawn in the “starry firmament,” to which Lukács refers in *The Theory of the Novel* (*T* 36). But this dream – and here Woolf disposes of the entire counter-tragic tradition of Western philosophy, from Plato to Lukács – is “but a reflection” in minds whose “nobler powers sleep.” Theirs is a superficial, chimerical reading of life, a somnambulist’s projection of dream onto reality.

What Lukács’ reading of modernism therefore misses is a third position, between nihilism and optimism: a tragic position. This is again the position of Sisyphus and Icarus, who find their will toward upward motion checked by overmastering forces – like Wallace Stevens’ pigeons who fall “Downward to darkness, on extended wings,” plummeting with their bodies still bent on ascension (“Sunday Morning” 120). For Sisyphus, writes Camus, “his tragedy

begins” when he understands that he must invariably descend the mountain; yet his heroism begins simultaneously, with his lucid commitment to those moments of exquisite rest atop the peak (*M* 122). Indeed, the “Myth of Sisyphus” is for Camus what the “A Free Man’s Worship” is for Russell: a testament to a new mode of affirmation within a tragic universe. Russell, too, imagines that “all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces is concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears” (*ML* 26). For Russell’s “weary but unyielding Atlas,” “tragedy is the proudest, the most triumphant” purveyor of *weltanschauungs*, “for it builds its shining citadel in the very centre of the enemy’s country, on the very summit of his highest mountain” (*ML* 28, 26). Here is Nietzsche’s contention in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the “*principium individuationis*” sets the stage for tragic experience. It is the lone center of consciousness, inimitable and irreplicable, that becomes the point of connection – what one shares – with a larger community of tragic subjects.

Hardy’s beleaguered Jude thus recognizes that if nature in its expansive and overpowering time is not the reflection of individual human consciousness, humankind as a whole will not do well to imitate nature. Hardy’s tragic protagonists come to embody Huxley’s stance in “Evolution and Ethics”: “social progress means the checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process” (qtd. in Knight 31). As Kevin Padian writes of Hardy: “He saw the countless daily acts of Nature, impassively cruel to an anthropocentric observer, as morally blank; whereas the least spiteful, neglectful or even unconscious of human acts are not. And he extended this further, concluding that evolutionary theory implies that humans are responsible not just for each other but for all of nature,” because the “morally blank” natural world cannot protect itself (225). Woolf likewise finds that beyond the human community “no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul” (*TL* 128). Camus, too, writes in *The Rebel* that “the mirror, with its fixed stare, must be broken” – not Woolf’s anthropomorphizing mirror in which the sky takes on human likeness – but the opposite mirror in which humanity, glassy-eyed, adopts the gaze of the impersonal environment (16). In lieu of such reflection, Camus envisions a “natural community” of ethical peers – for “human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed” – who refuse impassivity (*R* 22). Saying that “I rebel – therefore we exist,” Camus evokes the tragic hero’s new birthright, a species-wide, bodily repulsion to death, grounds for intersubjective intimacy (*R* 22). He affirms a new and tragic sociality.

The tragic modernist novel is therefore obsessed with ocean and cloud, with vegetation and sunlight and darkness, as so many reminders of the ephemerality of human beings’ – not of nature’s or the universe’s – time. Hardy writes in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*: “Then a large cloud, that had been hanging in the north like a black fleece, came and placed itself between her and the sun. It helped on what was already inevitable, and she sank into a uniformity of sadness” (88-89). Nature’s beautiful or dreadful weather now makes for sadness, not on purpose, not seen through the lens of pathetic fallacy – but precisely because of the arbitrariness of its fluctuations, because of its un-empathetic generation or retraction of pleasure and terror. Nature poetry, too, can take on this awareness that landscapes move us, themselves unmoved. Portuguese modernist Fernando Pessoa’s poetic persona Alberto Caeiro crystallizes this insight. For all his relishing of pastoral vistas, Caeiro admits “still I’m sad, as the sunset is / to the imagination,” to the human imagination only, that reads in the waning of the light the loss of beauty, and the metaphorical loss of consciousness (“I Never” 9-10). Sadness now belongs, contra Whitehead, not to the

sunset, but to the mind observing it. Caeiro is likewise sad “when a cloud’s hand passes over the light,” because the cloud’s anthropomorphized hand (a poetic convention, Caeiro notes, that expresses a systemic falsehood in human thought) unwittingly deprives him of his preferred sky, and seeds in him ominous forebodings (“I Never” 38). Twice Woolf’s Lily Briscoe, too, contrasts the endurance of beloved scenes in memory with the clouds’ “eternal passing and flowing” (*TL* 161). She finds that “distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer,” and her sense of such mismatched temporal and emotive registers – “a million years” versus “Lily thought” – is essential to modernism’s tragic vision of nature and to its subsequent emphasis upon a confederacy of gazers who construct a defensive edifice from moments and memories (*TL* 20). Camus himself confesses in his notebooks:

If a cloud covers up the sun and then lets it through again, the bright yellow of the vase of mimosa leaps out of the shade. The birth of this single flash of brightness is enough to fill me with a confused and whirling joy. ... If I still feel a grain of anxiety, it is at the thought of this unseizable moment slipping through my fingers like a ball of quicksilver. ... A cloud passes and the moment grows pale. I die to myself. (*Notebooks 1935-42* 8, 9)

Like Caeiro’s happiness, Camus’ “confused and whirling joy” is cut short when a random “cloud passes.” In this undesigned eclipse of the moment he now sees the prototype of his own death – and finds common ground for an ethics that aims to preserve such views and viewers as much as possible. He writes that “a delicate, transparent band of blue” in a stormy sky “can drive us to despair because it offers us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time” (*Notebooks 1935-42* 6). Our very responsiveness to such a scene, Camus suggests, can ignite a commitment to valorizing, to seeking out these glorious, precarious bands of blue – not a commitment to loving the impermanence that incites despair, but a commitment to savoring this limited beauty that nonetheless makes life possible. We come to vow, too, Camus concludes, to undertake collective practices that hold annihilating clouds at what distance we can.

Caeiro’s volume of poetry, *The Keeper of Sheep* (1914), epitomizes in microcosm this modernist confrontation with despair, as well as the modernist eschewal of it in favor of moments of immersive joy (“the glimpse of an eternity we should like to stretch out over the whole of time”) – shared appreciation of which heightens such moments’ power. Caeiro’s foundational premise is that “Nature is simply parts, nothing whole,” that “there’s no one great All these things belong to”; there is no roadmap home, no hieroglyphs to decipher in nature, as William Paley’s natural theology would have it (“On a terribly” 15, 12). Caeiro professes, too, a constitutive difference between conscious and unconscious life: “But flowers wouldn’t be flowers if they felt anything – / They’d be people,” “Nature hasn’t any inside / It wouldn’t be Nature otherwise” (“Today” 9-10, 25-26). Caeiro himself actively resists the despairing impulse to merge with the insentient environment that time’s passing on occasion inspires in him. He recognizes such fantasied fusion with the nonhuman as an “escape into nothingness” – not an escape into the nihilistic subjectivism of which Lukács accuses modernism, but an escape into an opposing species of nihilistic objectivism, into a form of unconsciousness alien to value and its fragility, from which all subjectivity is absent. Caeiro is adamant that such “Songs that deny me / Give the lie to everything I feel,” “are the opposite of all I am” (“The four songs” 18, 3, 4). Composing them, he must be “sick completely – ideas and everything” (“The four songs” 16).

Such poems represent, he concludes, “the landscape of my soul at night,” its nihilistic face (“The four songs” 20). He captures, as it were, a whole strain of modernist thought and feeling – the inclination not to be, the temptation of self-abnegation – in these brief verses. He names his condition soul-sickness, what Nietzsche calls “time-sickness,” what Miguel de Unamuno, too, identifies as the plague of consciousness in *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1913):

There is something which, for want of a better name, we will call the tragic sense of life, which carries with it a whole conception of life itself and of the universe, a whole philosophy more or less formulated, more or less conscious. . . . man, by the very fact of being man, of possessing consciousness, is, in comparison with the ass or the crab, a diseased animal. Consciousness is a disease. (35-36)

Thus in modernism’s novels, poetry, non-fiction, and philosophy, we see that the tragic can indeed beget a sense of existential sickness, a sense that “conscious life is an evolutionary mistake,” as Mary Ann Kelly describes Schopenhauer’s position, and as we have seen Nietzsche argue in *The Birth of Tragedy* (232). Lukács and Pessoa, like Beckett to follow, attest to characters’ resultant desire to become once again a lump of plasma, a handful of dust. But in addition to dramatizing such a condition, Caeiro names and resists it. He connects his wish for non-being to the sadness that distresses him at sunset, to his conviction that “[t]o think is to be eye-sick,” to find one’s seeing, one’s immersive sensation, infected by reflection (“My Glance” 17). It is then that his nighttime soul-scape emerges, and he announces the poems made in its image with cautionary verses that warn of the illness to follow. Even the final couplet of one such poem of despair makes plain that it is grief at the irrecoverable past, grief at time’s hourglass, at paradises lost or at haunting former pains, that drives him to turn against consciousness and human form:

I'd give anything just to be the roadside dust  
And the feet of the poor would trample me...

I'd give anything just to be the flowing rivers  
And have the washerwomen at my banks...

I'd give anything to be the poplars along the river  
And have just sky above and water down below...

I'd give anything to be the miller's mule  
And have him beat me and value me...

O to be any of these rather than go through life  
Looking behind and feeling sorrow... (“I’d give anything” 1-10)

What Pessoa reveals is that modernist characters are attracted to unconsciousness or suicide not because nihilism’s initial and “pure” form – having no sources of value, no skyhooks – destroys them, but because they do register meaning in life (a post-Christian meaning), and experience such meaning’s imperilment and fragility as unbearable. If nihilism first marks the demise of God-given values, it now marks characters’ preemptive strikes against the vulnerability of

human values, earthhooks, this-worldly loves. Theirs is second-wave nihilism: nihilism as a mode of counter-tragic philosophy. If tragic loss is too painful to bear, commit to valuing nothing. What was once a stultifying and terrible prospect, the absence of all value, becomes attractive.

Like Caeiro, modernist novelists showcase the many bleak, desperate, soul-sick machinations of characters, only to have penned *negative examples*: proofs that such recourse to nihilism does more harm than good. Tragedy may beget nihilism, but tragedy and nihilism have antithetical ideologies: the one committed, as Lukács says, to antisocial negation, to the “disintegration of personality,” the other committed to shared, Sisyphean defenses of selfhood (*I* 400). If, then, for a critic like George Steiner, as Rita Felski writes, there is only “the ‘absolute tragedy’ of the Greeks ... marked by a radical pessimism alien to both Christianity and atheism,” modernist authors can accommodate tragedy to atheism (16). They can avoid the overconfidence that attaches to what Camus describes as atheistic melodrama, in which “the problem of existence has in fact already been solved,” the world is “subject to wholly human law,” and a perennially justified humanity reigns, God-like, over the amoral cosmos (*LCE* 303). And while for Steiner so life-denying is tragedy’s expression of pessimism that, as Schopenhauer believed, it must impress upon audiences that which Nietzsche calls “the wisdom of Silenus,” echoing Sophocles – that never to have been born is best – novelists find in tragedy an ideological niche between triumphalism and despair.

That never to have been born is best, to return to insentience, proves the wisdom of nihilism, but it is not the necessary consequence of a tragic worldview. Thus Kevin Padian tells us that “Peter Morton records that on at least two occasions in his life (1911 and 1924) Hardy contradicted the critical judgment of Schopenhauer’s dominant influence on his thoughts” (218). Camus, too, is quick to stipulate that “we live in tragic times. But too many people confuse tragedy with despair” and Beckett is equally firm: “I simply cannot understand why some people call me a nihilist. There is no basis for that” (*LCE* 136; qtd. in Büttner 30). Instead, nature’s atheistic, inhuman scope and scale make for tragedy that nevertheless engenders characters’ rebellious pursuit of moments of joy, beauty, passion, and intimacy, in lieu of a wish for non-being. Such an account of modernist fiction runs counter to 1) theories such as Garrett Stewart’s and Jonathan Gottschall’s that consider narrative itself (not climactic moments) to be the quintessential mechanism of character-formation, 2) theories such as Alain Robbe-Grillet’s that find that modernist novels continue to personify nature as deliberate savior or adversary (what he calls the novel’s “tragic humanism”), and 3) theories such as Paul Sheehan’s that contend, on the contrary, that so thorough is modernist fiction’s departure from anthropocentrism and teleological narrative it dissolves the differences between persons and their encircling environs.

## Overview of Chapters

In my first chapter, I treat Thomas Hardy’s masterpieces, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) as rebuttals of Aristotle’s influential and long-standing theory of tragic character. Unlike Aristotle, Hardy makes use of tragic plots to demonstrate that destiny issues from *outside* of his protagonists. I argue that Hardy is tragic in the Athenian playwrights’ sense – in which both cosmic amorality and human cruelty are tragic antagonists. Hardy’s fiction indicts, too, the later tradition of moralizing tragic misfortune: the recasting of mortal luck, as well as the injustices of men, as the victim’s wrongdoing. I contend that Hardy represents characters who are doomed by the meanings ascribed to the traumas they undergo. Both Hardy’s

impassioned narrator in *Tess* and his titular character in *Jude* contest this refiguring of tragedy as poetic justice. They object to the model of plot that classicist Jonathan Lear describes: “In Aristotle’s conception of tragedy, the individual actor takes on the burden of badness, and the world as a whole is absolved” (325). Hardy thus bucks the Aristotelian trend of lodging *causal* responsibility within character and the subsequent Christian trend of lodging *moral* responsibility within character. His novels treat the Tess and Sue who assume a “burden of badness” as false, warped images of the “real” Tess and Sue who resist such characterization. Tess’ underserved suffering makes for the distortion – not the consummation – of her character. Sue cannot survive a tragic cosmos devoid of consolatory narrative, in which the death of her children has no transcendent meaning: Sue moralizes her own fate, and *Jude* pictures her final penitence, the denial of her affective impulses, as the negation of her character.

Woolf deems Hardy “the greatest tragic writer among English novelists” and I argue in my second chapter that she shares his tragic sense (*CR II* 246). She, too, re-imagines tragic destiny as that which bears down on characters from outside; like Hardy, Woolf also presents a tragic universe as neither Schopenhauerian (entirely life-negating) nor Nietzschean (entirely life-affirming). Rebutting the Lukácsian critique of modernism, Woolf represents not *only* subjectivity, but its encounter with unexpected, reasonless objectivity – although so antianthropomorphic an external world would no better please Lukács. Thus while critics tend to answer the question “does Woolf write tragedies?” in the negative, Woolf adopts a tragic *weltanschauung* in which time overpowers characters with its unforeseeable surprises. Woolf’s own passion for Greek literature, particularly for its tragedies, has not gone unnoticed either: for instance, in Carpentier, Fowler, Koulouris, Marcus, Mills, and Shattuck, for whom Woolf reproduces or adapts aspects of Greek drama. I add to these studies that in Woolf both a “Dionysian” view of time as unceasing flux (the view held by Nietzsche, Jane Harrison, and Henri Bergson) and an “Apollonian” view of time as permanent, mathematical continuum (the view held by Bertrand Russell) make for tragedy. Woolf’s novels are devoid of the ritual and mythic solace so often misattributed to ancient drama and to her oeuvre alike. Woolf’s natural, “Dionysian” time is severed from the ritualistic, cyclical renewals that anthropology describes; such ceaseless Heraclitean time sentences characters to death, not to collective rebirth. Woolf’s logical “Apollonian” time, linear and irreversible, is also severed from recuperative, mythic destiny. Woolf contends that “it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are tired ... of the Christianity and its consolations of our own time”; abandoning consolatory plotlines in her fiction, Woolf depicts the non-teleological march of nonhuman nature as anti-Christian, as tragic (*CR I* 38). *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931) set the “flow and change” of characters’ daily lives, and the “still space” of their most cherished moments, against “the waste of ages and the perishing of the stars” (*W* 251; *TL* 105, 36). Woolf’s fiction accentuates time’s passing and models characters’ Sisyphean resistance to it. Her protagonists envy the longevity of sky and waters and aim to make “one moment out of what measureless abundance of past time and time to come, [burn] there triumphant” (*W* 278).

I turn more explicitly, in my third chapter, to a form of contrast – between tragedy’s moments of affirmations and the siren song of negation – that emerges within the novels of Hardy and Woolf and is essential to the oeuvres of Pessoa, Camus, and Beckett. Camus’ magisterial negative examples of *L’Étranger* (*The Stranger*, 1942) and *La Chute* (*The Fall*, 1956) display characters who do cultivate states of ethical indifference akin to nature’s own. Meursault is certain that “nothing, nothing mattered, and [he] knew why” (*S* 121). Clamence is aghast at his own powerlessness in the face of another’s suicide and within a prisoner-of-war

camp. He attempts to care for no one and to blame all for their fates, from Jesus to the child who enters Buchenwald. Sham nihilism and moralism are his perennially failed endeavors to annul the tragic. Such studies in character, then, stand in opposition to Camus' corpus of fiction based on Woolfian moments of being, and on the literary and ethical merits of resisting, not emulating or eluding, our tragic antagonists: the absurdity of the cosmos and the men who adopt its inhumanity. Individual and ideological denials of personhood and shared defenses of it prove the antimonies of the modernist response to a tragic universe in Camus. Like his Nobel prize-winning friend Monod, Camus echoes Bertrand Russell's descriptions of blind natural forces (their inhuman permanence, their want of teleological purpose) at odds with a human desire for survival. Camus takes a message of human limitation and solidarity – not domination and hierarchy – from his Darwinian sense of nature.

Pessoa and Camus make comprehensible the narrator of Beckett's *The Unnamable* (*L'Innomable*, 1953), who labors to erase his physicality and subjectivity with biting epistemological skepticism and self-degrading humor. Convinced that there is no philosophical cure for the tragic condition of being born, The Unnamable mounts strategies not to be. He vehemently refuses, like Pessoa's Baron of Teive and Camus' Clamence, to weep for the fragility of life's bounties. He also scorns all attempts to rationalize his pains. His foil, I argue, is Beckett's narrator in *Company* (1980), who speaks of himself in the second and third person not to flee self-knowledge, but to people an otherwise intolerable solitude. Participating in modernism's modest and fleeting affirmations, he comes to recapture, with involuntary Proustian lyricism, what Camus, too, tells us that he seeks to recover and to preserve in art: "these two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened" (*LCE* 17).

## Thomas Hardy: Anti-Aristotelean Tragic Character

In representing the natural world, Hardy conveys a foundational premise of his tragic fiction – “God’s *not* in his heaven” – as observation of nature had led Darwin, too, to speculate (*T* 199). This absence, however, does not issue in the nihilism that Nietzsche describes, but in the tragedy that befalls unprotected human consciousnesses in an otherwise indifferent and chance-filled cosmos. Hardy muses in his early poem “Hap” that while we hunger for divine design in the universe – even for malevolent plotting in lieu of destinies so aimless that “hap” is a fitting name for them – chance is the reigning arbiter of our fates. We prefer that “a Powerfuller than I / Had willed and meted me the tears I shed” but it is “[t]hese purblind Doomsters,” “Crass Casualty” and “dicing Time,” who “had as readily strown / Blissed about my pilgrimage as pain” (7-8, 11, 12, 13-14). These are Socrates’ unpredictable and amoral agents of tragic necessity, throwing dice, dicing persons to pieces.

Writing on Hardy, D. H. Lawrence suggests that the “terrific action of unfathomed nature,” causally and morally unintelligible, is the tragic antagonist *par excellence* – Greek, Shakespearean, and modern. Lawrence critiques Hardy’s tragic fiction, however, for depicting such power “merely as being present in background, in scenery, not taking any active part, having no direct connection with the protagonist” (29). Lawrence argues that for “Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth ... out of this unfathomed force comes their death,” whereas “Tess, Sue, and Jude find themselves up against the established system of human government and morality, they cannot detach themselves, and are brought down” (29-30). Yet the very ethics, I contend, that Hardy derives from a tragic worldview leads him to set this social foreground against a terrific and unfathomed background. Hecuba in Euripides’ eponymous tragedy explains such a logic. Hecuba tells us that if the gods’ fatal allocations cannot be disputed or fought, for “fate moves invisibly! A mystery” – there is little to be done about an ironclad, extrahuman ordinance – then when men take up the gods’ mantle, killing innocents in their stead, the utmost retribution is in order (*Alkestis* 1.674, trans. Carson).<sup>22</sup> Hardy, too, is so far from believing that all is permitted in a hapful cosmos that he composes novels excoriating fatal modes of thought – those which also make for crass casualty, and all the more unforgivably.

Hardy’s ethical and aesthetic vision therefore entails the presentation of two registers that endanger human consciousness: that of the inhuman natural world, and that of inhumane society. Both come to threaten the “single opportunity of existence ever vouchsafed to [character] by an unsympathetic First Cause – her all; her every and only chance” (*T* 121). Pamela Gossin thus describes Hardy’s maturation as tragic novelist as follows:

Gothic romance, pastoral harmony, and melodramatic emotion all recede as bases for likely cosmological stories and give way to an increasingly probable vision that the genre of life in a fatalistic universe is a neo-Greek tragedy. ... In *Tess*, the music of infinitely distant spheres strikes only tragic tones, and the final act of

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<sup>22</sup> For Hecuba’s call for vengeance, see *Hekabe* in *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*, trans. Anne Carson, 1.750-760. Like Hecuba, the chorus laments “It was ordained for me – catastrophe / It was ordained for me – grief” and Talthybios cries out: “Zeus! What can I say – that you watch over human beings? / That you care mortal luck? Or is it a delusion we persist in?” (1.615-116, 1.488-490). Certainly, then, Euripidean characters are alive to unfeeling and amoral fatality; yet Hecuba also, with rhetorical flourish, makes the case for a divine moral law that men have violated, and proceeds to proclaim that “if men go unpunished ... then there is no justice among human beings. / Call this shameful!” (1.772, 1.774-775).

loyalty and faith [in *Two on a Tower*] gives way to a futile sacrifice at Stonehenge. (193, 195)

In his experimental novel *Two on a Tower* (1882), Hardy already “[sets] the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe,” as he writes of his aesthetic in his preface (xvii). Swithin St. Cleeve, protagonist and aspiring astronomer, remarks that “the actual sky is a horror,” crowded with “monsters to which those of the oceans bear no sort of comparison. ... Such monsters are the voids and waste places of the sky” (*TT* 29, 31). Describing this terrific magnitude, Swithin continues:

And to add a new weirdness to what the sky possesses in its size and formlessness, there is involved the quality of decay. For all the wonder of these everlasting stars, eternal spheres, and what not, they are not everlasting, they are not eternal; they burn out like candles. You see that dying one in the body of the greater Bear? Two centuries ago it was as bright as the others. (*TT* 34)

Even this formless immensity of sky is short on time, rendering human consciousness, by comparison, a match lit and extinguished in a moment. This telescopic perspective, dwarfing and humbling the human – accentuating its vulnerability, recommending against its own wanton destructiveness – will be precisely what Virginia Woolf applauds in Hardy, and develops from him.

As Woolf will do in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, Hardy counterpoises the non-narrative vastness of nature’s space and time against the ephemeral lyricism of human loves:

[Looking through the telescope] they more and more felt the contrast between their own tiny magnitudes and those among which they had recklessly plunged, till they were oppressed with the presence of a vastness they could not cope with even as an idea, and which hung about them like a nightmare. (*TT* 58)

‘... So that, whatever the stars were made for, they were not made to please our eyes. It is just the same in everything; nothing is made for man.’

‘Is it that notion which makes you so sad for your age?’ she asked, with almost maternal solicitude. ‘I think astronomy is a bad study for you. It makes you feel human insignificance too plainly.’

‘Perhaps it does. However,’ he added more cheerfully, ‘though I feel the study to be one almost tragic in its quality, I hope to be the new Copernicus.’ (*TT* 28)

‘... it overpowers me!’ she replied, not without seriousness. ‘It makes me feel that it is not worth while to live; it quite annihilates me.’ (*TT* 27)

Thus while for Matthew Arnold in “The Modern Element in Literature” Sophocles is “a man who has mastered the problem of human life, who knows its gravity, and is therefore serious, but who knows that he comprehends it, and is therefore cheerful,” Hardy’s characters admit that observation of nature, “almost tragic in its quality,” nearly confounds them into a despairing sense of personal annihilation (*E* 464, 471). While for Arnold, “the peculiar characteristic of the

highest literature – the poetry – of the fifth century in Greece before the Christian era, is its *adequacy*; the peculiar characteristic of the poetry of Sophocles is its consummate, its unrivalled *adequacy*,” for Hardy’s characters “it is quite impossible to think at all adequately of the sky – of what the sky substantially is, without feeling it as a juxtaposed nightmare” (*E* 464; *TT* 31).

Yet Hardy’s figures and fictions do not, on the whole, tip into despair and advocate the renunciation of life. Hardy parts ways with Schopenhauer’s views of the tragic human animal. In Schopenhauer’s Catholic-inflected vision of the psyche, the will that pervades us is intrinsically self-defeating, sinful and vain; the only pleasure we can know is negative, in the form of pain’s cessation. Such pleasure devolves into boredom, and boredom spurs a fresh visitation of desire, that is, of pain that must be relieved. For Schopenhauer, “consciousness is an evolutionary mistake,” to be corrected by death, and life constitutes an interminable, fruitless ride on the “wheel of Ixion,” shuttling sentient beings between suffering and ennui (Kelly 232, 241). Schopenhauer conceives of tragedy as a consummate parade of these torments, aesthetic distance from which schools audiences in the necessity of resignation in real life, in the forfeiture of desire, in the negation of the will to live.

Hardy is absorbed by the existential dilemma that Schopenhauer raises – by characters’ being born not just “fifty years too soon,” but at all (*J* 315). Yet the novels *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) do not exhibit these Schopenhauerian convictions. For Hardy, the ineradicable pain of existence results from the fact that chance and mortality curtail *positive* pleasures, free from taint. As Hardy remarks to interviewer William Archer in their “Real Conversation” of 1901: “whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life it is certain that men make it much worse than it need be. When we have got rid of a thousand remediable ills, it will be time enough to determine whether the ill that is irremediable outweighs the good” (qtd. in Kelly 246). Hardy is at pains to dramatize manmade belief systems that ossify into lethal plot arcs; he demonstrates how social strictures make for “crushing,” “killing” narrative structures in a universe already heralding irremediable loss. Tragedy is double in Hardy: there is the wrongdoing of humankind (its social unreason) and the sheer impersonality of encircling nature (its existential unreason), which recalls the cosmic irrationality of Greek necessity. Both witting human action and unwitting fortune make for the tragic.<sup>23</sup>

Hardy’s dual sense of tragedy sponsors his meliorism; his certitude of some inalterable pains motivates his commitment to piecemeal improvement in realms that permit it. Hardy quotes his own 1896 “In Tenebris” in his 1922 “Apology” to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* – “If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst” (*CP* 557). If we begin with the most forbidding view of human destiny we may come to share Hecuba’s resolve to contest further horrors, to seek “the best consummation possible,” a stance “so old as to ...permeate the Greek drama” – such that, in Hardy’s imagining, “pain to all upon [the globe], tongued or dumb, shall be kept down to a minimum by loving-kindness” (*CP* 557, 558). Hardy’s fiction communicates the tragic “full look” that Darwinism entails and advocates “loving-kindness” – active, ever-striving ethical comportment – as an appropriate response to a universe teeming with misfortune. Hardy’s depiction of the natural world signals that what it cannot do ethically, humankind

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<sup>23</sup> On this subject, see also Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (updated edition), and Williams, *Shame and Necessity*. On the one hand, Greek divinities might represent the inexorability of an impersonal Fate; on the other hand, the ancients might emphasize the callousness and misunderstandings of these gods to indict comparable human behaviors.

must.<sup>24</sup> In telling fashion, young Jude comes to recognize that “events did not rhyme [in Nature] quite as he had thought,” and feels ever more responsible, himself, for human and animal welfare (*J* 17). Hardy’s narrator introduces ten-year-old Jude as one who suffers from a defining compassion for defenseless, sap-bleeding trees, and for birds and earthworms:

He could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped from a fancy that it hurt them; and late pruning, when the sap was up and the tree bled profusely, had been a positive grief to him in his infancy. This weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again. (*J* 15, 16)

Jude abhors human callousness toward the natural world, and aches for its unprotected and assaulted creatures, for its slaughtered pigs and rabbits, with whom he identifies; he expects trees, too, to bleed as people do. This readiness to extend sympathy to all life forms destines him to prodigious vicarious suffering. Yet he is wrong about the trees’ misery. And this double “weakness” – this extraordinary sensitivity to others’ torments and this youthful presumption that even trees possess human feeling – prepares him to recognize that the whole of the natural world does not share his objection to pain, his hatred of human ill usage. So he comes to ache, too, for nature’s tree-like impassivity.

With biting irony, Hardy’s narrator remarks that all will be “well with” Jude once again when he no longer aches, no longer feels. Yet such “wellness” is a far cry from the merciful reprieve Schopenhauer envisions in death. Hardy’s narrator conceives of this wellness as pathetic fallacy, for it ascribes sensation to an inanimate body, deprived forever of its chance for happiness. No solace awaits Jude: either he is a being in pain, or he is insensate, having lost his human form. No wonder Jude sees no infallible ethical blueprint, no salutary, extrahuman design in the nonhuman world around him:

Nature's logic was too horrid for him to care for. That mercy towards one set of creatures was cruelty towards another sickened his sense of harmony. As you got older and felt yourself to be at the center of your time, and not at a point in its circumference, as you had felt when you were little, you were seized with a sort of shuddering, he perceived. All around you there seemed to be something glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it.

If he could only prevent himself growing up! He did not want to be a man.  
(*J* 17)

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<sup>24</sup> Jude realizes that vegetation and the natural world as a whole (perpetuating itself via laws like natural selection) do not participate in human emotion or morality. Jude is also wary of human behaviors whose “animalism” goes unchecked. This is not to suggest, however, that Hardy rejects the idea that human sympathy, altruism, and morality may be *evolved* from animal instincts. Spencer propounds this view; Huxley argues against it, contending that human ethics demonstrates our refusal of animal impulses. Darwin, Hardy, and Leslie Stephen (Woolf’s father) grapple with this question – whether we share sympathy and altruism with other animals – and each sees merit in the case for an evolutionary explanation of human conscience and social feeling. Indeed Hardy, following Darwin in *The Descent of Man*, hopes that human beings will extend concern and care to all living creatures; such will prove the natural development of our natural inheritance. On these ideas and debates, see Sumpter, Padian, and Infante.

As a child, Jude lives in no cocoon of uncontaminated contentment. Although trees may not suffer as Jude imagines, his intuition that the entirety of nature, the relations amongst its flora and fauna, do not rhyme as poetically as he might hope, that Darwinian unconcern reigns in the natural world, and that adulthood brings a heightened awareness of violence and pain in a universe that does not object to them, proves fully justified within this fictional world. Nature's logic does not protect its myriad creatures from injury, he realizes; nor does humankind protect them. Jude recognizes the silence of the universe, and reads in it the merciless, amoral obliteration of all he loves; all the while, human history proves wittingly cruel and destructive of human and nonhuman nature. Jude foresees the utmost loss without the least salvation, and finds himself surrounded by human beings who aggravate rather than combat this "glaring, garish, rattling" condition, one that seizes him "with a sort of shuddering." He does not want to be a man – a member of this sentient species, an adult male – because his "little cell" will be assailed by nature's pitiless, impersonal forces, and yet he will be expected to adopt nature's inhumanity as his own, to participate in manmade violence. In his experience, his fellows refuse the very "loving-kindness" that offsets nature's tragic dispensations. They become agents of death themselves, contributors to life's "tragic machinery."<sup>25</sup>

#### Neo-Greek Novels

Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* therefore oppose George Steiner's 1961 "death of tragedy" thesis – the idea that "we moderns" are too self-sufficient and optimistic to contend with ancient tragedy's overpowering forces, irremediable conflicts, and unwarranted losses. Although Steiner argues that Greek tragedy is unique in its dramatization of cosmic *disorder*, injustice, and forsakenness, Hardy shows us that an atheistic, Darwinian understanding of the cosmos *recovers* the Greek playwrights' worldview; it counters theistic notions of sin and salvation as well as a secular, progressivist vision of our ever-increasing invulnerability to loss. Hardy's fiction also departs dramatically from much philosophy of tragedy, the *modus operandi* of which is to assign redeeming value to suffering. Hardy would agree with Steiner that at the heart of ancient tragedy lies an amoral universe that sentences heroes and heroines, in Steiner's words, to "obscure fatalities" – to existentially reasonless fates – and that this Attic worldview is the antithesis of the Judeo-Christian conception of the universe's rationality and justice (6).

Hardy's fiction is in fact best understood as a study in the dangers of "Christianizing" tragic adversity. In Hardy's final two novels, Attic bad fortune does subject Tess to rape and Sue to the deaths of her children, but it is a counter-tragic interpretive schema – in which these unjustifiable events are taken to be judgments against Tess and Sue – that destroys these women. It is *Tess*' narrator and *Jude*'s titular character who hew to Greek tragedy's perspective when they refuse to view Tess and Sue as the authors of their own misfortunes. Tess' narrator and Jude refuse to treat plot itself as the outcome of *hamartia*, understood as an inborn character flaw that earns Tess and Sue their dues. Such moralizing of the tragic fall is not Greek literature's creation: as we saw in our introduction, it begins with Plato's objection to amoral fate and with Aristotle's preference for complete and intelligible plot (that needn't be moral) over divinely wrought chaos. The moralizing impulse then pervades medieval as well as early modern, Enlightenment, and Victorian thought on tragedy. Even present-day readings of Hardy's tragic novels that remove *hamartia*'s moral valence – but still assign Tess a character flaw that is

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<sup>25</sup> Further discussion of Hardy's tragedy can be found in King, Draper, and Kramer.

simply her heredity, her deterministic, biological inheritance – make her person the engine of her fate.<sup>26</sup> Yet Greek tragic destiny descends on characters from without and engulfs them. Greek tragic destiny renders individuals its accomplice, some more willingly than others, and seeks in their personalities its entrée. But characters are not their fates' sole site of origin. Characters, in the Greeks and in Hardy, are not responsible – in a causal or moral sense – for the entirety of what befalls them.

When critics then argue that Hardy's concentration upon externally wrought demises is a fault in his novelistic craftsmanship, a ponderous over-plottedness, they fail to see that crushing outside forces are the signature of his Attic tragedy – and that in incorporating them into his fiction, Hardy lays the foundation to indict the conscription of such tragic occurrences into justificatory narratives.<sup>27</sup> Combining genres, Hardy fiercely accentuates the fragility and innocence of character: the victim of tragic plot twists, blamed for its victimhood. If, as Virginia Woolf says, it is true that

[all novels] deal with character, and it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich elastic, and alive, has been evolved

then Hardy's novelistic tragedy does target what comes to the fore in the modernist novel, characters' minds, their inimitable, feeling natures, and mercilessly pits both plot and its construal against them (“Mr. Bennett” 749).

What therefore dooms Tess is extrahuman nature's indifference to her rape and execution, and the human response to her assault that renders death its outcome: “Dead, dead, dead,” sleeping-walking Angel pronounces her, having learned of her past (*T* 193). Angel presumes that what has befallen Tess is both morally reprehensible and a mark against her character. It is not, therefore, Alec's violent act, Hardy's narrator reiterates, that by itself deprives Tess of all but a mournful future. What seals Tess' fate is Angel's mistaken belief that her soul is tainted, her purity a masquerade. As I will show, when Tess murders Alec, she raises arms against the instigator of a character – Tess the polluted, Tess the conquered and unlovable – who she never wanted to be. Battling mischaracterization, she finds herself bound to the very judgment that wrongs her: “guilty.” This ineluctable acquisition of criminal character is the Aristotelean sentence that overhangs and overtakes her.

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Morton, for instance, argues that Tess is impulsive and incautious by birth; she is free of culpability for a nature she did not choose, but doomed from within to act in self-destructive ways. See also Dale Kramer and Jeanette King, who discuss Victorian tragedy's apology for innocent suffering. Hardy, I would contend, rejects the notion that such suffering hallows heroines and confirms their virtue; unwarranted pain, in his fiction, distorts rather than consummates character, and is a spur to ameliorative ethical action. Pamela Gossin argues, as I do, that Hardy instead adopts a “neo-Greek” view of the cosmos, in which blameless characters are subject to externally wrought misfortune (at the hands of both chance and men, as the Greeks had it).

<sup>27</sup> When William Dean Howells and Havelock Ellis defend *Jude* in 1895 and 1896 respectively – taking the minority position at the time – they still regret that a “capricious troll” at times holds the reigns of his plot. T. S. Eliot and E. M. Forster complain similarly of Hardy's narrative structure. Yet Woolf sees the logic behind such twists of fate: “To find anything approaching the violence and convolutions of Hardy's plots one must go back to the Elizabethan drama. ... no reading of life can possibly outdo the strangeness of life itself, no symbol of caprice and unreason be too extreme to represent the astonishing circumstances of our existence” (*CR II* 249).

Only Tess' narrator consistently recognizes and champions the rival character, guiltless and thriving, that it is not Tess' fate to secure in the eyes' of the world.<sup>28</sup> Only he suggests that she can leave her rape and its pains behind her – or that if she cannot, her past might be viewed as wholly without shame, or indeed advantageous to her. If every detail of her experience must contribute to her character – like innumerable drops of coloring that tint a clear liquid – he opts for accounts of that coloring that are salutary to Tess. Such, indeed, is Nietzsche's recommendation: to be "poets of our life" who "see as beautiful what is necessary in things" (*GS* 240, 223). Tess' narrator, this paper contends, distinguishes between the Tess driven to extremity by Angel's and Alec's appraisals of her and the Tess who might have been, who should have been – who fought to be. His rightful Tess is pulled from her "natural" course, which bends toward happiness, and forced down a fatal track: casualty of rape and of the assumptive meanings Angel and Alec assign to it.

When Jude and Sue then come closer to finding what Tess' narrator regrets that she will not find – "the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment" – they do appear to judge one another aright and to vibrate at the same affective frequency (*T* 31). Their tenor of feeling, which *Jude* delimits as properly human and humane, contrasts with that of affectless natural processes and with their fellows' excessively animalistic and devout dispositions. Yet their union comes "fifty years too soon": their finely developed sympathy for all living creatures is precocious (*J* 315). Their love is also belated in that each has already married wrongly. And for all that each finds in the other the "right and desired one," they travel opposite trajectories, backward or forward in time, away from one another: Jude moves from his modern-day spirituality to pre-Christian belief in a tragic universe, whereas Sue begins irreverently pagan and ends mired in Christian mores (*T* 30-31). In the character of Jude, Hardy pictures a present-day secularization that re-awakens the tragic consciousness of the ancients; in Sue, Hardy pictures the contrary, the birth of Judeo-Christian religion from the spirit of tragedy.

In *Jude*, it is Sue's capital mistake to assign herself a guilty character that is not in fact hers. This misassumption of culpability, following the deaths of her and Jude's children, allows Hardy to depict how the moralization of tragic events is, on the one hand, a strategy to survive them, to assign them an explanation in order to bear them – yet also how excruciating such moralizing logic, in its absorption of fate into character, can be. Hardy's fiction, however, does not blame Sue for blaming herself, and does not present her grief-stricken worldview as the final revelation of her character. Given the extent to which the novel laments what she has become – the pain it causes both her and Jude – it suggests that tragic circumstances, beyond Sue's control, have destroyed rather than clarified her character. Whereas Tess might have passed from grief to prosperity, had others taken her side in time, Sue's "mental *volte-face*" signifies that affliction has obliterated her former self – she whom Jude considers the true Sue (*J* 279).

Hardy's fiction undertakes a delicate feat of representation: to separate the emergence and consolidation of character from character's distortion at the hands of both unforeseen events and pernicious belief systems. Hardy's tragic novels attempt to differentiate flourishing "Tess" and "Sue," on the one hand, from what occasions their "ruins," and from their ruined selves, on the other.

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<sup>28</sup> Little attention has been given to *Tess*' narrator as a significant contributor to the form of Hardy's novel. I see him as a replacement for the Greek tragic chorus, an onlooker who not only laments but refuses the plot at hand. Yet Hardy's narrator in *Tess*, if discussed at all, is often viewed as the mouthpiece for an overly intrusive author, and as an awkward and self-contradictory spokesman. See R. P. Draper's collection *Hardy: The Tragic Novels*, in particular David Lodge's "Tess, Nature, and the Voices of Hardy."

## Hardy versus Aristotle

It is Aristotle's "secularization" of tragedy – his determination to exclude the Greek gods' irrationality from the tragic stage and to hold characters responsible for tragedy's plots – that inaugurates the moralization of the genre.<sup>29</sup> For numerous contemporary philosophers, literary critics, and classicists, Aristotle envisions a rational universe that implicates characters in their demises in a way that the ancient tragedians do not.<sup>30</sup> That is, undeserved, often inexplicable upheavals of fortune (*tuchē*, luck, the allotment of the gods) await virtuous heroes and heroines in Attic tragedy; this ill luck becomes the unintended and pitiable, but self-wrought defeat of Aristotle's favored protagonists. Aristotle's Oedipus cannot know the full meaning and repercussions of his actions, but his ignorance constitutes a flaw in his person, and the inadvertent guilt that he accrues constitutes his fate. Characters err, and the errors that they commit come to define them in Aristotle: characters pass from one condition and from one self-understanding to another, or barely elude this transformation, as in *Iphigenia in Taurus*, in which error is prevented, catastrophe averted, and stainless character preserved. Thus Angel feels that he has loved, not the real Tess, but "another woman in your shape," and Tess protests "that I am the same woman, Angel, as you fell in love with" (*T* 179, 265). For the majority of the novel, Angel espouses an Aristotelean view of disaster in which Tess' involuntary action entails both her unhappiness and the reappraisal of her identity. Angel's change of heart comes too late; too late does he feel that "the beauty or ugliness of character ... lay, not among things done, but among things willed" (*T* 267). Instead, Aristotle's pitiable and inadvertent guiltiness becomes the fully deserved sinfulness of Sue's Christianity – of Attic tragedy turned moral fable. Indeed, Hardy's Sue fulfills Plato's counter-tragic dream of moralization. As Stephen Halliwell describes it, in the myth of Er that closes *Republic X*, Plato is at pains "to translate potential tragic material into the substance of a moralistic fable" in which man "is taken to bring his own fate on himself; the cause of it lies in his own soul. His sufferings will be a punishment, and Platonic punishment is good for its subject" ("Denial" 52).

Answering Socrates' call in the *Republic* for an "apology" for tragedy, Aristotle himself suggests that wholly underserved suffering, that which divinity visits upon guiltless human beings, is not exhibited in the finest tragic drama. Aristotle stipulates in a thorny, much-debated line of the *Poetics* that "good men should not be seen passing from prosperity to affliction, for this is neither fearful nor pitiable but repulsive" (1452b34-36). Two means of interpreting this statement have come to the fore: that for exceptionally good men to meet such an end is insupportable, and that for ordinarily good men to suffer it arbitrarily, rather than for a discernable mistake they have made, is insupportable.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, the staging of such demises is abhorrent to Plato's Socrates in the *Republic*. The latter reproves Homer, whom he considers the first tragic poet, not principally for imitation (for being three removes from what *is*), but for nourishing the "mournful part" of us – not for misrepresenting our susceptibility to misfortune, but for broadcasting it too widely (606a). Socrates objects to tragedy's depiction of men who do not "accept the fall of the dice" and instead act "like children who have fallen and who hold on to the hurt place and spend their time in crying out" (604c). Those who internalize tragedy's philosophy, worries Socrates, will believe too much in a cosmos that does not, here or hereafter,

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<sup>29</sup> See Stephen Halliwell, with whom I agree, for a full commentary on this "secularization" of tragedy.

<sup>30</sup> See Anthony Cascardi, Stephen Halliwell, George Harris, and Jonathan Lear.

<sup>31</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, "Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency" and *The Fragility of Goodness*, for discussion of these interpretive possibilities.

allocate fates on merit; they will be too unmotivated to act justly. While Martha Nussbaum then argues that Aristotle, as a result, defends this tragic disparity between virtuous character and happy outcome – on the basis of its schooling audiences in sympathy – Aristotle’s vindication of tragedy works differently. Rather than good characters, not wholly perfect, with whom we identify, whom we pity, and whose fates we fear as our own – who fall prey to underserved loss, usher it in unknowingly, and often remain virtuous in the face of it – Aristotle prefers that characters’ own unsound natures ignite their reversals. Aristotle appears to militate for character itself that determines plot, in contradistinction to the under-determined “fall of the dice” that subjects character to plot.

While it could seem that Aristotle in fact paves the way for Hardy, by seeing that tragedy can be secularized – that characters’ ignorance of past and future need not be divinely produced, and that divinely orchestrated plots are not the only means of communicating the divergence between laudable character and her desired outcome – Aristotle does more than re-conceive tragic suffering as terrestrial in origin. He does more than refuse “irrationalities” (in his view, the signature of the gods) as so many metaphors for fearful and pitiable mortal luck, while instead presenting casually intelligible earthly agents that occasion the same overthrow of character. Granting that Aristotle believes a rational sequence of events more fear-inspiring than a capricious one (because comprehensible misfortune impresses audiences more with its likelihood), what benefit does Aristotle derive from making unwitting character the source of its ills, rather than others who plague him? If Aristotle’s ideal tragic character is a somnambulist sleep-walking through destiny until he awakens to who he now is, shouldn’t Aristotle likewise approve plots that feature legible and destructive outside agency, pitted against character and forcing his hand? As Nussbaum writes: “The unanswered question ... is why Aristotle insists that the causal mechanism must be an act of the hero’s, rather than a (casually intelligible) network of events that bears down on him from outside” (“Self-Sufficiency” 278). Perhaps heroes who unknowingly wreak their own demises (or risk doing so, catching themselves in the last instant) are not, for Aristotle, the starkest dramatization of a pitiless cosmos that governs and sports with mortals; perhaps Aristotle instead delimits and minimizes the sphere from which threats come, steering clear of the divine agency that remains the paradigmatic signifier, in Attic drama, of a universal human vulnerability to loss.

Indeed, Aristotle resists any external cause – divine or human, opaque or intelligible – as the source of a character’s fall or flourishing. The events of the play must issue from *him*. When Aristotle objects to the irrationality of the *deus ex machina*, for instance, he refuses a narrative development that does not follow necessarily from a hero’s own deed. Aristotle rejects the gods’ obscure ends as causes of the plot’s unfurling; he rejects how unexpectedly fortunes can change in their hands. If chance must make its appearance in tragedy, Aristotle asserts that “even chance events make the greatest impact of wonder [one’s feeling upon discovering that seemingly incomprehensible events are, in fact, comprehensible] when they *appear* to have a purpose (as in the case where Mity’s statue at Argos fell on Mity’s murderer and killed him, while he was looking at it: such things do not seem to happen without reason” (1452a5-10). In this instance of an occurrence that gives the impression, at least, of possessing a clear explanation, its reason is also a moral one. Jonathan Lear captures Aristotle’s deft interpretive maneuver as follows: “In Aristotle’s conception of tragedy, the individual actor takes on the burden of badness, and the world as a whole is absolved” (325). Aristotle asserts that what lies beyond characters’ doing is extraneous to plot: “Plots should not consist of parts which are irrational. As far as possible, there should be no irrational component; otherwise it should be outside the plot-structure”

(1460a26-29). Aristotle brackets the larger question of the full origin of a tragic hero's end: whether unwitting action, beyond one's control, can properly be said to issue from oneself, whether the universe in which it occurs can be called rational, and whether such ignorance is culpable or exculpatory.

We come round to the duck-rabbit of Aristotle's theory: in what sense did he use the fraught term *hamartia*, which harbors these myriad ambiguities? Jean-Pierre Vernant sketches the semantic development of the Greek word:

The paradox of an *agnoia* [ignorance] that is both the constitutive principle of the misdeed and at the same time excuses it by expunging it is also to be found in the semantic evolution of the words related to *hamartia*. The evolution is twofold. On the one hand the terms come to carry the notion of intention: one is only guilty, *hamartōn*, if one has committed the criminal action intentionally; anyone who has acted despite himself, *akon*, is not guilty, *ouk hamartōn*. The verb *hamartanein* can designate the same thing as *adikein*: the intentional crime that is prosecuted by the city. On the other hand, the concept of the intentional that is implied in the primitive idea of a mistake made through a man's blindness also bears fruit as early as the fifth century. *Hamartanein* comes to apply to the excusable misdeed where the subject was not fully aware of what he was doing. As early as the end of the fourth century *hamartema* comes to be used to express the almost technical idea of the unintentional crime, the *akousion*. Thus Aristotle sets it in opposition to the *adikēma*, the intentional crime, and to the *atuchēma*, the unforeseeable accident that has nothing to do with the intentions and knowledge of the agent. (65)

Does Aristotle's *hamartia* lean toward the *adikēma*, however – is it closer to active guilt than to indomitable bad luck? If the latter is “repulsive” to Aristotle, perhaps he considers the former more properly tragic – more in line with his five prohibitions against “impossibilities, irrationalities, morally harmful elements, contradictions, and offences against the true standard of the art” (1461b21-4). F. L. Lucas rightly remarks both that “Aristotle himself felt that the misfortunes of absolutely righteous characters were too shocking for the tragic stage” and that Aristotle was, subsequently, “not studied in the Greek spirit, but rather as if he had been a Hebrew prophet” (100, 12). Halliwell concludes that Aristotle practices the “denial of tragedy's deepest level,” “more of an attempt to woo it over to philosophy's side than to meet it on its own terms” (“Denial” 67). Anthony Cascardi and Simon Critchley diagnose in the philosophical tradition as a whole a defining need to “overcome,” “defeat,” or “avert” the tragic (Cascardi 171). Aristotle's very commentary on the genre begins to contain and to sanitize it: requires character to engender the fullness of plot. In Aristotle, the moment of *anagnorisis* (recognition, self-knowledge) ideally coincides with the *peripeteia*, the reversal of fortune contrary to expectation: seeing one's true character, that is, *effects* the narrative shift from well-being to sorrow or the opposite.

In Aristotle's interpretation of tragedy, plot is a closed and self-contained system because character is. In the novel, however, characters and plots appear, at least initially, more open-ended; multiple plotlines seem possible and character has yet to be determined. Character, in the novel, seems to coalesce as it comes to follow one plotline among the myriad available. Yet in Aristotle's view, in which plot is the final exigency of character, novels might be tragedies

whose ends we do not know in advance, where character, by definition, carves a single furrow into the granite of possibility. In both the novel and tragedy, to be *you* seems necessarily to go one way only, as in tragedy, even when many more ways, as in the novel, present themselves.

Yet Hardy's fiction argues that character is not always coincident with its endpoint. Tess is not equivalent to her fate; she is not, to her narrator, the product of her cumulative circumstances. Even Sue, whose character is eclipsed in the end – who embraces self-slander where Tess resists it – is not reducible to her final posture, in Jude's estimation. While Aristotle reads plot as the consequence of character's essence (good, pitiable, but fallible, rendering him a criminal despite himself), Hardy sees "pure" character at war with circumstances that curb and criminalize it: "the inherent will to enjoy" menaced by "the circumstantial will against enjoyment" (*T* 224-25). Contra Aristotle, Angel, and Sue, Tess' narrator and Jude instead view tragic suffering as Tess' mother does: "as a thing which had come upon them irrespective of desert or folly; a chance external impingement to be borne with; not a lesson" (*T* 202). Hardy's fiction, that is, trains its readers in a new mode of decryption, asking us to reject the notion that a heroine's final outcome presents the consolidation of her character. Hardy's protagonists do travel a single, unitary course – as fictional and nonfictional persons must – but Hardy's novels suggest that plot, and its interpretation, can warp and obscure personhood, rather than bring it fully to light.

## Two Tesses

From the moment we meet Alec, Tess' narrator establishes, contra Aristotle, that Alec is the instigator, the seed of this tragic plot, not Tess. Hardy's narrator positions Alec as "the 'tragic mischief' of her drama – one who stood fair to be the blood-red ray in the spectrum of her young life," a fact that she "[does] not divine, as she innocently" beholds him (*T* 30). During Alec's rape of Tess, Hardy's narrator maintains this grammar of overpowering fate and powerless character: upon "her tissue" Alec "traced" the "coarse pattern it was doomed to receive" (*T* 57). In Hardy's anti-Aristotelian view of tragedy, "practically blank" Tess is branded, tattooed, stenciled in suddenly – her life-plot marked by an agency not her own. No philosophical or theological attempts to rationalize this occurrence, he asserts, will satisfy our "sense of order" or "mend the matter":

Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which there poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked.

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a

fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. But though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the matter. (*T* 57)

“Why,” he repeats twice, the insoluble question that haunts this tragic formation of character. It is against such a “coarse pattern” and the Tess it forges – hounded by her past – that Hardy’s narrator rails, imagining the open future that ought to be hers.

In this scene, too, Hardy’s narrator renders Christianity as unresponsive and impotent as the supreme pagan divinity, Baal, of whom Elijah (“the ironical Tishbite”) speaks with contempt. Elijah reports that Baal’s prophets beseech their god to display his power, but “there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded” (1 Kings 18:29). For Hardy’s narrator, this “primeval” indifference *is* the enduring condition of the natural world. The Greek gods who look aside in much Attic drama as human beings wreak havoc upon one another are now the “Purblind Doomsters” of Hardy’s “Hap” (*CP* 9). Now the countenance of the mist is “eyeless,” as Hardy writes in his anti-theistic poem “A Sign-Seeker” (*CP* 49). For the nonhuman world not to look, not to care, is for Hardy both a tenet of Darwinian science and a tenet of tragic fiction. Hardy’s narrator also makes this episode the occasion to indict the Attic logic of inherited familial curses. These Greek precursors to the Judeo-Christian “sins of the fathers” are daemonic miasmas that infect innocent youth, inevitably. Like biological agents, they do not mete out warranted punishment. Hardy’s narrator objects to the spurious notion that Tess’ rape is retribution for those rapes that her male ancestors have perpetrated against their social and sexual inferiors. This is precisely the structure of violence that Aeschylus dramatizes and challenges: crime begets crime begets crime. The vileness of one act is expunged by the commission of that same act against the previous wrongdoer. Aeschylus himself is at pains to break this cycle, to envision a new form of juridical practice that does not visit wrong upon wrong. And Hardy’s narrator’s tirelessly mounted defenses of Tess, as we will see, show his own loathing for a logic in which the viciousness of the fathers is paid by the life of the daughter. Here, Hardy’s tragedy recovers from the ancients the indictment of such models – Iphigenia slaughtered by Agamemnon, her father, for wind to Troy, and Cassandra raped by him, or Hecuba’s daughter, Polyxena, sacrificed by the Greek host so that Achilles’ ghost can have her. In the company of the Greek tragedians, *Tess* reprises and reproves the very idea of sacrifice: beginning with the May-Day celebration, a descendent of pagan fertility rites in which the death of the maiden, initiated into sex, ensures the vigor of the harvest, and clothing Tess in the same ceremonial white frock to meet Alec.<sup>32</sup>

Thus the gods of pagan and Judeo-Christian mythology slumber while Alec invades Tess’ sleep. It is Tess, however, who sees writ large on the boards of a stile, “THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT” (*T* 62). Her own impulse is to challenge its credo, that bad fortune is proof of bad character: “‘But,’ said she tremulously, ‘suppose your sin was not of your own seeking?’” (*T* 62). He who paints the words replies, “I leave their application to the hearts of the people who read ‘em” and Tess boldly counters: “I think they are horrible. ... Crushing! Killing!” (*T* 62) She goes further: “‘Pooh – I don’t believe God said such things!” she murmured

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine Gallagher illuminates Hardy’s anthropological method and Victorian anthropology’s new vision of sexual and sacrificial primitive ritual. See also Nicole Loraux’s *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* on the sacrifice of virgins and the suicide of wives in ancient tragedy.

contemptuously” (T 63). But it is precisely her fellows’ insistence upon impurity – *hamartia* as inner iniquity – that casts the fatal pall over her life.

Hardy’s narrator, however, reiterates that while her rape changes her, it spells her undoing in this moralizing universe only. His commentary works to establish how singular, how anomalously reproving is her particular social milieu: “Most of the misery had been generated by her conventional aspect, and not by her innate sensation” (T 71). He imagines other worlds in which she would thrive, where no one would require her to be Angel’s immaculate, neo-pagan goddess, the vestal proto-Christian of the vale, in order to survive and to flourish. Specifically, he imagines places in which she would have no past, ensuring that no life-negating interpretation of it could prevail:

Moreover, alone in a desert island would she have been wretched at what had happened to her? Not greatly. (T 71)

But just created, to discover herself as a spouseless mother, with no experience of life except as the parent of a nameless child, would the position have caused her to despair? No, she would have taken it calmly, and found pleasure therein. (T 71)

Let the truth be told – women do as a rule live through such humiliations, and regain their spirits, and again look about them with an interested eye. While there's life there's hope is a conviction not so entirely unknown to the “betrayed” as some amiable theorists would have us believe. (T 82)

Tess’ narrator’s fictions and truths, however, contradict those of his story world. Tess is consigned to a world in which these “amiable” theorists of damnation have their way, a world in which her narrator’s imagined scenarios do not win out. Yet it is his signature practice to improvise alternatives to her fate, and to denounce the fact that she is made to feel guilt and shame for her tragic ill luck. Thus he devises three more re-tellings of her story, incompatible with one another, but each in her defense. Hardy’s narrator suggests that Nature’s own morality clears Tess of guilt vis-à-vis her past, that amoral Nature purifies Tess of her past entirely, and that her past enhances rather than impeaches her character.

In his first gambit, Hardy’s narrator allows that Tess’ internalization of guilt is real to *her*, but also, editorializing heavily, asserts that hers is an inaccurate self-assessment. Because she personifies nature such that its harsh weather seems a commentary upon her culpable soul, he rejoins that nature bespeaks her innocence. He pivots away from the tragic, unseeing Nature that has eyelessly countenanced her rape and imagines a Nature whose own moral tenets refute society’s “moral hobgoblins”:

The midnight airs and gusts, moaning amongst the tightly-wrapped buds and bark of the winter twigs, were formulae of bitter reproach. A wet day was the expression of irremediable grief at her weakness in the mind of some vague ethical being whom she could not class definitely as the God of her childhood, and could not comprehend as any other.

But this encompassment of her own characterization, based on shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess’ fancy – a cloud of moral hobgoblins, by which she was

terrified without reason. It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she. Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedges, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence. But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly. (*T* 67)

Hardy's narrator wishes to imply that by the standards of "Nature," by the laws "known to the environment," Tess has committed no crime, that these "haunts of Innocence" are indeed her asylum and vindication, refuting her self-indictment. Hardy's narrator would himself exonerate her, and seeks in this view of nature his keenest ally and her most invincible apologist: she is "no different" from, "in accord" with her natural surroundings, and therefore as blameless as they. He confirms that for all her "conventional" shame, "every see-saw of her breath, every wave of her blood, every pulse singing in her ears was a voice that joined with Nature in revolt against her scrupulousness" (*T* 139). It would seem that the "natural side of her which knew no social law" is proof of her truest character (*T* 72).

"Nature," now the faultless external realm of tree and pheasant, and the manifold of seen and unseen laws that govern all life, travels inward – is her nature too. "Every wave of her blood" denies the very categories in which condemnation of her might be framed, the terms in which she, too, castigates herself. Her "natural side" has its own commandments that countermand the artificial charges brought against her. Her narrator's description of her child, too, presupposes the misattribution of artificial character to natural character: "So passed away Sorrow the Undesired – that intrusive creature, that bastard gift of shameless Nature who respects no social law" (*T* 75). Tess' narrator bitinglly evokes the perversions to which he bears witness: rendering a child a "sorrow," the creaturely "intrusive," a gift a "bastard," Nature herself culpable. He plays on the opposing meanings of "shameless" – wanting proper shame, from society's condemnatory perspective, and exempt from needless shame, under nature's law. But is there no shame in the forced act of procreation that begot Sorrow? Because Tess is young, fecund, and luxuriantly attractive, is her rape, too, harmless, lawful, even salutary? Furthermore, are the "moral hobgoblins" of religion, classism, and sexism really Tess' own "fancies"? This well-intentioned shielding of Tess from censure is riven with contradiction. She has every practical reason to be concerned for her future, even if the causes of her fear and regret, namely her feelings of shame, sin, taint, and culpability, should be dismissed. If her persecutors are "out of harmony with the actual world," what actual world does Hardy's narrator mean? The so-called natural world, whose "ethics" absolves her of guilt by licensing her rape? The world of society as it should be, the counterfactual, just and humane world which the entire novel coaxes its readers to desire? Just as Hardy's narrator's "real" Tess is not the recipient of punitive, sham "justice," his "actual world" does not dole out such punishments. Meanwhile, the actual world in which Tess dwells denies her a lifetime of love and kills her without remorse. It shoots these pheasants from whom, in her narrator's reverie, she is no different.

Invoking Nature's laws to acquit Tess, to de-criminalize her biology, her person, and her past, her narrator risks justifying all that has befallen her under Nature's ostensible supervision. He must, then, to protect his heroine, retreat from claims of Nature's justice, reserving the sphere of compassion, of the ethical, for the very human society that elects her ruin; and its thoughtlessness, its failure to care for Tess, must be criminal in a way that Nature's is not. Her

narrator must communicate that no laws of Nature have protected Tess from an indefensible and not innocuous rape; no bough or pheasant has interceded on her behalf. Tess' very exemption from guilt must be a matter of human discrimination, not of resemblance to the unfeeling haunts of forest and vale. Thus Hardy's narrator intermittently brandishes Nature's immunity from shame as a strategy to afford Tess relief from her anguishing "scrupulousness," yet he also registers that this shamelessness, this imperviousness to sentiment, is Nature's keenest deficiency. Nature cannot differentiate between shameful and un-shameful acts as narrator or reader can. Nature cannot preclude the former or condone the latter. Tess, unaware of her supporters, can only lament that God's blameless sun shines on the just and the unjust alike (*T* 99).

Acknowledging that Tess' environment cannot, after all, serve as her character witness or sympathetic companion – for the "familiar surroundings had not darkened because of her grief, nor sickened because of her pain" – Tess' narrator embarks upon his second mode of defense, suggesting a new analogy between his heroine and her environment that promotes her recovery and flourishing. Allowing that her surroundings, however rich in their "oozing fatness and warm ferments," are alien to human feeling and judgment, he proceeds to emphasize that this fertile vegetation and Tess are nonetheless wont to rejuvenate, to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of their literal or metaphorical winters: "yet even now Tess felt the pulse of hopeful life still warm within her" (*T* 116, 78). Morality aside, the biosphere in its lush plenitude still objects to her tragic end: a "particularly fine spring came round, and the stir of germination was almost audible in the buds; it moved her, as it moved the wild animals" and "some spirit within her rose automatically as the sap in the twigs. It was unexpected youth, surging up anew after its temporary check" (*T* 78). Knowing full well that Tess' life will be permanently and prematurely checked, her narrator nonetheless paints her encounter with Alec as he thinks it ought to be, as a "temporary check" only:

The irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere, which pervades all life, from the meanest to the highest, had at length mastered Tess. Being even now only a young woman of twenty, one who mentally and sentimentally had not finished growing, it was impossible that any event should have left upon her an impression that was not in time capable of transmutation. (*T* 81)

He militates for Tess' resilience and adaptability – her developing character – in lieu of a character ossified and contracted in one fell swoop.

Whether nature is Tess' moral advocate or her amoral partner in indomitable, resilient life, her narrator consistently suggests there her own "innate sensation," her oft-referenced life "pulse," proves her keenest source of resistance to crushing social scruples. Her human nature, like her narrator's, throbs with counter-scruples, counter-impulses. But at times her inborn sensations pain her, intrude upon her well-being; her inner ecology, that is, is not unequivocally salubrious, the internal imprint of some external perfection. Within Tess' own body, her nature may either "sing" of "revolt" or "thrust" "oppressiveness" upon her, and she must navigate these promptings and impediments to her happiness (*T* 115). Hardy's narrator cannot derive an infallible code of ethics from any supernatural, extrahuman, or human source; human convictions, in Humean fashion, spring only from interrogations of fallible human nature itself.

Yet because of the profusion of perspectives that Tess' narrator varyingly adopts and abandons, beginning in 1895 Lionel Johnson criticizes Hardy, in representative fashion, for embroiling readers in a morass of contradictory descriptions and pronouncements:

...*Tess* is more than the history of a woman's life and death; it is also an indictment of 'Justice,' human and divine, as the *Oresteia* is its vindication. ... Mr. Hardy is not content to frame his indictment, by the stern narration of sad facts; he inserts fragments of that reasoning, which has brought him to his dark conclusion. They are too many, too bitter, too passionate, to be but an overflow, as it were, from his narration; they are too sparse, too ironical, too declamatory, to be quite intelligible. ... I want definitions of nature, law, society, and justice: the want is coarse, doubtless, and unimaginative, but I cannot suppress it. (*T* 390, 391)

Johnson's is not a coarse or illegitimate want; Hardy's fiction provokes this ache for definition. It is Hardy's narrator's own, as he labors both to delineate and to refute those conceptions of "nature, law, society, and justice" that entrap his heroine. His array of declamatory statements is at once too sparse and too passionate to be fully intelligible, but this jostle of ardent, piecemeal viewpoints is still more intentional than haphazard. Hardy's narrator does not labor for absolute clarity and fail; rather, what his interwoven proclamations add to "stern narration" is its aura of active, critical, ethical struggle. His "reasoning" does not simply rehearse, or justify, a "dark conclusion" to come. With consistency, he entertains rival stances in an endeavor to challenge dismal events, and to determine (alongside his readers) those premises about Nature, human nature, and its distortion that either undo Tess or pose alternatives to her ruin. His view of the *Oresteia* is the opposite of Johnson's: all does not end well, with the "vindication" of human and divine actors. It is entirely true that he is "not content" to narrate unobtrusively, but "overflows" into character himself, bitter and ironical: "'Justice' was done," he announces scathingly, "and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess" (*T* 314).

Unwaveringly dissatisfied with this conclusion, Hardy's narrator elects to represent, in conjunction with his own musings, an expansive array of opinion amongst his characters – to parade their views' inconsistencies and fatal consequences. Multiple chapters close with Tess' own distressed and hopeless suppositions, her ironized rhetorical questions and meditations in free indirect style: "... why should she, who could never conscientiously allow any man to marry her now [be loved]?" and "It was wicked of her to take all without paying" (*T* 108, 175). Whereas Tess thinks to herself that "she you love is not my real self, but one in my image, the one I might have been!" her narrator is certain that this "might have been" Tess is she – and that the Tess whom Angel worships is a sham, fetishized fabrication all his own (*T* 168). How many contradictory viewpoints, indeed, are accorded to the chameleon and perfidious Angel? One moment he is "a man with a conscience," well-aware (in free indirect style) that "Tess was no insignificant creature to toy with and dismiss, but a woman living her precious life – a life which, to herself who endured or enjoyed it, possessed as great a dimension as the life of the highest to himself" (*T* 121). Then this same man demands, solely on his own terms, a "new-sprung child of nature," "rustic innocence," and proves himself the most unworthy reader of human nature, the worst hypocrite (recall that "he [had] plunged into eight-and-forty hours' dissipation with a stranger," casting himself as an innocent "cork on the waves," "tossed about by doubts and difficulties") (*T* 182, 186, 177). Angel's self-congratulatory, "heterodox" humanism, his sense

that “it was for herself that he loved Tess; her soul, her heart, her substance,” proves a posture only (*T* 129). While he claims that “her unsophisticated open-air existence required no varnish of conventionality to make it palatable to him,” he already assumes that such untutored simplicity ensures as inviolate, as “blank” and unmarked a past as that of the most idealized Christian (*T* 129). He believes her “pure and virtuous,” “chaste as a vestal,” precisely the “unimpeachable Christian” his parents require (*T* 128, 129).

Following Alec’s “tragic mischief” is Angel’s misguided moralization of it. When Tess cries “I have forgiven you for the same!” he rejoins, “O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another. My God – how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque – prestidigitation as that!” (*T* 179) Tonally, lexically, he is mistaken, asserting peremptorily that “this kind of case ... is rather one for satirical laughter than for tragedy. You don’t in the least understand the quality of the mishap” (*T* 183). Angel thinks himself the universe’s laughingstock, he the victim of a “grotesque” “prestidigitation,” a magician’s sleight of hand – disappearing one woman and replacing her with another. Tess’ confession, for him, is a conjuring trick that brings forth an entirely new person: he cannot forgive or even recognize “his” Tess, because she has been transmuted into and unveiled as another, a sinner to whom forgiveness does not apply. This reversal redefines her, in his view, and this “reillumination” makes for a “terrible and total change ... wrought in his life, in his universe” (*T* 180). He has the sense of a true and complete Tess’ materializing out of a deceptive and disguised precursor: “I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you” (*T* 179). Thus Angel feels that because Tess “looked absolutely pure,” “Nature, in her fantastic trickery, had set such a seal of maidenhood” upon her – rendering her face a duplicitous mask (*T* 186). On the contrary, from her narrator’s perspective, the face that launches Alec’s attack, that Tess hides to shield herself from further “gallantry,” and that she later bares in defiance, is her faithful representative. Hardy’s narrator has little patience with Angel’s paucity of imagination and hard-hearted treachery: “with all his attempted independence of judgment ... [Angel] was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings” (*T* 208).

Tess’ narrator, therefore, has one further counter-narrative that he brandishes both early and late: “but for the world’s opinion, [Tess’] experiences would have been simply a liberal education” (*T* 77). He chooses to allude to Tess’ past merely as a fortuitous eye-opener, a school-of-hard-knocks tutorial, amplifying her spirit; he adopts a seemingly myopic, even cold-hearted position of disregard – casts Tess’ rape and loss of a child in unequivocally positive terms – precisely to counter in advance the gratuitous suffering that he foresees for her. If she is the teleological outcome of her past, her character is the richer, the more loving and loyal, for her experience. In this particular judgment of her prior powerlessness and current knowledge, he cleaves only to the benefits of her suffering, excluding all else, intimating the potential brightness of the future that will be denied her. He celebrates her maturation, brushing aside at what cost she has achieved it. This “would have been” narrative, conditional given the facts of the fiction, is for Tess’ narrator much closer to the truth of the matter. He emphasizes, as no one else will, that the woman who attracts Angel possesses these prior experiences – they enrich her gaze, augment her beauty – experiences that Angel refuses to hear and cannot understand.

Hardy’s narrator is not as fickle, as unreliable as Clare, his character. He adopts this contrarian position – “Tess’s passing corporeal blight had been her mental harvest” – *because* her fate is the opposite of his pronouncements, her allotment the inverse of his hopes. Angel’s appreciation of Tess’ mental harvest – Angel’s awareness of her alluring *gravitas*, whose origin eludes him – is of passing duration, while a conviction of her lasting corporeal blight overtakes

him. Although Tess' narrator insists upon nature's regenerative power, Tess will find herself insuperably "unregenerate" in the eyes of others (*T* 240). Tess indeed tries to leave her past behind: "She dismissed the past – trod upon it and put it out, as one treads on a coal that is smouldering and dangerous" (*T* 151). Tess strives to keep at bay the "gloomy spectres" of a self-characterization that will break her, and yet "she knew that they were waiting like wolves just outside the circumscribing light" (*T* 153). For all that Tess labors to banish the past (never daring to recast it as her narrator does), she comes to feel that she cannot evade a character imposed upon her from without, which affords her the "almost physical sense of an implacable past which still engirdled her":

It intensified her consciousness of error to a practical despair; the break of continuity between her earlier and present existence, which she had hoped for, had not, after all, taken place. Bygones would never be complete bygones till she was a bygone herself. (*T* 240)

Thus Hardy's narrator seems driven to model an agitated intellect constantly at odds with the modes of thought, the "standard of judgment," the "sense of condemnation," that transform his "pure" heroine (a character she never loses, in his view) into a heroine with blood on her hands (*T* 236, 219).

From the beginning, he narrates a Tess who is cowed, intimidated, and compelled to intimacy in Alec's carriage, where Alec plants his "kiss of mastery" upon her (*T* 40). Alec spies, hunts, follows her, his predation sinister. When Alec then returns to re-entrap her, seething with anger at his thwarted possession, he announces that "I was your master once! I will be your master again," and this ineluctable symmetry of abuses, which robs Tess of self-determination a second time, is what Hardy's narrator seems unable to bear in silence (*T* 261). Similarly, if he must give voice to Angel's condemnatory thinking, he will classify it as a "hard logical deposit" and insert his tidbits of counter-logic (*T* 189). If Angel dares to call Alec Tess' "husband in nature" (and to suggest that "if he were dead it might be different"), Hardy's narrator will evoke Tess' visceral revulsion to such a classification (*T* 190). Tess is nonetheless forced to believe, to repeat those words, to argue that "this man alone was her husband" (*T* 282). It is a supposed truth so inimical to her feeling that, unable to voice or to legitimate an alternative conception of union or self (too late would Angel sanction it), she strikes down that which she has been compelled, time and again, to accept as a restraint to her every bodily impulse, and she dies for her resistance.

Overcome with "mad grief" and lamentation – "Oh – Oh – Oh!" – Tess cannot bear that Alec has a second time "made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again" (*T* 304, 300, 301). The "original Tess," whom Angel at long last recognizes, has for the second time lost sovereignty over her body: "allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will" (*T* 299). Like Sue to follow, Tess' living will is broken, her body turned corpse under subjection and false belief. Only upon killing Alec does Tess experience a short-lived, poetic beat of joy – but "this happiness could not have lasted. It was too much. I have had enough" (*T* 312). As she knows, her moment of being will not arrest her narrative's merciless becoming. Her very self-assertion, her defense of personhood, saddles her with the charge of guilt, of culpable action, that she has sought to disprove. So Hardy's narrator, his own tale's counterweight, constantly gestures toward a "great passionate pulse of existence, unwarped, uncontorted, untrammelled," hers in his imagining, as if he cannot tolerate the events

he transcribes and must conjure the pulse of her “might have been” life, playing devil’s advocate to the “tragic machinery” he represents (*J* 7).

### Sue’s Reversals

Whereas Tess falls prey to others’ life-negating interpretations of her misfortunes, Sue herself cannot bear a tragic cosmos in which suffering and death have no decipherable meaning and lie beyond her control; Sue moralizes her own fate in order to make sense of it. Unjustifiable, Attic calamity leads her to efface the very pagan character that Jude has come to love: Sue’s reversal of fortune leads her wholly to re-envision the world and herself, to paint herself a sinner receiving her due chastisement. *Jude* pictures Sue’s resultant penitence – the denial of her affective impulses – as the negation of her character.

Yet while Arabella distracts Jude from his self-taught reading of the New Testament in Greek, it is Sue who wishes, for the majority of the novel, that Jude embrace a “more ancient” Greece, prior even to Platonism, that of tragedy’s mortal luck, grief, and passion. In Jude’s chambers, early Sue reiterates her irreverent repulsion to Christminster (the novel’s Oxford), her beliefs rooted in visceral feeling, for when she is in her “saddest, rightest mind” she beholds spires and cloisters and their acolytes as “ghastly glories of saints, dead limbs of gibbeted Gods!” (*J* 120). This Sue is wounded by Jude’s “differing from her” when she unabashedly cries that his beloved “new Jerusalem” is “a place full of fetishists and ghost-seers!” (*J* 120). Jude himself “[looks] pained” as he murmurs in reply that she is “quite Voltairean” (*J* 121). Her distress escalates in response to his own: “her speech had grown spirited, and almost petulant at his rebuke, and her eyes moist. ‘I wish I had a friend here to support me; but nobody is ever on my side!’” (*J* 122). Both suffer, in this moment, from their clashing opinion, and both will suffer, later, from a shared set of feelings that finds no sanction outside their dyad, and finally, from an opposition of views when they have exchanged positions (he heretical, she devout).

At present, neither wishes to argue over “hypothetical,” “conjectural subjects,” for belief divides them where “on matters of daily human experience” their emotions coincide (*J* 122, 123). And yet these hypothetical matters, these ghosts and fetishes, will come to condemn their daily human experiences. Tess’ moral hob-goblins will become their shared adversary; Jude’s early “grief at her incredulities” will prove grief at his fellows’ credulity and at hers (*J* 123). Still, Jude is ineluctably drawn to Sue, whose vivacity comes of her “fine-nerved” body (*J* 173). In their first conversations, each is hurt by the opacity, the illegibility of the other; for Sue, no one can feel as she feels, and consequently, defend her point of view. But the mark of their maturing affection is their much refined reading of one another. The sensitivity of each to the other’s sufferings develops well prior to any agreement in the substance of their thoughts; indeed, love emerges from this attunement of feeling, and emotional accord catalyzes the transformation of Jude’s intellectual convictions. His conservative thoughts grow radical in response to his advancing attachment. Consider the consolidation of their intimacy. Sue flings herself from a window to flee and to protest her punishing solitary confinement at her teachers’ training-school. She crosses a river in the chill of evening to effect her escape, and seeks refuge in Jude’s quarters – there she dons his dry Sunday best, sleeps a few hours, and awakes to converse all the more freely with him. Sue invokes his assessment of her, at their last encounter, as a sophisticated “creature of civilization” (*J* 111). She retorts that “it is provokingly wrong. I am a sort of negation of it [modern civilization]” (*J* 117). She is not “animal,” but “more ancient than medievalism, if you only knew,” as she has said before (*J* 134, 107). Jude discovers that

what he has suspected to be her culture, what he has detected as her arresting modernity, is in fact a mutinous paganism.

When Sue then marries Phillotson, quickly to feel she “ought” not have done, she temporarily conceals her mind from Jude: “for he felt that he did not even now quite know her mind,” “what she felt he did not know” (*J* 151, 134, 137). But drawn together for Aunt Druscilla’s funeral, physical proximity revives their psychological closeness:

Jude knew the quality of every vibration of her voice, could read every symptom of her mental condition; and he was convinced that she was unhappy, although she had not been a month married. ... She went on, to keep him from his jealous thoughts, which she read clearly, as she always did. Indeed when they talked on indifferent subjects, as now, there was ever a second silent conversation passing between their emotions, so perfect was the reciprocity between them. (*J* 151, 161)

Jude registers once more the “scorn of Nature for man’s finer emotions” (*J* 141). It is these “finer emotions” which he discerns in Sue, whereas he finds that “Arabella ... had no more sympathy than a tigress” (*J* 146). In contrast to Arabella, Sue resists marriage on the grounds that it reduces her to a “she-ass,” a “domestic animal” (*J* 136). Sue trumpets her aversion to external decrees of feeling: “the moment you had contracted to cherish me under a Government stamp, and I was licensed to be loved on the premises by you – Ugh, how horrible and sordid!” (*J* 203). Her views travel to Jude, who comes to reckon that “as long as he nourished this unlicensed tenderness it was glaringly inconsistent for him to pursue the idea of becoming the soldier and servant of a religion in which sexual love was regarded as at its best a frailty, and at its worst damnation” (*J* 171).

Outside of marriage, Jude and Sue come to find in each other a shared sense of “ought.” Tellingly, neither can bear the infliction of pain upon innocent flesh. Jude hears a trapped rabbit’s cries in the night and envisions its fate:

He who in his childhood had saved the lives of the earthworms now began to picture the agonies of the rabbit from its lacerated leg. If it were a “bad catch” by the hind-leg, the animal would tug during the ensuing six hours till the iron teeth of the trap had stripped the leg-bone of its flesh, when, should a weak-sprung instrument enable it to escape, it would die in the fields from the mortification of the limb. If it were a “good catch,” namely, by the fore-leg, the bone would be broken and the limb nearly torn in two in attempts at an impossible escape. (*J* 169)

Sue, similarly, pictures the creature’s agonies and dashes outside to end them: “I heard the rabbit, and couldn’t help thinking of what it suffered, till I felt I must come down and kill it! But I’m glad you got there first... They ought not to be allowed to set these steel traps, ought they!” (*J* 169).<sup>33</sup> Their rabbit is powerless before an unfeeling human collective, a nameless and implacable “they.” And it is Sue’s and Jude’s perception of the grisliness of human practice that sets them apart from conventional attitudes – sets them up, too, as victims of man-made gins that will render escape impossible. Their feeling unites them, and alienates them from others:

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<sup>33</sup> For more on human kinship with animals, see Rohman and Richter.

She played on and suddenly turned round; and by an unpremeditated instinct each clasped the other's hand again.

She uttered a forced little laugh as she relinquished his quickly. "How funny!" she said. "I wonder what we both did that for?"

"I suppose because we are both alike, as I said before."

"Not in our thoughts! Perhaps a little in our feelings."

"And they rule thoughts... Isn't it enough to make one blaspheme that the composer of that hymn is one of the most commonplace men I ever met!"

"What—you know him?"

"I went to see him."

"Oh, you goose—to do just what I should have done! Why did you?"

"Because we are not alike," he said drily. (*J* 160)

Feelings "rule thoughts," and Jude's head invariably proves an extension of his heart. His "finer emotions" develop his thinking, until he, too, affirms all that Sue intuits in her "saddest, rightest mind." It is tragic loss, however, with its unbearable surfeit of sadness, that comes to divide them: "Sue and himself," Jude realizes, "had mentally travelled in opposite directions since the tragedy" (*J* 270). Sue comes to feel that "in inhabiting the fleshly tabernacle with which Nature had endowed her she was somehow doing wrong" (*T* 243). Sue's unprecedented grief spawns her newfound conviction that "Arabella's child killing mine was a judgement – the right slaying the wrong"; it is a commentary upon "my badness" (*J* 275, 210). Even as this "despairing self-suppression" suffuses her conversation with Jude – their speech grows as racked and uncertain as his sickly gait – Sue calls her curtailed liberty of expression "self-mastery" (*J* 283, 277).

When the very religious proscriptions that Jude has ceased to obey consume Sue's thought, he forswears them further. "It's no use fighting against God!" she cries in her reactionary desperation, following her announcement that she will return to her first husband, Phillotson, and he replies:

It is only against man and senseless circumstances. ... You make me hate Christianity, or mysticism, or Sacerdotalism, or whatever it may called, if it's that which has caused this deterioration in you. That a woman-poet, a woman seer, a woman whose soul shone like a diamond—whom all the wise of the world would have been proud of, if they could have known you—should degrade herself like this! I am glad I had nothing to do with Divinity—damn glad—if it's going to ruin you in this way! ... How you argued that marriage was only a clumsy contract—which it is—how you showed all the objections to it—the absurdities! If two and two made four when we were happy together, surely they make four now? ... Can this be the girl who brought the Pagan deities into this most Christian city?—who ... quoted Gibbon, and Shelley, and Mill? ... All wrong, all wrong, he said huskily. Error—perversity! It drives me out of my senses. You are my wife! Do you care for him? Do you love him? You know you don't! It will be a fanatic prostitution—! (*J* 269, 276, 283)

Sue demonizes the very feelings that have justified her union with Jude. Now she opts for the ascetic, the self-flagellating suppression of her natural urges, opts for a "fanatic prostitution" of her body, because in her pain she blames her "unlicensed" pleasure and the convictions it

sponsored for the deaths of her children. She cannot accept “man and senseless circumstance,” Hardy’s own tragic antagonists (the social, the existential) as her children’s destroyers – for where is the sense, the redemptive power in that? She cries to Phillotson: “My children – are dead – and it is right that they should be! I am glad – almost. They were sin-begotten. They were sacrificed to teach me how to live! Their death was the first stage of my purification. That’s why they have not died in vain!” (*J* 285). She must be the author of so agonizing a loss; she becomes an Aristotelian theorist of the tragic.

Suffering of Attic proportion attaches Sue to those Christian scruples that she eschewed “in the independent days, when her intellect played like lambent lightning over conventions and formalities which [Jude] at that time respected, though he did not now” (*J* 270). She had been adamant that:

It is none of the natural tragedies of love that’s love’s usual tragedy in civilized life, but a tragedy artificially manufactured for people who in a natural state would find relief in parting! ... I am certain one ought to be allowed to undo what one had done so ignorantly! I daresay it happens to lots of women, only they submit, and I kick... When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what will they say! (*J* 170)

The “natural tragedies” of love involve unwanted partings, sincere losses, Sue’s of her children, Jude’s of her. But the “usual tragedy of civilized life” is gratuitous, “artificially manufactured,” consists in refusal of the “relief” of separation, of the “oughts” of free feeling. Thriving on forced couplings, such manufactured tragedy also drives asunder those who most desire togetherness. Sue has deemed this socially mandated strangulation of one’s feelings, to the benefit of none, akin to the “amputation of a limb,” and yet she now submits, stops kicking – because what she formerly designated “barbarous customs and superstitions” she re-sees as her atonement (*J* 168).

Sue, who used to understand herself “outside all laws except gravitation and germination,” views Little Father Time’s murder-suicide as an indication of God’s law (*J* 111). Following a social excommunication based upon “artificial compulsions” (Jude’s term in Hardy’s manuscript), Sue is overtaken “by an awful conviction that her discourse with the boy [about the family’s troubles] had been the main cause of the tragedy” (*J* 264). Yet for all that his act is read as Hardy’s Malthusian interlude, in which the child determines to decrease the familial population (“done because we are too menny”), this incident is itself a warning against the mis-assumption of personal fault (*J* 264). That *I* am to blame is the logic that overtakes both mother and stepson. A certainty of her own sinfulness colonizes Sue’s mind, and she submits her body to what most repels it on the notion that she now, rightly, subordinates sinful flesh to soulful faith in a proper and penitent manner. That it should feel so forced, so foul and punishing, she now takes as a sign of her perversity; Jude, of course, reads the pains of fanaticism as signs of their perversity, and rejects the notion that a flaw in her nature has wrought her own misery. Sue, however, needs to believe in some affective *hamartia*, guiltiness lodged within her, to erase from view the horrors of human cruelty and cosmic indifference.

*Tess* and *Sue* indict an Aristotelean theory of character that lends itself to such moralization: because “Fate has given us this stab in the back,” Sue rationalizes, we ourselves must have occasioned it (*J* 266). Sue proposes a Christian solution to the crime of “self-delight,” of making “a virtue of joy” that she and Jude have committed: “we should mortify the flesh – the

terrible flesh” (*J* 270, 266). For all that Jude resists her “creed-drunk” ethos, reiterating that “the letter killeth” and that “there's no evil woman in you,” her conviction of their iniquity does pain him to death (*J* 307, 306, 271). *Tess*, too, indicts this “crushing” narrative logic: “all was, alas, worse than vanity – injustice, punishment” (*T* 218). Tess recognizes that the injustice of tragedy is reimagined as Biblical chastisement. Angel’s “view of her deadened her,” and so punishing is this view that even he comes to suspect that his “conventional” thinking constitutes the indefensible cruelty of a forsaken and tragic universe: “God’s *not* in his heaven: All’s *wrong* with the world,” he conjectures irreverently (*T* 179, 199). Thus while the rape of innocent women and the slaughter of innocent children would suffice to destroy characters in Attic drama, in Hardy’s fiction rape and murder-suicide are precursors to their “killing” moralization. It is Tess’ narrator who vociferously reminds us that any number of alternative readings of Tess would have saved her. Similarly, when Sue determines that the stabs of Fate are a commentary upon her character, the widow Edlin recognizes that now “she’s got nobody on her side. The one man who'd be her friend the obstinate creature won't allow to come near her” (*J* 289). Edlin regrets the plot twist that issues from Sue’s new philosophy: “the self-sacrifice of the woman on the altar of what she was pleased to call her principles” (*J* 290). Tragedy forced into an impossible mold – that of poetic justice – announces the end of all joy for Tess, Sue, and Jude.

## Virginia Woolf: Tragic Nature

Virginia Woolf commits lavish attention to the representation of interiority, but far from suggesting that it is subjectivity that pervades all of nature, she pointedly and poignantly confronts character consciousnesses with radically nonhuman alterity. Whereas anti-Darwinian philosophers such as Peirce and Whitehead, as we saw, refute the amorality of the cosmos by infusing the entirety of nature with mind, Woolf's perspectivalism is set against a thoroughly anti-anthropocentric perspective. In representing the natural world, Woolf finds her tragic antagonist: the expansive time of nature that does not "reflect the compass of the soul," but guarantees both the chanciness and finitude of human being (*TL* 128). Indeed, Woolf argues in "On Not Knowing Greek" (1925) that contemporary readers are drawn to the ancient characters of Homer and the Attic tragedians because "they are more aware than we are of a ruthless fate. There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate" (*CR I* 38). Woolf herself animates characters who decipher a ruthless fate in the natural world around them.

In a paradigmatic scene from *The Waves* (1931), for instance, Woolf captures precocious young Neville's response to a murder in the apple orchard. Neville recounts freezing upon the staircase, paralyzed by the image of an "immitigable tree":

I heard about the dead man through the swing-door last night when cook was shoving in and out the dampers. He was found with his throat cut. The apple-tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared; I was unable to lift my foot up the stair. He was found in the gutter. His blood gurgled down the gutter. His jowl was white as a dead codfish. I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, "death among the apple trees" for ever. There were the floating, pale-grey clouds; and the immitigable tree; the implacable tree with its greaved silver bark. The ripple of my life was unavailing. I was unable to pass by. There was an obstacle. "I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle," I said. And the others passed on. But we are doomed, all of us, by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass. (*W* 24-25)

Woolf affords Neville this premonition of mortality, this epiphany of an obstacle both insuperable and inscrutable. Neville remembers halting upon the landing; he is "unable to pass by" once the revelation is made. That which arrests him remains "unintelligible" – no satisfactory explanation can be assigned to it – but a snapshot of the setting in question (as he saw it or imagined it) lodges itself in his consciousness "for ever." He names this visual tableau "death among the apple trees." His image of the landscape is suffused with the fearsomeness and fixity of this violent death and of death per se – "the moon glared" steadily, Neville finds himself immobilized, the leaves, too, are inflexible, and the dead man is rigid. Neville's picture, in fact, concentrates not so much on a deceased fellow creature as on irrevocable destiny. For Neville, this shared and intractable "obstacle" is symbolized by the unyielding environment to which he and the man are exposed; "the immitigable tree, the implacable tree" occasions the brunt of Neville's displeasure. The tree's stark objectivity, its imperviousness to Neville's desires, is precisely what colors his envisioning of the scene with horror. The tree stands unmoved while persons perish. Tellingly, the tree's bark is "greaved," encased in silver armor, a Greek warrior preparing for battle, greaved and not grieved. Eteocles, in Aeschylus' *The Seven Against Thebes*,

commands: “Bring my greaves / to shield me from the lances and the stones” (1.676-7). It is now the greaved apple tree that acts as Neville’s foe and he presages its victory: “we are doomed, all of us, by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree we cannot pass.” Rather than humanize the tree, Neville’s militaristic metaphor attests to its paining otherness.<sup>34</sup>

This is precisely why Woolf praises Hardy as a neo-Greek tragedian, as “the greatest tragic writer among English novelists” – he, too, sets character consciousness against alien, unvanquishable powers (*CR II* 246). Revealing her own commitments as well, Woolf argues in “The Novels of Thomas Hardy” that Hardy “makes us feel that we are backing human nature in an unequal contest” (*CR II* 247). Ours is an unequal contest, Woolf writes, against “Nature as a force,” or in Hardy’s words, against “the eyeless countenance of the mist” (*CR II* 247; 7). Hardy’s phrase signals nature’s want of foresight or special provision for humanity, and comes from his poem “A Sign Seeker.” In its verses, Hardy describes those who continue to believe “that Heaven inscrolls the wrong” of the malicious, those who

rapt to heights of trancelike trust,  
These tokens claim to feel and see,  
Read radiant hints of times to be –  
Of heart to heart returning after dust to dust. (37-40)

But, Hardy writes, “Such scope is granted not to lives like mine... ” (41). Hardy’s tragic novels instead recognize that it is only human “affliction [that] makes opposing forces loom anthropomorphous” (*J* 269). Like Hardy, Woolf sees that “we have time to open our minds wide to beauty and register on top of it the queer sensation – this beauty will continue, and this beauty will flourish whether we behold it or not” (*Essays Vol. 4* 592). Our minds open wide to beauty and to affliction, encountering them in the natural environment, and yet nature has no authorial intentions and exists apart from our human beholding.

Defending Hardy against criticisms of his fiction’s godlessness and wild coincidences, Woolf asserts that he channels that “wild spirit of poetry that saw with intense irony and grimness that no reading of life can possibly outdo the strangeness of life itself, no symbol of caprice and unreason be too extreme to represent the astonishing circumstances of our existence” (*CR II* 257). It is Hardy’s tragic *weltanschauung*, Woolf writes, that shows us the extent to which “human beings are the sport of forces outside themselves,” besieged by caprice and unreason (*CR II* 246). Woolf herself shares Hardy’s anti-Christian and anti-Romantic sentiment in *To the Lighthouse’s* “Time Passes”: “Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacency she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture” (*TL* 134). Both Hardy’s and Woolf’s tragic intuitions center upon a natural world that is, to human consciousness, as Woolf says echoing Hardy, “eyeless and so terrible” (*TL* 135). This is Diderot’s, Hume’s, Darwin’s nature, not Wordsworth’s, not deist Voltaire’s. It is visionless and morally vacuous, communicating to characters that mortality and devastation have no transcendent purpose.

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<sup>34</sup> Woolf herself recounts a nearly identical experience in her autobiographical “A Sketch of the Past,” penned over a decade after *The Waves*: “I overheard my father or mother say that Mr. Valpy had killed himself. The next thing I remember is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr. Valpy’s suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark – it was a moonlit night – in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralyzed” (*MB* 71).

Friedrich Nietzsche, Jane Ellen Harrison, and Henri Bergson, on the contrary, conceive of nature as both a site of capricious change and as a safe haven for the human psyche. Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and Harrison in *Themis: a Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912) see the ancient Greek worship of Dionysus as an acknowledgement of nature's expansive time and perennial mutability, which make for human mortality; yet they understand this Heraclitean continuousness of all life, to which all creatures are returned, to be recuperative, more sustaining than menacing, within the context of Bacchic religion. Harrison writes that "Prof. Bergson has shown us that *durée*, true time, is ceaseless change, which is the very essence of life – which is in fact 'l'Évolution créatrice,' and this is in its very essence one and indivisible" (477). In Nietzsche's and Harrison's thought, pre-classical Dionysian rituals show us the dissolution of the individual into this cyclical, communal, and continually renewing stream of life. Bergson himself is adamant that unpredictable ("creative") novelty is the principle of life – to which Jacques Monod replies that invariant replication, preserving chance mutation, is (CN 116). But Bergson, like Nietzsche and Harrison, and unlike Darwin and Monod, sees spontaneity as spiritually salutary, rendering evolution progressively grander, although not deterministically so. All life, all time, for Bergson, is bound together by the *élan vital*, "one and indivisible," an evolving yet everlasting whole to which human beings belong.

It is the argument of this chapter that Woolf, in the midst of such thought, also accepts chance into her work – but joins the Attic tragedians, Darwin, and Hardy in holding such chance apart from vitalism, idealism, and theism, and from consolatory ritual and myth. Woolf instead weds this new Darwinian chance to Socrates' idea of tragedy as the unforeseeable and wounding dice throw. Woolf's fiction depicts nature's time not as a source of solace for her characters, but as their tragic antagonist: that which assures their lives' brevity and fateful contingencies. Increasingly, however, Woolf is read as expressing Harrisonian views of ritual and tragedy, in which nature is maternal and reassuring, and fosters a sense of dynamic, shared, and lasting being. Woolf is presumed to reprise female-centered, communal rites of renewal within a restorative Dionysian-Bergsonian temporality. Woolf is said to critique Greek tragedy, on the contrary, as the genre of hero-worshipping and war-mongering masculinity, whose protagonists perpetrate familial and political violence. In this vein, Jean Mills reads Woolf as "the female Aeschylus" who exposes and censures such a mentality (GG 105). Mills describes *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Waves* as Woolf's feminist, "Aeschylean trilogy" (GG 108). Sharon Marcus, Sandra D. Shattuck, and Rowena Fowler also explore Woolf's incorporation of a ritualistic collectivity, a version of the Greek tragic chorus, into *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts*. Not only, then, has Mrs. Ramsay been seen as a goddess of Greek myth, an incarnation of Demeter or Aphrodite, but she bears a likeness, these critics contend, to Harrison's pre-Olympian archetypal mother, Themis – who represents perennial life, the fabric of civilization, and the unity of the group, animated by shared custom and emotion. Lee Whitehead likewise associates "pagan god" Augustus Carmichael with the pre-Olympian figure of Orpheus (TL 208). On the one hand, Orpheus stands for Themis' and Dionysus' "religion of rebirth," but on the other hand Orpheus "preached the evil of human sacrifice so effectively that Dionysus ... set his frenzied Maenads upon him" (Whitehead 412, 413). Orpheus comes to denounce Dionysian rites of violent self-dissolution, and yet, like Pentheus in *The Bacchae*, remains one of Dionysus' doubles, a participant in such rites despite himself. Orpheus, on this reading, encompasses a ritual and mythic duality that both Nietzsche and Harrison attribute to Greek drama, and that Woolf's fiction is now said to echo: tragedy as the descendant of Dionysian ritual in which the sacrificial god is dismembered and reincorporated into the

communal, undifferentiated vitality of all life, and tragedy as the inventor of Apollonian *mythos* in which protective artistry aims to justify the sufferings of individual heroes and heroines. Yet is Woolf's view of Greek tragedy really Harrison's, so that it is only such drama's retention of a still Dionysian chorus that Woolf can adopt approvingly? Does Woolf's own tragedy primarily consist in a critique of glorified individualism?

Woolf instead revives the Greek tragedians' chanceful world of individual fragility, and presents her characters' resultant endeavors to take what stands they can against their own destruction, to carve out brief, safe intervals in which they are released from fate's clutches. Albert Camus, as we will see, contends that this very practice – learning one's limits, facing not denying them, and yet forging such a means of going on – is “the highest lesson of the tragic universe” (*LCE* 305). In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Mrs. Ramsay finds such a “platform of stability” as “a wedge-shaped core of darkness” and in associating herself with the perennial lighthouse beam (*TL* 63, 62). She imaginatively turns the tables for a moment, apportioning more-than-human time to herself – without letting her personhood be swept away with it. It is the latter experience that threatens Bernard in *The Waves*, the disappearance of his “I” into eyeless nature's larger life, and from which he recoils, seeking a literary language that neither denies the indomitability of onrushing nature nor is silenced by it. In this way, Bernard comes to cultivate the scaled-down staying power that moments of human communion afford him, as Mrs. Ramsay also does. Mrs. Ramsay disseminates “this peace, this rest” that she has achieved alone – a feeling of permanence, despite nature's reminders that human lives have little temporal duration – among family and friends (*TL* 63). Lily, too, finds herself “crediting the world with a power which she had not suspected – that one could walk away down that long gallery not alone any more but arm in arm with somebody” (*TL* 54). Lily and Bernard then seek to memorialize such moments in their art, to “make of some scene, or meeting of people (all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers, and love plays” (*TL* 192). They celebrate and rely upon these “moment[s] of friendship and liking – which survived, after all these years complete” (*TL* 160). Woolf, too, evokes her indebtedness to such unanticipated, heightened interludes of feeling and writes of the aesthetic they foster:

I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion – it is irrational; it will not stand argument – that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene. (*MB* 142)

These most robust and memorable flashes of being, flares of cohesive and explicable reality, stand opposed to life's crushing misfortunes, those that mystify and overthrow vivid consciousness. Between such extremes lies what Woolf describes as the enveloping “cotton wool” of “non-being,” which creates muted, leaden, diminished experience (*MB* 71). And beyond both “shocks” of being and this muffled non-being stands the realm of entirely nonhuman being. Woolf captures its myriad manifestations via renderings of the natural landscape – itself delivering shocks of beauty and affliction, galvanizing delight and paralysis both, signaling the precariousness of even the most resplendent human scenes, signaling human limitation and its own limitlessness.

## Ritual Nature

Before turning to Woolf's representation of incommensurate human and nonhuman time scales, and of characters who, reading no anthropocentric narrative in the natural world, envision no salvific narratives for themselves, let us consider the very different interpretations of nature and tragedy that obtain in the decades prior to Woolf's writing. Late nineteenth-century anthropology turned toward a study of wildness and mutability in ancient Greek thought, away from the sedate and sanitized Hellenism that prized permanent and idealized forms. Picturing violent and ecstatic flux at the heart of the ancient rites of Dionysus, Nietzsche's philosophy and Harrison's anthropology nonetheless rendered the natural world of ritual, in all its volatility, life-affirming, such that a no-holds-barred endorsement of existence should be possible. Nietzsche and Harrison believed that Greek tragedy originated in this cultic worship of Dionysus. To varying degrees, however, as we will see, Harrison, fellow anthropologist Gilbert Murray, and Nietzsche held that tragedy parted ways from ritual. Focused on individual not communal fates, ancient tragedy, in Nietzsche's view, developed a wholly new means of championing destiny. Yet Nietzsche discarded this sanguine view of Greek drama, to then replace it with his own triumphant "tragic-Dionysian state" (WP 453). Nietzsche ultimately sought to transform tragedy into fortifying counter-tragic philosophy – *amor fati*, he called it – an aim that Woolf does not share. Woolf sounds a different cry: the "it is enough!" that attaches to fleeting moments of affirmation, those which reconcile characters to an otherwise perilous and redoubtable fate.

### *Harrison's Ritual*

Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928) established and steered the anthropological society now known as the Cambridge Ritualists. Treating Greek religion and society in concert, Harrison combined and advanced the developing fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology; she was both philologist and archeologist as well, and brought together fellow classicists Gilbert Murray and Francis M. Cornford. Woolf keenly admired Harrison, read, knew, corresponded with and published her, and paid tribute to her in *A Room of One's Own*. In her recent study of Harrison and Woolf, Jean Mills describes Harrison's work as follows:

The introduction of the theory of a pre-classical culture based on women that is communal and collective in nature is among her greatest contributions as a Ritualist, along with her articulation of Dionysus as a Year-Spirit or *eniautos daimon* rather than as a drunken, pot-bellied Bacchus. She also portrayed and outlined the goddess Themis as representative of *polis*, as the integument or fabric of society itself, especially when characterized by a sense of community. Each of these new ideas was considered radical and controversial as her work shifted the focus in the Classics away from philology and the myths of a pantheon of named and individuated gods to the communal, women-guided ritual practices of ancient Greek culture. (7)

In Harrison's view, precisely the Attic tragedians' recourse to legendary epic heroes and Olympian gods constituted the denial of this earlier, ritual culture that celebrated communal and matrifocal rites. To comprehend such rites, Harrison argued, we must imagine not "the individual soul" but "that thing at once more primitive and perhaps therefore more complex – the group-

soul” (472). From this collectivity “the god is projected, not by the thinking or the feeling of one man, but by such a part of his thinking and feeling as he has in common with other men, such emotions and ideas as are represented by his customs and enshrined in his language” (472). This shared tissue of emotion and habit is the Themis of ritual culture; Dionysus is its half mortal and half divinized “projection of group-unity” (48). Dionysus is not fully anthropomorphic, is not a celestial king perched on high, but an earthly *daimon*, a spirit of fertility, who perishes and returns annually. He represents the religious hope of a totemistic community bound to the earth and its life cycles: “Dionysos is a daimon, he is *the* daimon, of death and resurrection, of reincarnation, of the *renouveau* of the spring, and the *renouveau*, this reincarnation, was of man as well as of nature” (339).

Harrison locates the origins of tragedy in these rites of springtime regeneration and tribal initiation: “the Dithyramb, from which the drama arose, was also a *dromenon* [ritual enactment] of the New Birth” (xi). Specifically it is in the *mythos*, in the plot of such ritual, that Harrison claims to find the evolutionary link, the common structure, binding Dionysian ritual to Greek tragedy. *Mythos* proper, Harrison says, originates with the Bacchic rites. *Mythos* is the narrative, the set of utterances, that accompanies the physical movements of the *dromenon*; yet tragedy inherits the word *mythos* to describe its own narrative arcs, and Harrison contends that the life story of Dionysus, repetitive and ever-same, passes its *form* to these later plots that concern a far more varied cast of characters:

The *mythos*, the plot which is the life-history of an Euniautos-daimon, whether performed in winter, spring, summer or autumn, is thus doomed by its monotony to sterility. What is wanted is material cast in less rigid mold .... The dithyramb, which was but the periodic festival of the spring *renouveau*, broke and blossomed so swiftly into the Attic drama because it found such plots to hand; in a word – *the forms of Attic drama are the forms of the life-history of an Euniautos-daimon; the content is the infinite variety of free and individualized heroic saga – in the largest sense of the word ‘Homer.’* (334)

This shift from Dionysus and his doubles to a profusion of Ionian heroes and Olympian divinities signifies, to Harrison, a decided cultural transformation. Citing her agreement with Nietzsche, Harrison writes that “Apollo has more in him of the sun and the day, of order and light and reason, Dionysos more of the earth and the moon, of the divinity of night and dreams. Moreover, Apollo is a man's life, separate from the rest of nature, a purely human accomplishment; Dionysos is a man's life as one with nature, a communion not a segregation” (443). Harrison often speaks appreciatively of Nietzsche’s distinction between Dionysian and Olympian religions:

We touch on the very heart and secret of the difference between the Olympian and the mystery-god, between Apollo and Zeus on the one hand and Dionysos on the other: a difference, the real significance of which was long ago, with the instinct of genius, divined by Nietzsche. The Olympian has clear form, he is the *'principium individuationis'* incarnate; he can be thought, hence his calm, his *sophrosyne*. The mystery-god is the life of the whole of things, he can only be felt – as soon as he is thought and individualized he passes, as Diosysos had to pass, into the thin, rare ether of the Olympian. The Olympians are of conscious

thinking, divided, distinct, departmental; the mystery-god is the impulse of life through all things, perennial, indivisible. (476)

For Harrison, such merging with the movement of the seasons, a sense of belonging to cyclical time, is essential to Bacchic religion, whereas the denial of time's passing is the Olympian stance: "all life and that which is life and reality – Change and Movement – the Olympian renounces. Instead he chooses Deathlessness and Immutability – a seeming Immortality which is really the denial of life, for life is change" (468).

Harrison sees in the Olympians the projection of a new Themis, a "form of society with which we are ourselves most familiar, the patriarchal family," which accompanies profoundly altered views of nature and divinity (490). Whereas Bacchic nature was terrific and unfathomed, and ritual sought both to propitiate and to harness its powers, the supernatural and changeless Olympians begin to suggest, in Harrison's view, that natural events are the expression of divine will, even of divine morality:

Man's first dream of a god began, as we saw, in his reaction towards life-forces not understood. Here again we begin with the recognition of, or rather the emotion towards, a truth. There *is* a mystery in life, life itself which we do not understand, and we may, if we choose, call that mystery by the name of god, but at the other end of the chain of evolution there is another thing, a late human product which we call goodness. By a desperate effort of imagination we try to link the two; we deny evolution and say that the elementary push of life is from the beginning 'good,' that God through all his chequered career is immutably moral, and we land ourselves in a quagmire of determinism and teleology. Or, if we are Greeks, we invent a Zeus, who is Father and Counselor and yet remains an automatic, explosive thunderstorm. (478)

Harrison is adamant that the brute power of the elements – the automatic and insentient, explosive, chance thunderstorm – should not be viewed as the divine communiqué of any Father or Counselor. She opposes the view that nature is shot through with "determinism and teleology." Harrison writes that to set Themis, Social Order, as the progenitor of Dike, Natural Order, is to deny the order in which evolution itself occurs, and to miscast natural menaces and bounties as so many signs of *a priori* design. Harrison does not, then, see the gods of Greek tragedy as the incarnation of mutable fortune, but as the incipient representation of a theistic creationism. Tragedy, in Harrison's view, takes the skeletal form of the life of Dionysus, but sets this infrastructure within a wholly different context – one of individuation and patriarchy, in which male violence rains down from the anthropomorphized sky and dominates the earth. Harrison much prefers the Dike and Themis of ritual, wherein, in her estimation, nature is not the reflection of God-given edicts and values – but the terrestrial engine of all life, vital force and *durée*, that which human communities attempt to honor and to rejoin, and in conjunction with which they develop their mythologies.

### *Murray's Tragedy*

In *Themis*, Harrison also includes Gilbert Murray's "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek tragedy." In agreement with Harrison, Murray seeks to further demonstrate

the kinship between the rites of Dionysus and Greek tragic drama. Yet while Harrison emphasizes the discontinuity between ritual and tragic worldviews, arguing that tragedies glorify the lone individual's struggle, Murray pursues with care the idea that the formal staples of ritual survive into and structure the Greek plays – even continue to dictate the plays' meaning, one of ritual rebirth. Murray's excursus evidences the anthropological impulse to discover foundational archetypes “preserved in” later cultural artifacts – the survivals, remnants, and traces of a past that is never entirely gone. Thus Murray's grounding premise is that “Tragedy is in origin a Ritual Dance, a *Sacer Ludus*,” “that of Dionysus” (340). Walking in Harrison's footsteps, Murray contends that tragedy therefore “regards Dionysus, in this connection, as the spirit of the Dithyramb or Spring *Drômenon* ... an ‘Eunautos-Daimon,’ who represents the cyclic death and rebirth of the world, including the rebirth of the tribe by the return of the heroes or dead ancestors” (341).

Acknowledging that tragedy's “content has strayed far from Dionysus,” Murray proceeds to show the ways in which the “forms of tragedy retain clear traces of the original drama of the Death and Rebirth of the Year Spirit” (342). Murray first enumerates the six components of the Dionysian ritual itself:

1. An *Agon* or Contest, the Year against its enemy, Light against Darkness, Summer against Winter.
2. A *Pathos* of the Year-Daimon, generally a ritual or sacrificial death, in which Adonis or Attis is slain by the tabu animal, the Pharmakos stoned, Osiris, Dionysus, Pentheus, Orpheus, Hippolytus torn to pieces ....
3. A *Messenger*. For this Pathos seems seldom or never to be actually performed under the eyes of the audience. (The reason of this is not hard to suggest.) It is announced by a messenger. ‘The news comes’ that Pan the Great, Thammuz, Adonis, Osiris is dead, and the dead body is often brought in on a bier. This leads to
4. A *Threnos* or Lamentation. Specially characteristic, however, is a clash of contrary emotions, the death of the old being also the triumph of the new ....
- 5 and 6. An *Anagnorisis* – discovery or recognition of the slain and mutilated Daimon, followed by his Resurrection or Apotheosis or, in some sense, his Epiphany in glory. This I shall call by the general name *Theophany*. It naturally goes with a *Peripeteia* or extreme change of feeling from grief to joy. (343-344)

Of signal importance is that death and dismemberment occur in the service of – are necessary to – resurrection and rebirth. The *anagnorisis*, the recognition of the loss of the god himself, gives way to the assurance of his restoration. Thus the course of reversal, of *peripeteia*, is from grief to joy, and the purpose of ritual is theophany, celebration of the endless life of Dionysus.

When tragedies are then staged during the celebration of the City Dionysia in classical Athens, they are distinguished from and followed by a satyr-play.<sup>35</sup> Murray argues that with the increasing demarcation between these two kinds of drama – which he suggests were both the

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<sup>35</sup> In the second edition of *Themis* (1927), Murray also mentions Francis Cornford's study of Dionysian rites' relation to the development and form of comedy, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*.

offspring of Dionysian rites and make most sense together – “the cutting-off of the Satyr-play left the tragic trilogy without its proper close.” The satyr-play, Murray contends, held the dénouement of the Bacchic rites: “the Satyr-play, coming at the end of the tetralogy, represented the joyous arrival of the Reliving Dionysus and his rout of attendant daimones at the end of the Sacer Ludus” (345, 344). Seeing the problem of tragedy as the problem of retaining this conclusion, ritual theophany, Murray writes:

What was it [tragedy] to do? Should it end with a threnos and trust for its theophany to the distinct and irrelevant Satyr-play which happened to follow? Or should it ignore the Satyr-play and make a theophany of its own? Both types of tragedy occur, but gradually the second tends to predominate. ... Secondly, what is to happen to the Anagnorisis and Peripeteia? Their proper place is, as it were, transitional from the Threnos of tragedy to the Theophany of the Satyr-play; if anything, they go rather with the Satyrs. (345)

Here is another decidedly affirmative reading of tragedy, in which its threnos, its lamentation, must never be separate from its theophany, its soothing assurance of the eternal life of Dionysus.

In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, then, the sole extant play featuring the god himself, Murray is pleased to find, in his view, a perfect embodiment of such triumphant rebirth:

Now, when we remember that Pentheus is only another form of Dionysus himself – like Zagreus, Orpheus, Osiris and the other daimons who are torn in pieces and put together again – we can see that the *Bacchae* is simply the old Sacer Ludus itself, scarcely changed at all, except for the doubling of the hero into himself and his enemy. We have the whole sequence: Agon, Pathos and Messenger, Threnos, Anagnorisis and Peripeteia, and Epiphany. The daimon is fought against, torn to pieces, announced as dead, wept for, collected and recognized, and revealed in his new divine life. The *Bacchae* is a most instructive instance of the formation of drama out of ritual. It shows us how slight a step was necessary for Thespis or another to turn the Year-Ritual into real drama. (346)

Murray also acknowledges and accounts for variations upon this structure. That is, he registers that “drama has gained ground upon ritual. Hippolytus has been made a mortal man. And we now have a Theophany with Artemis immortal in the air and Hippolytus dying on the earth” (346). Or further from ritual still: “in the *Andromache* the persons are all varied: it is Peleus and Menelaus who have the contest; it is Neoptolemus who is slain and mourned; it is Thetis who appears as divine” (347). It is equally the case that “there are some plays in which our supposed Year-daimon makes his epiphany not as a celestial god but as a ghost or a hero returned from the grave” (350)

Indeed Murray traces the permutations of the ritual form in each of the plays and fragments of Aeschylus and Euripides, and in much of Sophocles. He asks why it is that Euripides is “ridiculed by comedy for his use of the *Deus ex machina*, if Aeschylus really used such epiphanies as much or more?” (351). Murray argues that the answer lies in Euripides’ bold and pointed stagecraft, mechanically inserting the gods on high at the close of myriad plays. In Murray’s view, Euripides is mocked for the bluntness of his return to ritual, for “particularly smooth and effective machinery” that is deployed in order “(1) to console griefs and reconcile

enmities and justify *tant bien que mal* the ways of the gods, and (2) to expound the Aition [explanation of the founding of a rite or custom] of the play, and the future fates of the characters” (351). It seems contestable, however, that the often morally dubious fiats of the gods justify their ways to men or allay the pain of all that has preceded their appearance on stage. The notably fickle pantheon of Euripides might equally be read as the embodiment of chance, at odds with human plans and purposes. Even the *Bacchae*, to play devil’s advocate, might be read as pure critique of a Dionysus who re-introduces into the polis all the destructive violence of his mystery cult. Yet Murray maintains that “it is in plays of Euripides, and most of all in the very latest of his plays, that we find in most perfect and clear-cut outline the whole sequence of Contest, Tearing-asunder, Messenger, Lamentation, Discovery, Recognition, and Resurrection which constituted the original Dionysus-mystery” (362).

Less concerned than Harrison with collectivity versus individualism, matriarchy versus patriarchy, Murray signally re-imbues the Greek plays with the epiphanic comfort he claims for earlier ritual. Yet directly following the Attic tragedians themselves, Plato and Aristotle, on the contrary, reject what they take to be a very different religiosity at the heart of tragic drama. While Murray fits the gods of tragedy into anthropology’s vision of regenerative ritual and redemptive Dionysus, Plato and Aristotle view these same gods as manifestations of chance, and labor to discard them in favor of rationality.

### *Nietzsche’s Approaches to Loving Fate*

Nietzsche writes prior to Harrison and to Murray – and is theorist and philosopher rather than anthropologist – but he adopts the widest swath of views concerning ritual, tragedy, nature, and narrative, and that is why we treat him last. Nietzsche’s first account of Greek drama appears in *The Birth of Tragedy*. He, too, suggests that the Greek tragic chorus is originally comprised of satyrs who represent Dionysus in the springtime ritual of the Dithyramb. This band of satyrs, he argues, rouses both tragedy’s audience and dramatic characters to desire self-dissolution – re-immersion within the totality of undifferentiated life. The satyrs of the Greek tragic chorus, says Nietzsche, fleetingly rekindle the infectious ecstasies of the Dionysian mysteries. They begin “severed from the eternal flux and individuated” (Dienstag 169). They then achieve liberating intoxication and are “torn to pieces and reunited with the whole” (Dienstag 170).

Yet the culture of tragedy is not the culture of ritual. Nietzsche would agree with Harrison that Dionysus has ceased to provide succor. Nietzsche concludes that when the satyrs’ (and audience’s and characters’) ecstatic trance ceases, life-negating sorrow awaits them. They find themselves exiled from the totality of nature. At a remove from communal, ritualistic practices, they experience Dionysian temporality as menacing – it now represents an eternity no longer theirs. Nietzsche theorizes that it is in response to this loss of temporal expansiveness that tragedy develops its compensatory “Apollonian” *mythos*: “the Apollonian aspects of the mask – are necessary effects of a glance into the inside and terrors of nature; as it were, luminous spots to cure eyes damaged by gruesome night” (*B* 67). Tragic drama’s *modus operandi*, Nietzsche contends, is to hide the “gruesome night” of a Dionysian nature that now terrifies individuated consciousness. Bernard Reginster describes Nietzsche’s view as follows:

The lesson of this tragedy ... is that “wisdom, and particularly Dionysian wisdom, is an unnatural abomination” (*ibid.*), which must be “transfigured” by Apollonian illusion, a transfiguration that involves, as in the case of Oedipus himself, a kind

of voluntary blindness. ... Tragic wisdom, at that early stage, thus prescribes eschewing the Dionysian depths and remaining at the Apollonian surface with its beautiful appearances – being, in other words, “superficial – *out of profundity*” (GS, Preface 4). (248)

Here Oedipus’ blindness is the figure for the curative concealments of art; Oedipus, in Reginster’s reading, shields himself from beholding further horrors. Now that boundless Dionysian collectivity cannot be experienced on any permanent basis, it is Apollonian dreamscape, elaborate fantasy, that solves the problem of suffering by commuting the agonies of individuation into beautiful form, into life-affirming story.

Thus Nietzsche establishes fictional *mythos* as the new purveyor of consolation, because real-life nature has become the site of “terrors.” And it is out of this account of the origin and function of ancient tragedy that Nietzsche develops his “literary” approach to life as a whole: “*What one should learn from artists.* – How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not?” (GS 239). Nietzsche suggests that we each become – given his early theory of tragedy – the tragic “poets of our life,” writers of our own transformative *mythos* (GS 240). Nietzsche commits to literary self-fashioning, to narrative’s powerful justificatory arsenal – for life stories can construe any character’s or man’s prior sufferings as necessary to and inseparable from his future glory. *The Gay Science* (1882) signally reprises the lexicon of *The Birth of Tragedy*: “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth!” (GS 223). Martha Nussbaum reads Nietzsche in this way, evidencing his late 1886 draft for a revised preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* in which he calls upon “Art as the *redemption of the sufferer* – as the way to states in which suffering is willed, transfigured, deified, where suffering is a form of great delight” (WP 452).<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum remarks that in this fragment Nietzsche is well aware that *The Birth* “portrays the world of nature as ‘false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning’ (WP 853)” (“Transfigurations” 99). Nietzsche’s own philosophy then reflects the very panacea he attributes to tragic drama: to fashion, as Nussbaum puts it, “a meaning where nature herself does not supply one” (“Transfigurations” 99). Alexander Nehamas also contends that Nietzsche’s theory of identity dovetails with this view of art. We have no *a priori* essence in Nietzsche; instead, every iota of our experience is essential to our character. To wish to revoke any one detail of our past is to wish to cancel our identity in its entirety. But to affirm any one detail of our experience is to embrace our life in its entirety. Our happiness is native to a self that is the accumulation of *all* that has befallen it – our happiness is necessarily the product of our griefs and hardships as well, and should be narrated to emphasize this interdependence. Thus for Nehamas Nietzsche’s “affirmation does not require that I abandon the standards by which I find them [my sufferings] detestable and horrible. It only demands that I manage to ‘redeem’ them, for example by creating a context in which they precisely cease to be detestable and horrible” (220).

Yet Nietzsche himself comes to doubt that these artistic ministrations can sufficiently hide from view the pains of individual self-awareness. Nietzsche questions whether the anguish that tragic characters and audiences experience in relation to nature and their individual finitude can be eclipsed by the creation of heroic plots and Olympian gods, by the creation of recuperative storylines. As Joshua Dienstag writes of Nietzsche’s second, far less cheerful view of Greek tragedy:

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<sup>36</sup> See Nussbaum, “The Transfigurations of Intoxication: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Dionysus.”

The ravages of time could not be cured or compensated through tragedy, only understood .... [T]ragedy simply serves to lay bare for us the horrible situation of human existence that the pre-Socratic philosophers describe, a situation from which our minds would otherwise flee: “the hero of tragedy does not prove himself ... in a struggle against fate, just as little does he suffer what he deserves. Rather, blind and with covered head, he falls to his ruin: and his desolate but noble burden with which he remains standing in the presence of this well-known world of terrors presses itself like a thorn in our soul” (*KGW* 3:2:38). (169)

This is Nietzsche’s strikingly revised reading of the tragic hero. Oedipus now falls to his ruin blindly, unknowingly and undeservedly, and his literal blindness does not symbolize his protection from outside terrors. It instead marks the very fact that he has known them – has registered their horror by gouging out his eyes. Oedipus has not been able to elude this nightmare world, in Nietzsche’s new reading, and must endure the continuous, unmitigated wrenching of his soul – which in turn wrenches ours.

Nietzsche comes to re-characterize the Olympian divinities as well. He no longer associates them with the allocation of glorious fates – no longer reads them as the authors of narratives in which heroes prove themselves or deserve their punishments. Nietzsche now associates the Olympians with the crushing “realm of chance,” with the blind striking down of character. In *Daybreak* (1881), Nietzsche writes of such chance and the gods:

... everything happens senselessly, things come to pass without anyone's being able to say why or wherefore. – We stand in fear of this mighty realm of the great cosmic stupidity, for in most cases we experience it only when it falls like a slate from the roof on to that other world of purposes and intentions and strikes some treasured purpose of ours dead. ... The Greeks called this realm of the incalculable and of sublime eternal narrow-mindedness *Moirā*, and set it around their gods as the horizon beyond which they could neither see nor exert influence. (80)

Destiny is no longer heroic and beautiful, but the irreversible bad luck that frustrates “some treasured purpose.” Resurrected Dionysius, whose worshippers were to be, like him, reunited with the unending continuousness of life, has become, not even the glorious Zeus or Athena of tragic theophany, but the puppet of the “the cosmic stupidity,” of incalculable *tuchē*. Ian Hacking describes Nietzsche’s view of tragedy and chance as follows: “Giles Deleuze has a succinct summary of one of Nietzsche’s thoughts here. The dice of creation ‘thrown once are the affirmation of chance, the combination which they form on falling is the affirmation of necessity ... What Nietzsche calls necessity (destiny) is thus never the abolition but rather the combination of chance itself’” (147-148).

In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche proceeds to characterize Christianity as the fullest realization of the impulse to reclaim design from chance – to make it design, at least, that human beings can “neither see nor ... influence.” In Nietzsche’s view, Christianity insists “that the Almighty ‘realm of stupidity’ was not as stupid as it looked, but it was *we*, rather, who were stupid in failing to see that behind it there stood our dear God who, though his ways were dark, strange and crooked,

would in the end ‘bring all glory’” (81). Unreason, Nietzsche says, is now the proof of superior and supreme reason:

This new fable of a loving God who had hitherto been mistaken for a race of giants or for Moira and who himself span out purposes and nets more refined even than those produced by our own understanding – so that they *had* to seem incomprehensible, indeed unreasonable to it – this fable represented so bold an inversion and so daring a paradox that the ancient world, grown over-refined could not resist it, no matter how mad and *contradictory* this thing might sound. (81)

Nietzsche therefore leaves behind his own theory of tragic art (and of art per se) as Apollonian “cover-up” – for it too much resembles the rationalization of chance that is Christianity – and undertakes a revaluation of the Dionysian itself. Now articulating the meaning of tragedy for a third time, late Nietzsche comes to posit that individual human psyches *do* relish the ceaseless, the perilous, the unpredictable flux and flow of existence. It is not the gods of chance who must be transformed into the God of wisdom and love, but terrestrial chance itself that must be loved. The Dionysian nature that proved so life-affirming in early Greek ritual, as Nietzsche, Harrison, and Murray envisioned it, had become the terrifying existential substrate of tragic art – the terrifying *raison d’être* of all art in Nietzsche’s view – but he now dismisses the resultant “tragic-Dionysian” wisdom that whispers that only “as an aesthetic phenomenon” is existence “bearable for us” and labors for “a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is” (WP 453, GS 163, WP 530). He will not hide or counteract the world’s “well-known terrors” – he will deny their power to terrify. He will abolish the desire to abolish them.

According to Reginster, Nietzsche goes about this by determining that our prevalent Western values – a hatred of time, change, and suffering, the prizing of compassion, the hedonistic definition of happiness as the elimination of pain – are what keep us in misery and are therefore life-negating (159-162). These values, that is, cannot be realized in life, afterlives have been discredited, and unfulfilled desire for them leads us to loathe the world as it is. Thus Nietzsche re-characterizes human psychology itself – and therefore the values that spring from it. He assigns to human beings a second-order desire for obstacles to the fulfillment of our first-order desires; accidents that frustrate our hopes nourish a stimulated character, strong, active, replete with desire (Reginster 126). Nietzsche elects to valorize Dionysian becoming over Apollonian being and develops his ethics of power: of the inherent gratification that attaches to striving and strife. Nietzsche reaches a new, Dionysian understanding of *amor fati*: we can love the very process of overcoming impediments to our most cherished objectives, of being thrown into the rough waters of life. We can love this suffering in its own right. Nietzsche’s new tragic hero is doomed only because he is eventually, laudably, attracted to a fatal portion of suffering. Nietzsche, Reginster argues, adopts a new and more radical theory of art: he considers a relish for creativity to be the proof of recalibrated values, because creativity itself craves its struggles, and is tragic because it meets with inevitable failure as its daring escalates (246-248). In Nietzsche’s final apology for the tragic, therefore, suffering does not even provoke lamentation because our biological constitution hungers for it. Suffering becomes a badge of honor, a sign of character fulfilled.

If Schopenhauer encouraged the quieting of the will, the cessation of desire, in order to diminish life’s pains, Nietzsche wishes to resist this quietism and to rescue desire – yet in order

to do so, he must will suffering itself. Thus the herald of modernism, who curses Socratic rationalism, scientific optimism, and Christian sin – who wishes to refute Schopenhauer’s argument for resignation and to ensure the world’s endorsement once and for all – cannot live with suffering as we know it. Nietzsche first reads Greek tragedy as the epitome of mitigation – consoling us for this-worldly ills via transformative art. When he then ceases to believe that ancient drama proffered such palliatives – and does not want to peddle “metaphysical comfort” himself – he revalues the very Dionysian nature whose terrors he had exposed (*BW* 26). Nietzsche revalues our vulnerability to loss so entirely that mitigation ceases to be necessary.

### *The Origins of Tragedy Revisited*

Sixty years after *Themis*, Jean-Pierre Vernant in the first volume of *Myth et Tragédie en Grèce Ancienne* (1972) continues to profess, in agreement with Harrison, that ritual and tragedy are fundamentally different in worldview. But he also denies the argument of descent from one to the other. In response to the longstanding “search for the umbilical cord linking tragedy with its religious matrix,” Vernant writes in “The God of Tragic Fiction,” a title which refers to Dionysus:

... there naturally arises the question of the internal link that it would be normal to expect to find between the tragic drama presented on the stage and the religious world of the Dionysiac cult to which the theater was so manifestly attached. It does seem surprising that, whether one thinks of themes or the texture of the work or the unfolding of the spectacle, tragedy in its true form – that is to say in fifth-century Athens – reflects nothing that particularly relates to this god who stands somewhat apart in the Greek pantheon. Dionysus embodies not self-control, moderation, the recognition of one's limits, but the quest for divine madness and ecstatic possession, nostalgia for a fulfillment from elsewhere; not stability and order, but the exceptional benefits of a kind of magic, escape toward a different horizon. He is a god whose elusive countenance, though close at hand, leads his devotees along the paths of otherness, opening up the way to a type of religious experience that is virtually unique to paganism, radical self-disorientation. Yet it was not to the mythical tradition relating to this unusual god – his passions, his wanderings, his mysteries, and his triumph – that tragic poets turned for their inspiration. With very few exceptions, one being Euripides' *Bacchae*, all the tragedies take as their subject heroic legends with which epic had made every Greek familiar and that, strictly speaking, had nothing to do with Dionysus. (182-183)

It is Dionysus’ “divine madness” and promise of “radical self-disorientation” and limitlessness that Nietzsche locates in the satyrs of the early tragic chorus. Contra Nietzsche, however, Vernant does not consider the passions of Dionysus to be the lost Eden that in turn engenders compensatory tragic *mythos*. Contra Murray, too, Vernant does not find the structures, the triumphs of Dionysian rites, to be the scaffolding upon which the plays are built. He instead sees “the development of what may be called a tragic consciousness,” in which “man and his actions were presented, in tragedy’s own peculiar perspective, not as stable realities that could be placed, defined, and judged, but as problems, unanswerable questions” (186). Vernant concludes:

The decisive fact is that both the evidence that allows us to trace the development of tragedy in the late sixth and early fifth centuries and the analysis of the great works that come down to us from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides demonstrate clearly that tragedy was, in the strongest sense of the term, an invention. To understand it, we should evoke its origins – with all due prudence – only in order to better to gauge its innovatory aspects, the discontinuities and breaks with both religious practices and more ancient poetic forms. The “truth” of tragedy is not to be found in obscure, more or less “primitive” or “mystical” past secretly haunting the theater stage. (185)

Woolf herself might agree. When she speaks of Homer and the tragedians in “On Not Knowing Greek” (1925), she opens her essay with the assertion that religious comfort and tragedy are antitheses: “it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of ... the Christianity and its consolations of our own age” (*CR I* 38).<sup>37</sup>

Woolf, alongside F. L. Lucas and Bertrand Russell, hews to the existentially bleak Greek tragic vision which Nietzsche is at pains to banish – views tragedy apart from any primitive and mystical, or mythical comforts. Sixty years after Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), Bernard Williams theorizes this same “Greekness” that returns to the present day. That is, he makes the case for a tragic Greek *weltanschauung* that is distinct from both ritual antecedents and monotheistic and rationalist successors, and that saliently reemerges with modernism. He writes in *Shame and Necessity* (1993) that the briefly appearing Greek tragic outlook, which did not present the natural world as a power for us to emulate ritualistically, or as the carrier of a metaphysical destiny wrought expressly for us, most closely resembles the secular vantage point of the twentieth century:

Plato Aristotle, Kant, Hegel are all on the same side, all believing in one way or another that the universe or history or the structure of human reason can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations. ... [Yet] we are in an ethical condition that lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and its Hegelian legacies. ... In important ways, we are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime. More particularly, we are like those who, from the fifth century and earlier, have left us traces of a

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<sup>37</sup> Throughout her life, Woolf turns and returns to the Greeks. She documents her early reading of the tragedians in her diaries and letters (what pride and pleasure she takes in it), confides her childhood sexual abuse to her Greek tutor, classicist Janet Case, and composes her own essays on Homer, the tragedians, and Plato (“On Not Knowing Greek,” “The Perfect Language”). Woolf read and admires Harrison’s scholarship, and travels to Greece. She analyzes contemporary English translations of the Greek tragedians, and performs her own translation work: pastes the Greek text of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* into a notebook in which she makes a “complete edition, text, translation & notes of my own; mostly copied from Verrall; but carefully gone into by me” (*D II* 215). Woolf keeps two such notebooks, on Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi* (1907) and *Agamemnon* (1922). For analyses of these notebooks and for commentary on Woolf’s learning of Greek, Greek and Latin in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century education and culture, and the gender politics of studying the classics, see Yopie Prins, “OTOTOTOI: Virginia Woolf and ‘The Naked Cry’ of Cassandra”; Jean Mills, *Virginia Woolf, Jane Ellen Harrison, and the Spirit of Modernism Classicism*; Denise McCoskey and Mary Corbett, “Virginia Woolf, Richard Jebb, and Sophocles’ *Antigone*”; Theodore Koulouris, *Hellenism and Loss in the Work of Virginia Woolf*; Emily Delgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World*.

consciousness that had not been touched by Plato's and Aristotle's attempts to make our ethical relations to the world fully intelligible. (163, 166)

While for Harrison, then, it is ritual that proclaims the amoral mutability and regenerative persistence of nature, and drama that commences down the road of fixed, anthropocentric meanings encrypted in nature, we can also make the opposite case: that ritual, with its regular forms, aimed to stabilize change, to make theophany of it, whereas tragedy conveyed ungovernable mutability, that which no magic could contain, no identification with community or encircling nature could control. Nor could rationalism and a new theism make "fully intelligible" chance necessities. In Woolf, we have this tragic *threnos* for the mortal individual – which is not commuted into redemptive epiphany.

Not "*Amor fati*" but "It is enough!"

Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* renounce both the mythic and ritual consolations so often misattributed to ancient drama. Woolf instead gives expression to a tragic, immitigable temporality in her novels.<sup>38</sup> Woolf shares Bertrand Russell's view of time as a succession of discrete instants, possessed of objective, abstract continuity and independent of human existence, onto which subjective experiences may be mapped.<sup>39</sup> Russell's and Woolf's logical time could, as Ann Banfield writes, "be summarized as 'Greek,' understood as non-Heraclitian" (66). Beats of past time, in their immobility, have all the mausoleum-like stillness of those occurrences locked in place when Zeus nods "yes," however happenstance his gesture, to goddess Necessity. Such a permanent, irrevocable march of instants is severed from Christian salvific narrative. It is stripped of Aristotle's character-based teleology, in which heroes fall for a reason native to themselves – and it is stripped of early Nietzsche's Apollonian *mythos* in which carefully crafted plot succeeds in championing the sufferings of superior men and women.

In the midst of his final, famed monologue in *The Waves*, Bernard comes face to face with such time, with its immovable being, as of things past. He repeatedly evokes a willow tree that has arrested his interest since childhood:

I was saying there was a willow tree. Its shower of falling branches, its creased and crooked bark had the effect of what remains outside our illusions yet cannot stay them, is changed by them for the moment, yet shows through stable, still, and with a sternness that our lives lack. Hence the comment it makes; the standard it

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<sup>38</sup> Very few critics have connected Woolf to a tragic sense of time. Eric Levy, however, writes in "Woolf's Metaphysics of Tragic Vision in *To the Lighthouse*" that in "the journey toward tragic vision ... the object perceived is the transience of the perceiving subject" (111). This "[t]ragic time is a seething flux of generation and corruption, a formless chaos of coming to be and passing away, with no purpose other than its own continuation" (116). This is the Dionysian temporality that (while Harrison and Bergson champion it) Nietzsche admits to be terrifying, meaningless, and destructive from the perspective of individual consciousness – prior to his revaluing it as desirable and salutary. Furthermore, Ann Banfield, in "Tragic Time: The Problem of the Future in Cambridge Philosophy and *To the Lighthouse*," presents a non-Bergsonian conception of tragic time: it is that which, "according to Russell, Bergson 'condemns' – as 'static, Platonic, mathematical, logical, intellectual'" (66). This non-Bergsonian, logical time marks the inevitable past; it marks that all will become the inevitable past. Banfield associates this tragic time with thinkers from Wittgenstein to Barthes, locating it, too, in F. L. Lucas' *Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics* (64, 67).

<sup>39</sup> For Woolf, Russell, and Cambridge philosophy see Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table* and "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time."

supplies, and the reason why, as we flow and change, it seems to measure. (*W* 251)

What exactly does Bernard see in this tree? It seems to “comment” upon his life, he says, as it stands unmoved – both stationary and unfeeling. The tree seems to measure his life in a manner to which he is unaccustomed. Its steadfast fixity and its unconsciousness seem at odds with his own witting experience of time.

Bernard tells us that the willow’s “creased and crooked bark had the effect of what remains outside our illusions yet cannot stay them” – a contrast between the willow and the human, between its suggestion of permanence and his mobile illusions. Twice he characterizes this difference:

[the willow] is changed by [our illusions] for the moment, yet shows through stable, still, and with a sternness that our own lives lack”

as we flow and change, it seems to measure

The willow appears to emphasize human movement because it does not participate in it, lies “outside” the human point of view. We cannot possess its stillness and it cannot “stay” our passing existence. Indeed, our own illusions may claim the tree “for the moment,” subsume it within our realm of temporal and affective experience, and fleetingly “change” it. Yet it reasserts its otherness, its changelessness: its lifespan exceeds our own, and we exceed it in our capacity for emotion. It alterity “shows through.” We cannot humanize it.

Bernard’s willow seems to supply its own measuring standard for immobility and longevity, and even more enduring than the tree’s temporal allotment are the timeless, mathematical universals that subtend it – which Banfield has demonstrated to be essential to both Russell’s and Woolf’s conception of the world. These logical forms exist separately from both people and trees, yet in Russell’s thinking, they underlie the willow’s total independence from the human subjectivity it outlasts. These universals are themselves “stable, still, with a sternness our lives lack.” As Banfield describes, Russell’s philosophical thinking takes him from subjective first-person sensations, to the sense-data that produce these sensations, to his own postulation of “sensibilia,” sense-data that no one need see (*PT* 59-107, 165). Russell suggests that we imagine sensibilia as unperceived but in theory perceptible – existing in unoccupied, or not-yet-occupied perspectives. These points of view occur regardless of anyone’s inhabiting them. Added together, they comprise a real outside world, and permit knowledge not only, in Russell’s terms, “by acquaintance,” by immediate, individual perception, but also indirectly, “by description” – as social and natural history, astronomy, geology, physics, and the word’s logical substructure itself are known.<sup>40</sup> As a result, Russell finds that propositions about the world are true or false by virtue of their correspondence to the world’s facts, the logical relations among its objects, which no longer require a viewing subject (or Berkeley’s omniscient God) in order to exist. Banfield contends that these logical relations constitute in both Russell and Woolf, not Bradley’s ultimate Reality, a hallowed Absolute, but an invisible, ghostly frame, spectral yet hard as “granite” – Woolf’s elected noun – which undergirds the transient, “rainbow” impressions of first-person experience (*PT* 148-154). Thus Bernard flows and changes while the

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<sup>40</sup> See Russell, “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” and *The Problems of Philosophy*, Chapter 5.

willow represents a version of unchanging eternity: “The tree alone resisted our eternal flux” – “that populous undifferentiated chaos of life which surged behind the outlines of my friends and the willow tree” (*W* 249). The willow seems to Bernard nearly as indestructible as the logical relations that uphold it. Visible and invisible constants, therefore, fixtures of the landscape and their underlying physics, mark necessities that, in their very endurance, seem to minimize human being, to reveal its contrasting fluidity – as Greek tragic doom, fixed, binding, was impossible to outpace or alter.

Woolf’s tragic time, however, also takes a second form – manifests itself as the endlessly mutable “eternal flux,” as unpredictable fluctuation, the teeming, chameleon time of evolution and its innumerable chances. In this model of temporality, not perennial stillness but perennial motion dwarfs and consumes human actors. Rather than the “very trees ... [as] symbols of the vast external world which recks so little of the happiness, of the marriages or deaths of individuals (*ND*, 331)” – rather than these seemingly immobile trees as markers of an impersonal and invariable physical world – we see the magnitude of space and time, in all their variability, as humanity’s uncaring opposite:

The stars did their usual work upon the mind, froze to cinders the whole of our short human history and reduced the human body to an ape-like, furry form, crouching amid the brushwood of a barbarous clod of mud. This stage was soon succeeded by another, in which there was nothing in the universe save stars and the light of stars; as she looked up the pupils of her eyes [Katharine’s in *Night and Day*] so dilated with starlight that the whole of her seemed dissolved in silver and spilt over the ledges of the stars for ever and ever and indefinitely through space (*ND*, 196-7). (qtd. in Banfield 121, 122)

Here we have, not the rigid intransigence of necessity, immutable as logic, but devouring Heraclitean nature – populous, undifferentiated, chaotic, surging – as the context in which such necessity bursts forth. It is the eyeless purveyor of irrevocable fortune, as well as the encircling reminder that the individual human hour-glass runs down while all else that is natural appears to cycle and change “for ever and ever and indefinitely.” This second species of tragic time, showing human life to be the insecure product of the promiscuous flux of all life, is the very antithesis of the productively protean, Bergsonian flux that Harrison praises in her preface to *Themis*: “Dionysos, with every other mystery-god, was an instinctive attempt to express what Professor Bergson calls *durée*, that life which is one, indivisible, and yet ceaselessly changing” (xii). Dionysian time, for Bergson and Harrison, supports humanity, whereas for Woolf it “reduce[s] the human body.”

Woolf’s Rhoda in *The Waves* hungers for Bergsonian temporality to cradle and include her, perfectly describes it but denies its existence: “If I could believe, said Rhoda, that I should grow old in pursuit and change, I should be rid of my fear: nothing persists. ... I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate. I have no end in view. I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass which you call life. ... Meaning has gone. The clock ticks” (*W* 130, 21). Bernard, on the contrary, can conceive of all life as an indivisible massing of moments, ever-changing yet unified by a shared natural force. But for him such a picture is not intrinsically meaningful; its “end” is not a kind of homecoming within nature or the sense of connection for which Rhoda hopes. Such time only reinforces the idea that “nothing

persists.” This Dionysian temporality, so fortifying to Harrison and Bergson, is not so to Bernard:

With dispassionate despair, with entire disillusionment, I surveyed the dust dance; my life, my friends' lives, and those fabulous presences, men with brooms, women writing, the willow tree by the river – clouds and phantoms made of dust too, of dust that changed, as clouds lose and gain and take gold or red and lose their summits and billow this way and that, mutable, vain. (W 285)

How much *more* ephemeral must Bernard feel when even the willow proves a short-lived creature in the history of the natural world? It, too, participates in this dust dance – is a passing phantom, on a level with the clouds, billowing without fixity (“mutable”) and devoid of pre-assigned purpose in a teleological narrative (“vain”). Bernard’s despair is that of Nietzsche’s Greek chorus who awaken, disillusioned, to their finitude, to their tenuous billowing amid the persistent changefulness of nature as a whole.

As Banfield shows, Russell himself in 1910 returns from the immutability of logic to the mutable sensible environment and our knowledge of it: “the completion of the logicist project [Russell’s and Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica*] turned the philosopher to the physical world” (PT 13). Bernard confronts his willow, too, under multiple aspects: there is its seeming immortality, like that of an abstract mathematical form, and there is its living, mortal presence. And it is to this vulnerable biological being that Bernard’s thoughts ultimately turn – to the willow’s fluidity rather than to its fixedness. Once the willow, even, seems to him subject to erasure, his perspective is so far expanded, his imagination so far “outside” its usual bounds, that his own life appears to measure nothing at all. In such “I-less” moments, Bernard owns a world bereft of conscious designers, and his usual designing powers do not rush in to transform the scene in front of him. His senses, his customary spurs to creation, cease to inspire him; his characteristic phrase-making grinds to a halt. He experiences his keenest bouts of self-dissolution when he registers no hint of authorship in this universe of impersonal and staggering change. In these rare moods, Bernard perceives the days, the waves, the clouds, the trees themselves, to cycle endlessly, and it is this recognition of eternal movement which reduces his existence, and his stories, to a felt impossibility.

It is thus awash in deep time that Bernard proclaims the falsity of narratives that represent human life as “one, indivisible,” indistinguishable from a larger totality that affords it a kind of eternity and stable significance. There is no ritual theophany in which Dionysus, dissolved into nature, returns to prove his persistence, or in which the gods of tragedy appear to ascribe meaning to the upheavals of the past. Bernard instead announces the vanity of taking “notes in the margin of [the] mind for some final statement” on life (W 128):

How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably. Lying in a ditch on a stormy day, when it has been raining, then enormous clouds come marching over the sky, tattered clouds, wisps of cloud. What delights me then is

the confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury. Great clouds always changing, and movement; something sulphurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost, and I forgotten, minute, in a ditch. Of story, of design, I do not see a trace then. (W 238-239)

Bernard's spectacle is of things "trailing, broken off, lost." This vision of size and indifference, of "great clouds always changing and movement" can, however, please him; at first, its unruly grandeur, its vast scope and confusion, "delight" him as he lies supine in his declivity in the earth. Yet he senses, too, "something sulphurous and sinister" in this pageantry of nature. It appears to him both "helter-skelter" and "towering," immense without "a trace" "of story, of design" to inform its passage across the sky. Its careless fury and magnitude come to diminish his own being, to endanger it. Bernard cannot escape the intimation of something "bowled up" and foreboding in the "march of day across the sky" (W 272). He feels his "I" "forgotten, minute."

Woolf therefore naturalizes the human and places it in peril, without dissolving her characters, ritualistically, into any collective and undying "group-unity." Woolf writes repeatedly in *The Waves* that "the being grows rings, like a tree. Like a tree, leaves fall" (W 283). The days pass and the mind ages: "Tuesday follows Monday; then comes Wednesday. The mind grows rings" (W 257). The mind is part and parcel of the natural world, racking up years, in no ways exempt from the dust dance. Yet the mind grows symbolic rings, seeks to tame the wildness of Dionysian nature, the confusion, the fury, into scripted form, to forge designs: "So the being grows rings; identity becomes robust. What was fiery and furtive like a fling of grain cast into the air and blown hither and thither by wild gusts of life from every quarter is now methodical and orderly and flung with a purpose – so it seems" (W 262). So Bernard describes such neat-and-tidy coming-of-age narratives and expresses his skepticism of them: "the true order of things – this is our perpetual illusion" (W 271). Contemporary critic Franco Moretti indeed defines the traditional *Bildungsroman*, what Bernard eschews, as the perennial endeavor to maintain this illusion:

[Wilhelm Meister] cannot make a 'connection', give his life the shape of a ring, and seal it. And if this does not take place, his life risks remaining unfinished – worse yet, *meaningless*. ... Time is here an unchanging beat, a mechanical and exhausting effort which the organicist teleology of the classical *Bildungsroman* banishes as if it were the pounding of death. Outside the Whole, outside the world-as-homeland, there is no life whatsoever. ... The ring, the circle: images of the abolition of time .... (18, 19)

But in a radical departure from such a model of identity formation and from such narrative homecoming, Bernard allows time to abolish him. He feels the bracing, the inhuman permanence of the willow tree, as well as the tree's sobering ephemerality, its own infinitesimal lifespan within the sweeping history of nature. Time can be both abstractly mechanical in Woolf – Rhoda's and Russell's "clock time," a series of petrified instants – and a living, Dionysian flood. But it has no "organicist teleology," "flung with a purpose" all its own. Bernard registers that the "world-as-homeland," whether natural or social, is no longer a reality – the modernist conclusion that had so appalled Lukács. Yet there *is* life "outside that Whole": it is the disorderly "world seen without a self," "without illusions" (W 287, 285). It is this "visionless" world, devoid of

inherent narrative structure and “true order,” that arrests Bernard’s own authorial impulses (*W* 285). He foregoes what Neville has called “the sequence of the story which he never stops telling himself” (*W* 69).

Prostrate in a ditch with the sky “towering” over him, Bernard embraces instead a reduced aesthetic fit for his reduced position: “a howl; a cry” will better capture his relation to the world. With an anti-anthropocentric perspective comes an altered artistic credo: “When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded I need no words. Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor. None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our breasts, making wild music, false phrases” (*W* 295). His will be a messy and “unfinished” account of himself and his fellows (*W* 283). His art will resemble the universe and culminate in no “final statement.” It will remain true only to “the welter; to the torture” of insecure human life, to the “rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights – elm trees, willow trees, gardeners sweeping, women writing” (*W* 257, 255). But an unfinished life is not a meaningless one. For all that Bernard regrets that he has “been sedulous to take note of shadows” only, to pay tribute to “mere changes” – and for all that he is nonetheless finished with immodest “phantom phrases” that trumpet transcendent truths – he does solemnize moments (Rhoda’s, “all separate”) with his scraps of language and this practices affixes him to others and to the world (*W* 285, 287).

It is not the majestic narratives of king and country, those which Percival epitomizes – Percival around whom Bernard and his companions initially rally – that in the end sustain him. Bernard comes to resist such counter-tragic rhetoric, its false promise of all-encompassing order. Bernard in his final soliloquy acknowledges the unrealizable vision of human nature that Percival had represented: “We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget” (*W* 277). Mere moments of closeness and bodily satisfaction – at first derived from the mythic splendor that Percival had signified – are what Bernard comes to value in lieu of Percival’s grand (but ultimately hollow) symbolic resonances. In his youth, that is, Bernard had felt:

That is the last drop and the brightest that we let fall like some supernal quicksilver into the swelling and splendid moment created by us from Percival. What is to come? I ask, brushing the crumbs from my waistcoat, what is outside? We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road. (*W* 146)

In his maturity, Bernard has strengthened this passion for created moments, but has forgone the notion of an ordered, “illumined and everlasting road” that would allow him to subjugate the world’s chaos permanently. He pursues instead “some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably” – moments of humiliation, of trammled selfhood, that guard against triumphalist narrative, and moments nonetheless of triumph that ward off self-abnegation, total silence. Embracing such moments,

Bernard at last finds safe harbor between narrative and nothingness. Thus tragedy for Woolf is not the beautiful Apollonian *mythos* that would sanctify and champion Percival's "heroic" commitments, and his death in the name of them. Tragedy is Bernard's mortal vulnerability in the face of impenetrable, narrative-subverting, Dionysian nature, wherein a roll of the die of mutability can mean "death among the apple trees for ever" (W 24). Bernard finds that no shining narrative armor, no greaves of myth, can protect him.

Fleeting intersubjective intimacy is now what offers him passing security – what he commemorates in words and seeks among his friends. It is, indeed, their small shared *telos*, their tragic sociality, perennially threatened with dissolution:

'Now once more,' said Louis, 'as we are about to part, having paid our bill, the circle in our blood, broken so often, so sharply, for we are so different, closes in a ring. Something is made. Yes, as we rise and fidget, a little nervously, we pray, holding in our hands this common feeling, "Do not move, do not let the swing door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, that globes itself here, among these lights, these peelings, this litter of bread crumbs and people passing. Do not move, do not go. Hold it for ever."' (W 145)

Theirs is "this common feeling," "the thing that we have made"; it supports them, "that immersion – how sweet, how deep!" as Bernard later recalls it (W 278). Such intimacy hovers above "'these roaring waters,' said Neville, 'upon which we build our crazy platforms'" (W 138). Like an object they hold such security, and wish to hold it perpetually. Yet it is more prone to disintegration than even the crumbs and peelings: "'But soon, too soon,' said Bernard, 'this egotistic exultation fails. Too soon the moment of ravenous identity is over'" (W 143). All share this sense of imperilment: 'For one moment only,' said Louis. 'Before the chain breaks, before disorder returns, see us fixed, see us displayed, see us held in a vice. But now the circle breaks. Now the current flows. Now we rush faster than before'" (W 142). Theirs is the rounded moment in all its doubleness, materializing and dissipating: "Let us hold it for one moment," begs Jinny and yet, as Rhoda attests, "The circle is destroyed. We are thrown asunder" (W 145, 143).

Bernard later recounts, too, that they "drew apart," "were consumed in the darkness of the trees, leaving Rhoda and Louis" (W 278). Bernard remembers that painfully "Neville, Jinny, Susan and I, as a wave breaks, burst asunder" (W 278). He experiences such separation, even at the time, as a kind of submersion in the river, as a kind of drowning. He never forgets this perishing of a closeness that had shored up selfhood:

I could not collect myself; I could not distinguish myself; I could not help letting fall the things that had made me a minute ago eager, amused, jealous, vigilant, and hosts of other things, into the water. I could not recover myself from that endless throwing away, dissipation, flooding forth without our willing it and rushing soundlessly away out there under the arches of the bridge, round some clump of trees or an island, out where sea-birds sit on stakes, over the roughened water to become waves in the sea – I could not recover myself from that dissipation. So we parted.

Was this, then, this streaming away mixed with Susan, Jinny, Neville, Rhoda, Louis, a sort of death? (W 279)

Like Neville who needs “the limbs of one person” because “nature is too vegetable, too vapid. She has only sublimities and vastitudes and water and leaves,” Bernard can only combat this disintegration of self, time and waves as “the pounding of death,” with revival among people (*W* 52):

Thus I visited each of my friends in turn, trying, with fumbling fingers, to prise open their locked caskets. I went from one to the other holding my sorrow – no, not my sorrow but the incomprehensible nature of this our life – for their inspection. Some people go to priests; others to poetry; I to my friends, I to my own heart, I to seek among phrases and fragments something unbroken – I to whom there is not beauty enough in moon or tree; to whom the touch of one person to another is all, yet who cannot grasp even that, who am so imperfect, so weak, so unspeakably lonely. (*W* 266)

For Bernard, too, “the touch of one person to another is all.” Nearly impossible to obtain, uncertain and precarious, such connection survives “unbroken” only in rare moments of relieved isolation. “Moon or tree,” even in their beauty, are not “enough” to sustain him. Indeed the “darkness of the trees” and the breaking wave communicate the “incomprehensible nature of this our life.”

Woolf is not, then, the pure subjectivist, consumed by the mind in all its solipsism, that many have claimed her to be.<sup>41</sup> She is committed to representing the extent to which time exceeds a merely human measure – to placing human perspectives in perspective. She brings to the fore, as Bernard describes it, “that unfeeling universe that sleeps when we are at our quickest and burns red when we lie asleep” (*W* 280). It is not the case, as she writes in *To the Lighthouse’s* “Time Passes,” that “beauty outside mirrored beauty within” (*TL* 134). The external world is not the internal world writ large upon nature: “the mirror was broken” (*TL* 134). Woolf’s characters, as a result, aim to create their own modest brand of stability, aim to make certain moments in time stand out and endure in their minds. They seek to emulate the solidity of the “granite” of logical form, all the while knowing that their lived moments cannot possess such solidity. Finitude becomes a condition that besets their loves, rather than the condition, the source and *raison d’être*, of their loves. So Bernard makes “the contribution of maturity to childhood’s intuitions” and fully recognizes “what is unescapable in our lot; death; the knowledge of limitations” (*W* 269). He feels that “I, too, am dim to my friends and unknown; a phantom, sometimes seen, often not,” in danger of disappearance: “Our flame, the will-o’-the-wisp that dances in a few eyes, is soon to be blown out and all will fade” (*W* 275). And yet he persists in feeling “the need for opposition” in “the presence of an enemy” – and he battles “to have dispatched the enemy for a moment” (*W* 269, 270).

Mrs. Ramsay, too, feels threatened by the deep time of nature and takes what action she can to defend herself. She hears the waves “like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life” and intimate that her allotment is “ephemeral as a rainbow” (*TL* 16). She feels

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<sup>41</sup> John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury read Woolf in this light in “The Introverted Novel,” in *Modernism, 1890-1930*. For those who refute this stance and argue that Woolf is centrally concerned with more than psychological interiority and Bergsonian, experiential time, see Banfield, *The Phantom Table*; Louise Hornby, “The Cameraless Optic”; Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*; S. P. Rosenbaum, “The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf”; Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf: the Patterns of Ordinary Experience*; and Rosemary Sumner, *A Route to Modernism*.

“an impulse of terror,” and to stave off its recurrence that evening, she cultivates “this peace, this rest, this eternity,” as “a wedge-shaped core of darkness” (*TL* 16, 62, 63). Even in this pared-down privacy, however, feeling herself invisible and divested of quotidian responsibility, she resists self-dissolution. She does not relish vacant impersonality but her own resilience and freedom. Mrs. Ramsay voyages as the wedge: “there were all the places she had not seen; the Indian plains; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome. This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting” (*TL* 62). It becomes her avatar, a ghostly vessel traversing foreign lands; she loses her spatially fixed personality to adopt a more far-reaching one. What appeals to her is not nothingness, sheer absence, in place of her usual embodiment; rather, she imaginatively expands, moves through the world unhindered and boundless, a mobile explorer. When Mrs. Ramsay’s gaze then turns outward, toward the sea, she attaches her still exulting subjectivity to an object, to the lighthouse beam; in her imagination, her wedge, having traversed space unseen and unchecked, becomes the eternal light stroke, infused with its temporal expansiveness, its regular beat as steady as the waves’ own (*TL* 62). In this way, Mrs. Ramsay succeeds in feeling herself more than “a little strip of time” (*TL* 59). Yet she locates in the light not a kindred spirit, not a universe that shares in her sensations, but her own keen emotion; watching the light, she plumbs and illumines her own personality. She recognizes that the character she ascribes to the beam is her own. She knows it is “odd” how one “leant to inanimate things”; she knows her “tenderness” for the light is “irrational,” and still she allows the beam to express her, become her, know her, be her (*TL* 63).

So soothed does she feel, that “suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord” (*TL* 63). Then her peace is rent, the candor of her experience sullied – “the insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her” (*TL* 64). She turns again to the beam to extirpate this falsehood: “she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie” (*TL* 63). She corrects her error:

How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that. (*TL* 64)

Here are the signposts of the Attic worldview: “no reason, order, justice” from the perspective of human ethics – a treacherous world, in which happiness stays for moments only. Mrs. Ramsay registers, too, that the beam itself is heartless, impersonal, “the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless” (*TL* 65). Yet “for all that,” the stroke continues to “hypnotize” her and she feels “as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight” (*TL* 65). The beam’s caress catalyzes her remembrance of past happiness – “she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness” – and her rush of present ecstasy constitutes a fresh moment of being that draws from her a cry of affirmation: “it is enough!” (*TL* 65).

Mrs. Ramsay proceeds to practice a second mode of triumphing over the haunting tick of the waves – not by imaginatively assigning herself to an object and assuming its longevity – but by cultivating a sense of permanence among people, among subjects. Woolf lifts the *party* from a

frivolous – recreational, trivial – pastime (Wyndham Lewis, with misogynistic disparagement, calls Woolf herself a “party-lighthouse”) to a feat of decided existential significance (160). Mrs. Ramsay combats nonhuman nature, its implacable rhythm, its promise of tragedy, with another stilled moment of being, a product of shared feeling, and yet (as she conceives it) akin to an elm in its fixity. While Mr. Ramsay inclines to behave “as if to be caught happy in a world of misery was for an honest man the most despicable of crimes,” Mrs. Ramsay recognizes that happiness itself is the mark of labor, of battle, of rare and “great reconciliation scenes” with “this thing that she called life,” “terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance” (*TL* 44, 59, 79). Such happiness is not a sign of complacency or mendacity, as Mr. Ramsay might have it. Mrs. Ramsay’s “effort of merging and flowing and creating” requires its own brand of “sternness” and heroism – just as when Mrs. Ramsay had associated herself with the lighthouse beam, she had found that “she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light” (*TL* 83, 64, 63). Mr. Ramsay’s truth (“it would not be fine,” “there is no God”), which the waves have whispered to her as well, spurs her to rebellious creation (*TL* 15, 207). Thus Mrs. Ramsay is determined to “secrete” at her dinner party what Woolf refers to in her diary as the “envelope” of “party consciousness” (*Diary III* 13):

Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily.

Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (*TL* 97)

For the moment, all refuse the reminders of “outside” time; endlessly “waving” nature is defied but not denied. In this candlelit room, the windows have become mirrors; “that fluidity out there,” really, is a reflection of persons within. So they have “common cause,” too, against their own vanishing, rippling natures, which flow and change in much more short-lived a manner than the hidden landscape beyond the glass. “Out there,” as they persist in calling it, remains blurred and impressionistic; in here proves a “composed” tableau. Mrs. Ramsay glances once again at “the window with its ripple of reflected lights,” sees it relegate the external world to obscurity and mirror the man-made scene within, and proclaims that something shines out “in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral,” and stays its movement temporarily (*TL* 105). “Conscious of making a party together in a hollow,” they stave off human wavering for the moment; no wonder when the party disperses, “they wavered about” (*TL* 112).

Bernard experiences an equivalent “summoning together” at dinner, in defiance of human transience, in defiance of “the huge blackness of what is outside us, of what we are not”:

And, half-way through dinner, we felt enlarge itself round us the huge blackness of what is outside us, of what we are not. The wind, the rush of wheels became the roar of time, and we rushed – where? And who were we? We were extinguished ... and the blackness roared. ... For me this lasts but one second. It is ended by my own pugnacity. I strike the table with a spoon.

If I could measure things with compasses I would, but since my only measure is a phrase, I make phrases – I forget what, on this occasion. (W 277)

“The wind, the rush of wheels, became the roar of time,” the hand of annihilation, Mrs. Ramsay’s waves. Bernard fights it too, not with the instruments of mathematics, not with the compass – although he would prefer the compass’ exactitude. But his measure, as he says, is the phrase. He must build a safe enclosure out of words (“assemble a few words and forge round us a hammered ring of beaten steel,” “a ring of clear poetry”) (W 128, 169). For the compass suggests a timeless circle to which Bernard can only approximate with his clumsier tool:

Against the gateway, against some cedar tree I saw blaze bright, Neville, Jinny, Rhoda, Louis, Susan, and myself, our life, our identity. . . . against the brick, against the branches, we six, out of how many million millions, for one moment out of what measureless abundance of past time and time to come, burnt there triumphant. The moment was all; the moment was enough. (W 277-278)

Here the cedar, like the willow, is an emblem of the ceaseless continuance of nature, against which these six stand out for a moment only. The expansive time of wind and water, of creeping airs in “Time Passes” (“there was time at their disposal”), is allied with the timelessness of the circles the compass draws: Bernard, like Mrs. Ramsay, aspires to both and cannot have either (TL 126).

But “the moment was all; the moment was enough.” In one sense, these two clauses bound together by a semi-colon are equivalent – the moment is everything, and this “all” suffices. “It is enough” is high praise in Woolf’s fiction, the pinnacle of affirmation. Yet Bernard’s “all” is not All with a capital A, is momentary and not eternal; it bespeaks no all-inclusive confederacy with the sum total of existence. It is not bound up with Greek ritual’s promise of collective rebirth. Nor does Bernard’s “all” implicate him in a mythic destiny that rationalizes, even valorizes, the necessity of the moment’s dissolution. “It was enough” captures the poignancy, the smallness of this “all” upon which Bernard’s entire affirmation of life must rest. Woolf envisions moments that burn triumphant before an inevitable defeat. At once the moment is the zenith of self-realization and intersubjective intimacy, and yet it is the most precarious container of value, gone when time passes. The moment’s flame of happiness bears within it the promise of grief. Thus these short-lived bursts of feeling, ballasts in the tide of life, contest *amor fati* – in contradistinction to a Nietzschean love of fate, Woolf stages moments snatched from the maw of becoming and elegizes their loss.

### *Tragic Chances*

Greek tragedy’s preoccupation with cosmic unconcern and the insecurity of human time is Woolf’s also. The inevitability of the past and the uncertainty of the future resurface prominently in *To the Lighthouse*’s “Time Passes,” Woolf’s extraordinary evocation of the unfathomable “cosmic stupidity” that Nietzsche describes. Ominously, the section commences:

‘Well, we must wait for the future to show,’ said Mr. Bankes, coming in from the terrace.

“It’s almost too dark to see,” said Andrew, coming up from the beach. (*TL* 125)

We have left a deterministic universe, idealist or materialist, in which all is “too dark to see” because of human ignorance only. We have left a necessitarian universe, as Peirce calls it, in which all is in principle predictable, knowable in advance. Characters “must wait for the future to show” for the new reason that both Peirce and Darwin recognize: time, like the evolutionary process, involves chance. This is Euripides’ universe, too, in which characters are buffeted about by aleatory, not rationally foreordained, forms of necessity: “the swings and swerves of mortal fate,” time in which “change rolls upon change” unpredictably, for “the life of man is a wandering thing, pounded from all sides” (*Hippolytos* 1.1197-1200, trans. Carson). Not only do these inevitable poundings seem fortuitous from the human perspective, but they may be swerving, changing, wandering things in and of themselves, outside the regularities of nature.

“Time Passes” characterizes the cosmos as massive, material volatility “pierced by no light of reason”:

Night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference. Listening (had there been any one to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the winds and waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason, and mounted one on top of another, and lunged and plunged in the darkness or the daylight (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together) in idiot games, until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself. (*TL* 134, 135)

Amid this “gigantic chaos,” the universe plays its “idiot games,” games of chance, “aimlessly.” The changeless, lawful constants of physics reside outside this realm of “brute confusion.” Banfield defines such separate spheres as follows:

Universals have being, but things in time exist: the word “exist” is taken to mean “being at some part of the time-series.” Herein lies the difference between the atemporal permanence of universals and the permanent, nondeictic, temporal relations of empirical facts. (“Tragic Time” 48)

There is the inhuman stability of Russell’s logical universals in the timeless realm of “being”; in the mobile realm of “existence,” nature’s evolution occurs. Once past, nature’s time is “permanent, nondeictic.” Every motion of every mote in the dust dance is fixed within a sequence of earlier and later occurrences – irrevocable. But future coordinates are not yet set.

It is the irreversible emergence of such unforeseeable chances that inhabits the well-known brackets of “Time Passes.” The first and paradigmatic lightning bolt of misfortune runs as follows: “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]” (*TL* 128). Here is the image of seeking and not finding – companionship and comfort – that dominates “Time Passes.” For Mr. Ramsay, the master predictor of the morrow’s weather in a deterministic cosmos, it was too dark to see this event. Mr. Ramsay’s

quintessentially demanding embrace meets with nothing. Open arms are made empty arms. Death comes “rather suddenly,” threaded, in this section, into no compensatory narrative. Not even a causal explanation is given, as the central consciousness of the novel is withdrawn; the encircling context, one of idiot games and brute confusion, implies that no explanation of any sufficiency can be given. Fate is in no way tempered or mitigated – not because the section is told from the impersonal, non-narrative perspective of nature, but because precisely this perspective nullifies the possibility that contingent, sudden, unforeseen luck can possess justification.

When the *renouveau* of spring then comes and it seems “impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules,” the next bracketed catastrophe occurs: “[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well]” (*TL* 132). This flimsy report, bandied about by a gossipy “people,” speaking casually of tragedy and its *peripeteia* – everything “had promised so well” – contains all the cold contingency of time’s passing. Prue dies in “some” illness; if people do not know or remember which, it seems equally the case that a complete etiology will go no further toward sufficient explanation. Springtime birth, here, has nothing of renewal in it. Generation is not regenerative. If reproduction, a new life, is to be a solace, what of Mrs. Ramsay’s dashed hopes that Prue “her own daughter must be happier than other people’s daughters”? (*TL* 109) Woolf demolishes ritual faith in redemptive springtime. And in the following bracketed episode, on the world-historical stage, “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]” (*TL* 133). This chance mercy attends the idiot games of war, wherein the general odds and luck of survival are once again unjustifiable. To what, we are asked to imagine, must the poetry of Augustus Carmichael attest, composed in this period of inexplicable death, sans resurrection – his book also come out in the brackets of “Time Passes”?

Lily, too, in later producing her painting, is not the worshipper who “participates in an eternal life force,” as Martha Carpentier reads her in Harrisonian fashion. Lily’s is the affirmation of moments that belong to no transcendent whole (187). Lily stands before her easel, with gratitude recalling Mrs. Ramsay’s uniting “herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, ‘Life stand still here’” (*TL* 161). But Mrs. Ramsay has not achieved ritual fusion with the breaking wave, or sublime mastery over it. It is instead one wave, one slice of Dionysian time, that she has commanded for once to stand still – in such a way that it matters and endures in memory, without dissipating into the irretrievable past – and it is this resistance to time’s remorseless measure, to its erasure of human meanings, that constitutes her triumph over “her old antagonist, life” (*TL* 79). Lily recognizes the Dionysian menace that Mrs. Ramsay in this way tames, and realizes that her own practice is the same:

Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she repeated. She owed it all to her. (*TL* 161)

Like the Attic tragedies' papyri rolls, left to disintegrate by indifferent Roman scholars, Lily's painting may molder in the attic. But it is her act of resistance, her stand against instability and loss. And precisely its uncertain future is another of Woolf's unsparing evocations of chance and fragility.

Lily registers the extreme insecurity of the tragic universe. She would like to demand of it an explanation. Poignantly, her vision of the acceptable reply is the resurrection of Mrs. Ramsay. As usual, the answer does not come:

Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air? Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life? – startling, unexpected, unknown? For one moment she felt that if they [she and Carmichael] both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexplicable, said it with violence, as two fully equipped human beings from whom nothing should be hid might speak, then, beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape; if they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return. “Mrs. Ramsay!” she said aloud, “Mrs. Ramsay!” The tears ran down her face. (*TL* 180)

So Woolf represents “implacable,” “immitigable” destiny in her writing. Lily weeps for a form she cannot reproduce – Mrs. Ramsay's. In lieu of the consolatory, Woolf pens the irremediable. In lieu of the reliving god of ritual, she depicts the perishable persons of tragedy.

Woolf parts ways from that singular contradiction in terms, counter-tragic tragedy – hostile to the notion that chance, undeserved, or uncompensated loss can befall characters. Like Hardy, hers is not the Aristotelian view that heroes' own inadvertent missteps inaugurate their doom. Nor does she adopt a Christian construal of the genre in which characters are the culpable agents of their own misfortune, punished for their immoral passions, their sufferings the route to salvation. Woolf also refuses the anthropological assessments of tragedy, as we have seen, that treat the death of the individual as a ritual enactment of communal renewal and theophany, or as a celebration of heroism. Woolf leaves behind, too, Nietzsche's philosophical renderings of tragedy as justificatory narrative or “heroic” psychology. In each of these discarded models, it is the fearsome chanciness of mortal luck that is to be exorcized at all costs – just as the chance at the heart of Darwinian evolutionary theory, as many critics said, emptied the world of the cosmic grandeur and solace for which tragedy was supposed, in their estimation, to stand.

Yet Woolf follows Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Hardy – a *literary*, not a philosophical or anthropological, heritage – when she sees in tragedy the overthrow, not the exposé or apotheosis, of character. Woolf's interpretations of tragedy and natural history do not yield theodicy – or attest to the ritual or biological consolations of terrestrial life. In her tragic novels, Woolf nonetheless celebrates an ethos of opposition to reasonless fatality, without justice on its side – Bernard's “against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (*W* 297) Yet she deflates whatever presumptions to triumphalism reside in Bernard's final, rebellious outcry. Woolf closes her novel with the impersonal, italicized reminder of human impermanence in relation to the waves, of the external world that will check Bernard's defiance: “*The waves broke on the shore*” (*W* 297). Woolf backs human nature in an unequal contest.

## Albert Camus: An Ethics of Tragedy

In 1955, Camus delivers a lecture in Athens entitled “On the Future of Tragedy.” The subject of his talk – whether the current age can foster the rebirth of the genre – is of life-long and prevailing importance to him. Camus’ answer is a qualified “yes”: provided that writers do not turn all too optimistically to melodrama or all too despairingly to nihilism. Camus’ corpus of fiction, as we will see, attests to the reality of an intermediate position – that of tragedy. Indeed, if we understand Camus’ vision of the genre, of its worldview and resultant ethics, we understand the foundations of his philosophy, and of its myriad literary expressions.

Camus speaks with modesty in his lecture, admitting the perennial difficulty of defining the Greek original. But he volunteers his own conception of tragedy’s “underlying ideology or *weltanschauung*,” as Lukács would say. Beginning historically, Camus contends that tragedy proper has appeared only twice before – in fifth-century Athens, and in England, Spain, and France, beginning in the Renaissance. In Camus’ estimation, such tragedy marks a world in pronounced transition from a theological to a human-centered belief system. One passes from pre-Socratic to Socratic thought via tragedy; one passes from the thought of the Middle Ages to that of the Enlightenment via tragedy. As our introduction has shown, there is also medieval tragedy, Enlightenment tragedy, Victorian tragedy, and abundant tragic theory; there exist innumerable offshoots and revivals of the Greeks. Camus himself is most familiar with Hegel’s conjoined philosophies of tragedy and history. Yet for Camus, the European Renaissance, with its global exploration, Reformation, and “flowering of the scientific spirit,” provides the ideal crucible for the genuine reappearance of a Greek tragic worldview (*LCE* 305).

Rehearsing a well-known appraisal of Aeschylus and Euripides, Camus declares that Greek tragedy moves from the “quasi-religious and ritualistic” to the “psychological,” and thrives in the middle space, as does sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tragedy:

On two occasions, twenty centuries apart, we find a struggle between a world that is still interpreted in a sacred context and men who are already committed to their individuality, that is to say, armed with the power to question. In both cases, the individual increasingly asserts himself, the balance is gradually destroyed, and the tragic spirit finally falls silent. ... Each time, the works move from ritual tragedy and from almost religious celebration to psychological tragedy. And each time the final triumph of individual reason, in the fourth century in Greece and in the eighteenth century in Europe, causes the literature of tragedy to dry up for centuries. (*LCE* 305, 297-8)

In its first stages, Camus asserts, tragedy is closest to religious melodrama, to the ritual that we have seen Nietzsche and Harrison, too, establish as its origin. In its later stages, tragedy is closest to secular melodrama; Nietzsche also delivers this reading of tragedy’s decline. The difference, for Camus, between tragedy and melodrama lies in their species of conflict. Melodrama portrays characters who vanquish their foes entirely. This is why, Camus says, the revolutionary and romantic German drama of the nineteenth century is not tragedy at all – the hero is invariably right, actively makes history, and overcomes all opposition to his aims. If there is loss involved in his triumph, it is well compensated. In tragedy, however, characters are lodged between an extrahuman order they cannot vanquish and their personal compulsion to disobey it:

The forces confronting each other in tragedy are equally legitimate, equally justified. In melodrama or drama, on the other hand, only one force is legitimate. ... Antigone is right, but Creon is not wrong. Similarly, Prometheus is both just and unjust, and Zeus who pitilessly oppresses him also has right on his side. ... The ideal tragedy ... is first and foremost tension, since it is the conflict, in a frenzied immobility, between two powers, each of which wears the double mask of good and evil. ... Tragedy occurs when man, through pride (or even through stupidity as in the case of Ajax) enters into conflict with the divine order, personified as a god or incarnated by a society. And the more justified his revolt and the more necessary this order, the greater the tragedy that stems from the conflict. (*LCE* 301, 302)

Camus' reading of Greek tragedy, at first blush, sounds decidedly Hegelian: two "equally legitimate, equally justified" forces come into opposition. Does Camus refer to the divided ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) of Hegel's tragedy? Are these conflicting necessities part of a metaphysical whole? Do they resolve themselves, in Hegelian fashion, into unity, forging a new synthesis out of their initial discord?

Given Camus' further description of tragic heroes, the answer is no. As Simon Critchley aptly remarks, in the case of Hegel's tragic characters, they "are shattered by something intrinsic to their being that opposes them" ("Hegel"). That is, they register life's broken totality, feel their rival's claim to justice – for it is "intrinsic to their being" – even as they refuse all reconciliation. It is against this Hegelian theory, in which convictions war precisely because they are parts of a divided whole, that Camus positions tragedy. Convictions war in Camus precisely because they are irreconcilable; individuals are shattered by forces extrinsic to their being. Tragic characters endeavor, valiantly and understandably, to breach the limits assigned them, and must learn limitation afresh. It is not, however, that they find themselves justly curtailed, deservedly put in their place. What appears an ethical conflict, in Camus' discussion, is a function of the Greek personification of divinity. What conflicting justices figure, however, is not really a contest between rival moralities, but two incompatible imperatives, those of individual mortals and those of their limiting conditions, varying understood as divine or social or natural in origin.

It is this ineradicable tension that matters to Camus. Whereas the melodramatic model, construed ethically, represents good's triumphing over evil and entails a clear victor, the tragic model, for Camus, as opposed to Hegel, pictures good versus good (or commingled good and evil versus its mirror image) in order to dramatize the impossibility of an existential solution to the conflict. Thus Camus remarks that insofar as Aeschylean trilogies end with divine pardon, such drama still hews to its melodramatically religious, its Dionysian roots. Similarly, later Greek tragedy, that of Euripides, insofar as it sides too thoroughly with the reasoned motivations and striving interiorities of its heroes, leans toward atheistic melodrama. Just as Christian mystery plays cannot, in Camus' view, be called tragedies, because they deny that divine mandates and human desires can have equal legitimacy, so "[o]n the other hand":

everything that frees the individual and makes the universe submit to his wholly human law, especially by the denial of the mystery of existence, once again destroys tragedy. Atheistic or rationalist tragedy is thus equally impossible. If all is mystery, there is no tragedy. If all is reason, the same thing happens. Tragedy is born between light and darkness and rises from the struggle between them. And

this is understandable. In both religious and atheistic drama, the problem has in fact already been solved. In the ideal tragedy, just the opposite, it has not been solved. The hero rebels and rejects the order that oppresses him, while the divine power, by its oppression, affirms itself exactly to the same extent as it is denied. In other words, revolt alone is not enough to make a tragedy. Neither is the affirmation of the divine order. Both a revolt and an order are necessary, the one supporting the other, and each reinforcing the other with its own strength. There is no Oedipus without the destiny summed up by the oracle. But the destiny would not have all its fatality if Oedipus did not refuse it. (*LCE* 303-4)

Tragedy begins, in Camus' appraisal, with characters' wholesale defiance of a severe restriction upon their flourishing. Consider Camus' above examples. Antigone is not reconciled to Creon's law, nor is Ajax to the Greek army's; Prometheus flies in the face of Zeus and Oedipus flouts Apollo. Sisyphus, Camus' own exemplar of a tragic hero, refuses to stay in the underworld. Yet these revolts are curtailed utterly: Antigone may twice bury Polynices but she is discovered and entombed alive. Prometheus may bring fire to humanity but he is left to the vultures. Ajax bears arms against Odysseus and Agamemnon but is made to slaughter the Greek herds instead. Oedipus leaves his adoptive family in Corinth only to reunite horribly with his blood relations. Sisyphus, too, manages to "put Death in chains," to steal unauthorized and glorious years "facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth," but finds that "his scorn of the gods, hatred and death, and passion for life" have "won him that unspeakable penalty," "in the wild and limited universe of man" (*M* 119, 120, 122).

This is not the entirety of Camus' insight into tragedy, however. Beyond characters' initial denial of limitation, and their ensuing, forced recognition of it, comes their resultant and all-important action within the confines of acknowledged inevitability. In such action Camus sees grounds for characters' lucid acceptance not of constraint per se, but of a life inseparable from it. Theirs is not Nietzschean *amor fati*, a masochistic love of pain. Instead, Camus' tragic characters continue to take the utmost stand against lethal external power, now knowing that they are bounded in their revolt. They prove rebellious in a more clear-eyed and productive manner. Camus therefore insists in both "The Myth of Sisyphus" and in "On the Future of Tragedy" that Oedipus, sightless and diminished, finds that "all is well" (*M* 122; *LCE* 305). In each piece, Camus claims to cite this phrase from Sophocles and calls it the miraculous "ancient wisdom" of tragedy (*M* 122). Camus explains:

Oedipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." ... [This remark] drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter .... (*M* 122)

In the face of his "futile sufferings," Oedipus' "only bond" to life comes from the touch of his daughter's hand. Oedipus practices Bernard's small, rescaled loves – the recalibration of affirmation, the redefinition of heroism. Camus' Oedipus does not bow to Apollo's law

approvingly, but reduced and in pain, attests to an attachment that is enough. This is Camus' neo-Greek, strikingly Woolfian philosophical and aesthetic creed.

Camus writes that Sisyphus "too concludes that all is well" and that we "must imagine Sisyphus happy" (*LCE* 305). As Camus' Oedipus is to Bernard, his Sisyphus is to Mrs. Ramsay: face to face with her "little strip of time," her consciousness to be snuffed out in "Time Passes," Mrs. Ramsay is, as Woolf imagines her, nonetheless willfully, heroically, ecstatically, and fleetingly happy (*TL* 59). What engrosses Camus, then, are characters' actions once they are conscious of an ineradicable sentence. What intertwined restriction and resistance, awareness of powerlessness and affirmation of remaining power is theirs? At the two extremes of post-recognition response in Greek tragedy itself, for instance, are the ostensibly full contentment restored to pardoned Prometheus, and the intolerable lucidity of shame-faced Ajax, who finds nothing left to affirm and takes his own life. Yet both Camus' Oedipus and Sisyphus cling to their small but Herculean, momentary but all-encompassing means of going on. It is the same for Camus' Rieux and Tarrou in *The Plague* (1947). Both resist their foe in the extreme, but when it nonetheless checks their defiance, they not only continue to fight it from their positions of circumscribed agency, but rely for sustenance upon a resuscitating moment of being, the tiny feat they can accomplish: swimming in tandem in the sea.

Thus Camus concludes that tragedy positions characters between "the two poles of extreme nihilism and limitless hope" (*LCE* 304). Tragic heroes and heroines attain awareness of their fate in an "unintelligible and limited universe" wherein "a horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds [them]" (*M* 21). Yet ideally they also reach the conclusion that while such fate "can be painful ... it is still worse not to recognize that it exists" (*LCE* 305). It is worse, Camus argues, to harbor false and limitless hopes, destined for disappointment, or to deny tragic constraint in the opposite manner – by hewing to extreme nihilism, claiming concern for nothing and no one (*LCE* 305). Camus' own fiction, therefore, belies his argument against atheistic tragedy – shows its possibility as neo-Greek, as an anguishing encounter with limits that engenders a Sisyphean battle for happiness. In Camus' atheistic fiction, the problem of existence and its evils has not "in fact already been solved," nor is the universe subject to "wholly human law." In lieu of divine order, there are certainly natural and social orders not made to human measure; human beings continue to encounter limits they wish to exceed and cannot exceed. Camus himself describes modern fiction as the expression of just such a conflict between rival forces:

The greater an artist's revolt against the world's reality, the greater can be the weight of reality to balance that revolt. But the weight can never stifle the artist's solitary exigency. The loftiest work will always be, as in the Greek tragedians, Melville, Tolstoy, Molière, the work that maintains an equilibrium between reality and man's rejection of that reality, each forcing the other upward in a ceaseless overflowing, characteristic of life itself at its most joyous and heart-rending extremes. (*RRD* 265)

In his lecture, too, Camus describes all tragedy as "theater in which the creature and creation are pitted one against the other [*le théâtre de contestation entre la créature et la création*]" (*LCE* 308). And it is the atheist Rieux who "believed himself to be on the right side – in fighting against creation as he found it" (*P* 127). Camus writes in *The Rebel*, too, that "metaphysical rebellion is the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of

creation” (23). Like Hardy, Camus does suggest that tragedy can be other than a skirmish with divine order, that it can be a contestation with nature’s absurdity. Absurd nature becomes the new harbinger of fate, as we have seen, with which modern characters grapple: the oracle of human finitude in an unconcerned and unconscious cosmos.

Like Hardy, too, Camus can conceive of tragedy as social in origin. He concludes his lecture by suggesting that tragedy reemerges in the twentieth century also because history acts as tragic antagonist:

The world that the eighteenth-century individual thought he could conquer and transform by reason and science has in fact taken shape, but it’s a monstrous one. Rational and excessive at one and the same time, it is the world of history. But at this degree of *hubris*, history has put on the mask of destiny. Man doubts whether he can conquer history; all he can do is struggle within it. In a curious paradox, humanity has refashioned a hostile destiny with the very weapons it used to reject fatality. After having deified human reign, man turns once more against this new god. (*LCE* 308)

History’s excessive, crushing power has no inherent value (ours are “futile sufferings”). The very pursuit of self-determination that has dethroned the gods – rescuing us from their fatality – has issued in a newly inhuman source of terrors. History in itself knows no ethical limits; it breaks human bodies as divine destiny did. Hubris is on History’s side. Camus argues that the rebel’s ethical plea for moderation now comes in response to History’s horrors.

#### The Moment in Woolf and Camus

Throughout his fiction and non-fiction oeuvres, Camus displays a keen awareness of tragedy, in contradistinction to Meursault, his early fictional protagonist, with whom Camus is too often conflated. For Camus, as for Hardy, history as tragic antagonist only exacerbates an already tragic human destiny within nature. For Camus, as for Woolf, a sense of this tragic niche within nature stems from a double recognition: 1) of an all-natural world not made to human measure and intimating an inexorable mortality, and 2) of an instinctual repulsion and “impulse of terror” in response to this sentence (*TL* 16). Whereas Jean-Paul Sartre condemns such a view of universal, transhistorical tragedy, calling it a recipe for inaction and defeatism, Camus recognizes an ethics unto tragedy itself. To the very moments that anchor Woolf’s characters to life, amid a Dionysian onslaught of time, Camus gives the name “revolt.” He theorizes a shared human imperative to generate such focal points of value and to protect them from annihilating external forces.

Camus’ modern existential tragedy, as Sartre registers, arises from the disparity between the “intuitive pleasure of being” and the “absurdity” of the universe (Sartre, *Situations* 111). It is absurdity – Camus’ key term for the enduring insentience of the cosmos – that spells the erasure of individuals and all they love. In contrast, then, to the lasting and affectless existence of the non-conscious world, both Woolf and Camus capture their characters’ keenly felt moments of being: the epitome of value “compacted” into a mite of time (*TL* 192). These short-lived bursts of feeling nourish characters’ wills to live, all the while standing in, by synecdoche, for the brevity of life as a whole. Rather than deny the tragic knowledge that such moments impart – knowledge of an insoluble conflict between death and human value – Camus, like Woolf,

persistently evokes it, juxtaposing human perishability against the persistence of the rest of the natural world.

In both Woolf's and Camus' fiction, life's periods of cotton woolly non-being (Woolf's image in "A Sketch of the Past") are transected by intervals of livelier consciousness, and these are punctuated by particularly memorable transports of feeling. Woolf and Camus privilege these moments that "[burn] there triumphant," in Bernard's words, in the present and in recollection, and in defiance of an impersonal and inhuman temporality (*W* 277). It is the novel that allows Woolf and Camus to underscore these moments' relation to both human (individual, historical) and nonhuman (evolutionary, cosmological) time scales. Because of characters' awareness of both lived and deep time, the moment is always double – a bearer of joy as well as sorrow, a sign of triumph as well as defeat. It galvanizes awareness of tragedy yet constitutes lucid revolt against it. Characters live for the very moments they fear to lose. Mrs. Ramsay registers this duality, conscious that the moment's intensity must pass – "but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment" in order to contemplate it (*TL* 104). Mrs. Ramsay does not permanently escape or deny the passage of time during this interval of quickened emotion; she grows increasingly aware of it. At once the moment's vibrancy stokes her love of life and is a reminder of her finitude. Her rapture at dinner enlivens her and others, protects and fortifies them, yet its participation in "eternity" – Mrs. Ramsay's sense that this moment will remain "engraved with the sharpness of steel" in the minds it touches – is restricted to memory and to art (*TL* 105; *CR I* 154). Such moments are the antithesis of nonhuman impassivity, yet they are still an acute reminder of chill and sobering extinction. Mrs. Ramsay's grief at her "little strip of time" precipitates her desire for the reprieve that comes of forgetting linear time entirely, fantasizing immortality – and yet such moments of relief also lead to a fuller reckoning with time's passing upon their cessation. Mrs. Ramsay's perception of the renewed tick of the clock alerts her to the comingled happiness and pain that accompany the momentary refusal of change and death. Camus' "The Adulterous Wife," as we will see, likewise pictures Janine fleetingly flooded with feeling, her icy exterior melted from within in a convulsive and transformative shock of ecstasy before the landscape. The pang of her own mortality leaves her desperate for this rejuvenating rush of life; her exaltation, in turn, leads her to weep for the fragility of life's bounties.

In contrast to such episodes, Woolf and Camus both capture their characters' life-negating, nihilistic impulses to adopt the world's very absurdity as their own, to quash moments of being, to become insentient themselves. In Camus' writings, this self-abnegation finds its representation in characters' imagined fusion with stones or with the night sky; characters are drawn to stones' or stars' unconsciousness. They do not experience the tantalizing specter of nature's longevity *as* yearning human subjects, in the way that Mrs. Ramsay does before the nighttime waters, as her mind is stroked by the lighthouse beam, or as Janine does, in even more erotic terms, feeling the "waters" of the darkened sky caress her "core" (*E* 15, 32). Instead, in this species of moment – the self-annihilating moment – Bernard glimpses the world "seen without a self," Rhoda whispers to the passing star "consume me," and Meursault communes more than ever with the "indifference of the world" (*W* 287, 64; *S* 122). This is their retreat from life and its tragedy into the elemental, I-less environment – a retreat both from life's value and its vulnerability. Nature's time reduces them to nothing, reveals not only their staggering transience but overwhelms their resistance to it.

Camus and Woolf, therefore, privilege David-and-Goliath revolt over attempts to merge with measureless Dionysian nature. Both authors prefer the simultaneously tragic and

rebellious conception of the moment. They evoke intervals destined to pass, the quintessence of value poised on the precipice of oblivion, and reveal that characters who repudiate these fragile moments sever themselves from existence entirely. Indeed Camus' overarching contention, in his writings, is that to numb the pain of past or prospective tragedy with nihilism or self-abnegation – with a refusal of experiences that incite a love of life and a loathing to lose it – is to live in a state of suppressed valuing, of suspended animation, of living death. This condition, to their detriment, attracts Camus' Clamence, Pessoa's Baron of Teive, and Beckett's The Unnamable, as we will see; it terrifies Woolf's Bernard, Rhoda, and Septimus.

Camus describes his own experiences of the moment of being, documented in his notebooks, essays, and in his autobiographical, unfinished novel, *The First Man*, in much the same terms Woolf's novels conceive of them: Camus' remembrances match Woolf's fiction. Like Mrs. Ramsay, young Camus feels his passion for existence, his keenest happiness, kindled by a beam of sunlight which he encounters in solitude. Mrs. Ramsay, as we saw in the previous chapter, projects her own "exulting" personality onto the lighthouse beam in an interval of privacy, and this scene prefigures Camus' account of a particularly glorious moment of self-awakening (*TL* 62). For Mrs. Ramsay:

She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie ["We are in the hands of the Lord"], any lie. ... It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover. (*TL* 63, 64)

In imagination, Mrs. Ramsay possesses the beam's steady rhythm, and in response to this communion with her externalized self, she cries "it is enough!" Camus, at age twenty-two, recounts just such an experience in his literary notebooks, and it elicits from him the very language of intimacy – with oneself – that Woolf employs:

Who am I and what can I do – except enter into the movement of the branches and the light, be the ray of sunlight in which my cigarette smolders away, the soft and gentle passion breathing in the air? If I try to reach myself, it is at the heart of this light that I am to be found. And if I try to taste and understand this delicate flavor that contains the secret of the world, it is again myself that I find at the heart of the universe. Myself, that is to say this intense emotion which frees me from my surroundings. Soon, my attention will be filled again with other things and with the world of men. But let me cut out this moment from the cloth of time as other men leave a flower in the pages of a book. (*Notebooks 1935-42* 9)

In prose almost fit for *To the Lighthouse*, Camus himself loses "the fret, the hurry, the stir" of "other things" and becomes a "ray a sunlight" (*TL* 63). He grows "limitless," "freed from [his] surroundings" (*TL* 62). To encounter himself, he must look to the beam – "it is at the heart of this light that I am to be found." Yet his own most personal and "intense emotion" is what he locates

there: “it is again myself that I find at the heart of the universe.” He recognizes in the light not a kindred spirit, not a universe that shares in his sensations – not the universe’s resemblance to him – but his own concentrated pleasure, as Mrs. Ramsay does. Camus, too, treats such a moment as a physical, a solid object, binding him to life, to be treasured and stowed away. Echoing Mrs. Ramsay who “looked up ... and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes,” he concludes: “today is a resting place, and my heart goes out to meet itself” (*TL* 63; *Notebooks 1935-42* 9).

Like Mrs. Ramsay, too, Camus prizes a double persona – both “solitaire et solidaire,” as his daughter characterizes him – committed to these solitary moments of satiety, of sudden delight within a world of inhuman alterity, and committed, also, to promoting and sharing such moments with others, for community heightens their power.<sup>42</sup> Just as Mrs. Ramsay recreates her earlier feeling of safety, of affirmation, again at her dinner, Camus himself develops a scene of solitary nighttime swimming, first drafted for his unpublished novel *A Happy Death* (composed between 1936 and 1938), into a scene of shared nighttime swimming in *The Plague*. Séverine Gaspari traces Camus’ transformation of the first, more loosely sketched scene into the exquisitely choreographed second, tracks its aesthetic and ethical development.<sup>43</sup> Gaspari shows us that in the first version of this episode the sea possesses a warmth, a body, a character all its own (52-54). Contact with its non-human physicality brings Patrice Mersault more fully to life; he experiences the sea as quasi-maternal, birthing, cradling him, throwing his aliveness into sharper relief. In *The Plague*, however, it is Dr. Rieux who recognizes the sea’s warmth, registers the moonlight, the scratchiness of the rocks on the shore; but the moonlight and rocks, the waters, rather than entities forming a dyad with him alone, the solitary swimmer, prove the background against which he attunes his perception to his dear friend Tarrou (65-66). Now Rieux is in harmony with this human companion. They stroke through the waters in sequence, Gaspari notes, speed in concert through a patch of cold – display a human intimacy at odds with their evocative and stirring, but unconscious and unconcerned environs (52, 65). In *A Happy Death*, the same glacial patch of sea quickens the lone Mersault’s sensibility, and leaves him shivering, exhilarated, happy on shore, his vitality surging in response to the sea, as Mrs. Ramsay’s and Camus’ own emotions had surged before their lone beams of light. Yet it is Camus’ mature novel that envisions feelings of personal vitality and of human intimacy intertwined. Responsiveness to the natural environment now begets a shared quickening of feeling, of rejuvenation and affection in response to nature, but also, concomitantly, in contradistinction to its endless waves and black depths, signaling the tininess of human lives and bodies (66). Rieux’s and Tarrou’s ephemeral, arresting moment of being – the plague on pause, held fleetingly at bay – becomes the quintessential emblem of human rebellion against intractable tragedy. It is sufficiently restorative to nourish both men in their return to battle – and acts as that for which they fight. Rieux, then, sees the end of the plague only after it has killed his companion. Rieux therefore includes this moment in the sea within his record of the catastrophe – as Lily’s painting commemorates moments with Mrs. Ramsay – making it clear that despite the plague’s cessation, this account of a war waged and won can never be read as melodrama.

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<sup>42</sup> See Catherine Camus, *Albert Camus: solitaire et solidaire*.

<sup>43</sup> See Séverine Gaspari, “Écrire contre soi-même: Albert Camus ou la posture du romancier.” Gaspari writes: “D’un texte à l’autre, on est passé d’une logique où l’homme tente de se sauver seul à une logique où il se sauve ensemble: de solitaire, le héros camusien est devenu solidaire ... Camus inscrit dans le passage d’une scène de baignade à l’autre la transition de *Sisyphes* à *L’Homme révolté*...” (66, 67).

Thus Camus himself comes to feel, as Mrs. Ramsay and Bernard do, that exquisite moments can and must be shared. For Camus these moments are the representatives of common human value, and he devotes *The Rebel*, his non-fiction treatise on the human revolt against death, to describing the community of feeling they inspire. Like Lily, Camus comes more and more explicitly to ground his art and philosophy in such moving and foundational scenes: “a man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, these two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened” (*LCE* 27). Camus writes these words two years before his own death, in his 1958 preface to a reissued volume of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, a collection of his earliest essays composed in 1936 and 1937. He reflects in this preface on his childhood and on his convictions and sources of inspiration:

‘There is no love of life without despair of life,’ I wrote, rather pompously, in these pages. I didn’t know at the time how right I was. I had not yet been through years of real despair. They came, and managed to destroy everything in me except my uncontrolled appetite for life. I still suffer from this both fruitful and destructive passion that bursts through even the gloomiest pages of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*. It’s been said we really *live* for only a few hours of our life. This is true in one sense, false in another. For the hungry ardor one can sense in these essays has never left me. ... My [childhood] revolts were brilliant with sunshine. They were almost always, I think I can say this without hypocrisy, revolts for everyone, so that every life might be lifted into that light. (*LCE* 13-14, 6)

For Camus, these rare moments – “we really *live* for only a few hours of our life” – never leave him, nourish him, and implant in him his “hungry ardor” for existence. When he finds his youthful, sun-soaked revolts checked by “years of real despair,” his ethics is only further solidified: “that every life might be lifted into that light,” shackled as little as the absurd cosmos permits. It is Camus’ own receptivity to such moments of being, which he also sketches in the essays *Nuptials* (1938) and *Summer* (1954), that allows him, as it does Mrs. Ramsay and Bernard, to say of life, for all its barbs and anguishes, its senseless fates and limits: “the moment was all; the moment was enough,” “it is enough!” (*W* 278, *TTL* 65)<sup>44</sup>

In Camus’ tragic vision of nature, the Mediterranean complement to Woolf’s, two inevitable forces square off – but as with the hero and history, they are not equally “legitimate” in a moral sense. The cosmos continues to check the human refusal of death, but it is this refusal that seems justified – provided that it does not pass, precisely, into historical excess and totalitarian ambitions. Speaking of the Mediterranean climate as Woolf does in “On Not Knowing Greek,” Camus recognizes in ancient drama “a solar tragedy that has nothing to do with mists” – “if the Greeks knew despair, they experienced it always through beauty and its oppressive quality. In this golden sadness, tragedy reaches its highest point” (*LCE* 148). Camus speaks of an outdoor beauty native to the theater that served to heighten an audience’s horror of

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<sup>44</sup> See Anne Prouteau’s *Albert Camus ou le présent impérissable* (2008) for a further discussion of the moment and temporality throughout Camus’ writings. Prouteau distinguishes Camus’ moments of plenitude from Jean Grenier’s. Both authors are particularly interested in indelible, foundational moments that rupture the fabric of linear time, that seem, simultaneously, to be unexpected invasions from without, communions with the natural world, and bearers of self-knowledge. Yet Camus finds these epiphanic moments quintessentially human, earthy, and bodily, while Grenier finds them mystical, aesthetic, so many signs of divinity. Camus’ moments are not, that is, instances of the Kantian sublime, of terror and transcendence, but secular moments of joy which oppose the terrors of living.

accident and loss. Camus' tragedy begins with a recognition of keen natural beauty and an acceptance of human limits – of a limited potential to protect and enjoy such beauty, of limited means with which to fight creation's absurdity – and ends in a tireless and unstinting revolt, one that can nonetheless bring happiness, endorsement of life. In his oft-quoted "Return to Tipasa" (1953), Camus writes:

Oh light! The cry of all the characters in classical tragedy who come face to face with their destinies. I knew now that their final refuge was also ours. In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer." (*LCE* 169)

For the classical hero, the light of the tragic dawn – of reversal, recognition, and excruciating discovery – has a reverse side, the touch of a hand. In Hardy's terms, having endured "a full look at the Worst," tragic man can proceed to nurture that "invincible" desire for a "way to Better" ("In Tenebris II" 14). Camus likewise finds in his very love for the sky, for the effect of its light on his receptive consciousness – making tuberculosis at age seventeen so agonizing – reason to oppose the light's portentous message to him, its assurance of nature's persistence and of his own mortality. In his very attachment to sun and to earth, Camus also finds his reasons to oppose those who emulate the light in its inhumanity, who strike as it strikes, searingly and thoughtlessly, and deprive others of their chance for happiness: "but rebellion, in man, is the refusal to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms. It is the affirmation of a nature common to all men, which eludes the world of power" (*R* 250). The rebel has learned moderation, not because he, Camus' modern-day tragic hero, bows willingly to fate – he fights the plague, he cannot justify or accept it – but because faced with such indefensible constraints, he vows never to author plague himself, to manufacture another's doom. He learns moderation not because he is reconciled to destiny, but because he loathes to compound it – he is committed to its antithesis, to an ethics of preservation.

### Camus versus Sartre: Tragic versus Anti-Tragic Ethics

Camus distances himself from Sartrean existentialism because it is *too* empowering: it avows that whatever "facticity" (necessity, fate) one faces, one is free to transform it in light of a future project or act. This is one's "freedom," one's "transcendence" of fate. There is a limitlessness to Sartrean self-assertion that Camus cannot abide. Sartre, therefore, proclaims an almost Nietzschean faith in perennially overcoming the fate one is dealt, whereas Camus insists that we acknowledge fate's irreparable damages; if we do not feel ourselves masters of fortune, we will be, in Camus' view, more cautious in the projects we elect. Not fearful and resigned, but aware that our world is not subject to "wholly human law," that we do not hold the reins of even our own history.

What Camus' fiction rejects is the idea of "*l'esquive*," eluding – the idea that life's tragedy can be overcome either in a Christian afterlife or a historical future. It is belief in such a *telos*, Camus reiterates, that makes for atrocity in its name. As Joshua Dienstag writes of Camus' position:

Eluding (*l'esquive*) is the mental maneuver that allows human beings to exist in linear time without being deflated by it, but without fully facing its challenge

either, thus “the typical act of eluding ... is hope. Hope of another life one must ‘deserve’ or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it” (*MS* 8). In this criticism, Camus means to sweep together both the transcendent hope of Christianity and the hope of historical optimists that, to him, is typified by Marxism. Both ultimately “betray” human life because they do not accept it in the time-bound, absurd state that is, in fact, its single unalterable condition. (129-130)

Camus equally rejects the idea that, without such *esquive*, a tragic sense of life must issue in withdrawal from ethics or in actual suicide. Instead, he militates against, in his view, the nihilistic premise underlying much of twentieth century politics: that the sweeping murder of fellow creatures, in the name of a given end, can be justified. As Arnaud Corbic writes in *Camus et l’homme sans dieu* (2007), Camus is fiercely opposed to all that “denies man, mutilates him and tends to crush him, that is the central theme of his oeuvre. Tragic lucidity does not preclude the demand for humanity” (174).<sup>45</sup> Yet the central indictment of Camus, arising during his own lifetime, and growing more robust afterward, is that his tragic lucidity does in fact preclude the demand for humanity. First in the infamous exchange among Francis Jeanson, Sartre, and Camus in Sartre’s journal *Les Temps modernes*, and then in postcolonial criticism of Camus in relation to Algeria, Camus is charged with turning his back on the sufferings of his contemporaries.

In 1952, Sartre tasks staff writer Jeanson with reviewing Camus’ 1951 *The Rebel*. On the one hand, Jeanson admirably synthesizes a number of Camus’ central tenets. Jeanson is certainly correct that “after endeavoring in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to prove the existence of the Absurd, [Camus establishes] that awareness of the Absurd leads not to suicide but to revolt” (*TM* 2074).<sup>46</sup> He also adroitly summarizes Camus’ distinction between revolt and revolution: “every revolution finishes by renouncing its initial movement of revolt in favor of a totalitarian pretention” (*TM* 2076). For there is “on one hand the metaphysical protest against suffering and death, on the other hand the ... temptation to omnipotence. The first represents true revolt, the second its revolutionary perversion” (*TM* 2077). On these grounds Camus refuses a Marxist view of history and the necessary *telos* it envisions. Yet Jeanson refuses to ascribe any value to Camus’ alternative ethics of revolt. For Jeanson, “Sisyphus knew already that one must not let oneself fall into the trap of action: one must act, of course, but simply for the sake of action and without expecting any result, without nourishing the illusion of giving meaning to what can never have one” (*TM* 2084). This is a shockingly unjust account of Sisyphus: it makes sheer absurdity and not “tragic lucidity” Sisyphus’ endpoint. As we have seen, Sisyphus represents action that is productive, as productive as humanly possible. It is essential that Sisyphus is happy in his journey down the mountain, that he has made his labor matter in fighting for this reprieve. Sisyphus is constrained, but motivated; he is now in a position to discriminate between action that counteracts and action that compounds the misery of his burden. He is far from a hopeless drudge – far from the nihilist who values nothing and far from the nihilist who has despaired so entirely of possessing what he does value that he *wishes* to value nothing. Contra Jeanson, the philosophical message of Sisyphus is that life invariably acquires meaning for human beings, and that this meaning is anything but illusory.

In this way Jeanson vastly misreads Camus’ rebel, his tragic hero. Jeanson contends that such a Sisyphus is locked in battle with a personified divinity, with a Creator who is supremely

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<sup>45</sup> My translation.

<sup>46</sup> All quotations in this section from Jeanson and Sartre are my translations.

unjust and has made the cosmos absurd as mankind's punishment. He argues that such a hero, nursing a perennial grudge – forever metaphysically wronged – cares nothing for terrestrial ills because they pale in comparison to this original cruelty. Yet we have seen that both Zeus' decrees and the Absurd – in Camus' evocations of tragedy – are not ethical judgments, consciously punitive, but amoral inevitabilities. They do not represent real and malevolent agency, but the intractability of mortal fates per se – which fates, in turn, only heighten the necessity of combatting earthly injustice where possible. Such was Hardy's ethical position as well. Yet Jeanson makes a mockery of it:

[In *The Rebel*, man finds himself] in an interminable and vain confrontation with his condition. This condition, for the rebel, is none other than God himself ... . Camus is certainly not an atheist: he is a passive anti-theist. He does not deny God (since he accuses him of injustice), he does not claim to triumph over him (that would be "excessive" [*démésure*]): he wants only to challenge him, and remain constantly, in relation to this Master, the rebel Slave. An estranged slave, who wants only "to conquer his own being and maintain it in the face of God": pure metaphysical conflict, from which men and their history are clearly evacuated. If God is the absolute Executioner who, condemning man to death and inflicting upon him the torture of the Absurd, submits him immediately and forever to absolute injustice, it certainly becomes difficult to take relative injustices seriously, and rather pointless to claim to remedy them: "children will always die unjustly, even in the perfect society." Thus the revolutionary is at the same time the victim and the dupe of God, because he plans to equal him in power and obviously can never do so. The rebel, by contrast, is the victim who rises up in a permanent challenge: who does not give God the satisfaction of contemplating his failures – because he plans nothing, and therefore cannot fail. (*TM* 2084)

These are biting words, a trenchant indictment of a position that is not Camus'. Jeanson contends that revolt's challenge to suffering and to death is immune to failure only because, apolitically cursing the sky, it ventures nothing; Camus objects to revolutionaries, Jeanson claims, only because they will never rival God and yet are foolish enough to try. He ignores Camus' real objection to History that plays God. He ignores revolt's own call for moderation. By contrast, Isabelle Schmitz describes Camus' view in the following way: "While revolt was born precisely from the affirmation of a limit one mustn't exceed in order to preserve human dignity, revolution betrays this original movement .... It prefers 'an abstract man to a man of flesh'" (*ERN* 75). As Camus responds to Jeanson, if the only marker of political engagement, the only proof against moral apathy, is the espousal of Stalinism, then the rebel indeed consigns himself to failure – but is progress only possible via revolution? Camus recoils from a totalitarian ethos lurking within revolutionary fervor, a desire for omnipotence which never leaves the human body intact and unmolested. This "principled," revolutionary disregard for human bodies is an instance of what Camus indeed labels "*démésure*" – his shorthand for an inhuman historical measure that brooks no restraint.

What Jeanson refers to as an interminable and vain face à face with the human condition is for Camus a perennial – constant, constitutive – battle but never a vain one. It is true that Camus foresees no absolute triumph over this condition's ills, yet his awareness of tragedy (of this irremediable conflict) leads him to more vigorously contest those who side with death

and do its bidding. The stagnant deadlock, the futile and truculent stalemate that Jeanson describes, bears little resemblance to Camus' own portrait of the unflagging Sisyphus or of the indefatigable Rieux. Camus' controversial decision to translate Nazism into pestilence, rather than signifying his replacement of history with nature, is his means of suggesting the extent to which human beings might be united in their will to combat agents of death – biological or historical. If unintentional plague is appalling to Rieux, how much more unconscionable is witting, manmade plague? Furthermore, has Camus really “evacuated men and their history” from his writings? To paint Camus a furious heretic – picturing and damning a God who, in His callousness, has consigned the world to absurdity – seems a doubly mistaken interpretation of Camus' philosophy. When Camus invokes the injustice of the universe, he refers to a wholly unconscious cosmos; it is absurd from the beginning, not the product of a withholding or vituperative deity. Absurdity is the absence of *a priori* meaning in the universe – and in response to it Camus pictures a species-wide community of responsive human bodies, each with equal claim to moments of being, and all opposed to both the nonhuman natural measure and the inhumane historical measure that extinguish such moments.

Camus pens an excoriating reply to editor-in-chief Sartre, accusing Jeanson of willful misunderstanding. Camus reiterates regarding *The Rebel*, as John Foley writes: “above all, it demonstrates that ‘the denial of history is equivalent to the denial of reality’ in the same way, neither more nor less, that ‘one separates oneself from reality by wanting to consider history as a self-sufficient totality’” (113). Sartre then enters the fray, claims that he can no longer spare Camus' delicate sensibility. Sartre's conclusion, the same as Jeanson's, is that Camus concerns himself with transhistorical human predicaments, with human solidarity before a fearsome existential fate, in order to duck participation in contemporary politics. Sartre's words, like Jeanson's, are especially cutting because they turn a keen analysis of Camus against him. Sartre addresses Camus directly:

To be happy, that was to do the job of being a man. You revealed to us “the duty to be happy.” And this duty was mingled with the affirmation that man is the sole being in the world who has a meaning “because he is the sole being who insists on having one.” Similar to Bataille's *Le supplice* but richer and more complex, you erected the experience of happiness in the face of an absent God as a reproach, but also as a challenge. “Man must affirm justice to struggle against eternal injustice, create happiness to protest against the universe of unhappiness.” The universe of unhappiness is not *social*, or at least not at first: it is the indifferent and empty Nature where man is a stranger and condemned to die. In a word it is “the eternal silence of the Divinity.” Your experience thus closely united the ephemeral and the permanent. Conscious of being perishable, you wanted to deal only with truths “that must rot.” Your body was one of those. You refused the fraud of the Soul and of the Idea. But since, according to your own terms, injustice is *eternal*—that is, since the absence of God is a constant across the changes of history—the immediate and continually reaffirmed relation of man who insists on *having* a meaning (that is to say, who demands that one be given to him) to this God who maintains an eternal silence, is itself transcendent to History. The tension by which man realizes himself – which is, at the same time, the intuitive pleasure of being – is thus a true conversion which wrenches him from his daily “agitation” and from “historicity” to make him finally coincide with his condition. One can

go no further: there is no place for progress in this instantaneous tragedy.  
("Réponse à Albert Camus 112-113)

This is indeed apt description of Camus' (hardly contradictory) belief in an eternally tragic human condition that finds expression in the perishable human body. But such a belief does not wrench Camus out of history. There is a dubious either-or logic here. Camus' fidelity to those "great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened" does express his determination to "create happiness to protest against the universe of unhappiness," to oppose "indifferent and empty Nature where man is a stranger and condemned to die." Camus does derive his convictions from the truths of a body "destined to rot," an expression Camus himself had used in reviewing Sartre's own novel of bodily distress, *Nausea* (LCE 200). Quite simply, however, none of these attitudes necessitates indifference to social progress.

Camus, on the contrary, openly argues for an accord between unceasing tragedy ("transcendent to History") and an ensuing opposition to the specific nightmares of history. As Foley explains, too, in *Albert Camus: from the Absurd to Revolt* (2008):

First, we should note that man's insistence on meaning in no way implies, as Sartre has it, that "[man] demands that he be given one." Instead it suggests that man has the capacity to *create* meaning ... [and] we should note that the act of creating meaning is necessarily done *in history*. ... There is no doubt that Camus continues to see, in the context of the absurd, the human condition characterized by an absence of justice (as opposed to the presence of injustice), and there is no doubt that he also sees rebellion as emerging out of this context. [But] Camus also clearly understands rebellion in a political context, as *The Rebel* makes clear. ... Crucially, nowhere does Camus assume that the immediate cause of political injustice is anything other than political. (118-19)

Camus writes in his 1945 *Letters to a German Friend* that "I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one" (RRD 28). There is, indeed, no hint of Camus' demanding that such a meaning be assigned from without. Foley is quite right, too, to distinguish between the "presence of injustice" and "the absence of justice," for it is in the latter that Camus locates absurdity, itself the spur to revolt – which is wholly conducive to political engagement. Camus asks Sartre why he, on the other hand, claims objective knowledge of history's significance, of history's definitive and predetermined end. Camus, as Foley summarizes, asks Sartre how "*Les Temps modernes*' implicit faith in Marxist historical determinism did not contradict its founding existentialist principle of radical freedom" (117).

Sartre makes no reply to this perspicacious inquiry; instead, he cites Camus out of context when he alleges Camus' resistance to historical "agitation." Sartre invokes a line from Camus' 1939 essay "The Minotaur or Stopping in Oran": "How tempting to merge oneself with these stones, to mingle with this burning, impassive universe that challenges history and its agitations!" (LCE 130). In Camus' philosophy, however, as we have seen, "this burning, impassive universe" need not eliminate History's importance – any more than it denies the moment of being its value. Hot, steely desert stone does provide a perspective outside of human history, a perspective which can dissolve character, as it temporality does Bernard, and which can induce the thought of merging with its stoniness, as we saw with Alberto Caiero. But this

stony “challenge” to the significance of human affairs can also throw into relief such concerns’ distinctively human meaning. Oran’s immensity of stone indeed tempts Camus, in his essay, to abdicate his humanity, to adopt the insensibility and immortality of this landscape; stone, for Camus, always brings to mind human annihilation and the impassivity of the natural world. Yet it is precisely the siren song of such self-erasure, the call to mingle with unfeeling stoniness, in order to elude existential and historical agitation, that Camus’ entire body of essays – on variously stony and seaside environments, life-negating and life-affirming – and his entire corpus of fiction resists.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, echoing Jeanson, Sartre signally mischaracterizes Camus as one who still believes in and personifies God, as one who is not an atheist but an anti-theist – conceiving of a God who has quite literally turned his back upon the world. But by “the silence of the Divinity,” Camus again refers to its inexistence, rather than to its recalcitrance. The latter interpretation is appealing to Sartre, perhaps, because it can establish a view of Camus’ revolt as a merely recriminatory dispute with the heavens, rather than as a foundational and productive posture toward all human experience. Sartre’s suggestion, therefore, is that to be absorbed with instantaneous tragedy – with tragedy that can erupt at any historical moment – is to do no more in the world than sound a disconsolate minor key on a moralist’s piano. It is to passively lament a world hopelessly flawed in its very constitution. For Camus, however, precisely the minor chords of Meursault and Clamence – who elude a sense of the tragic and therefore fail to act ethically – demand the major chords of Rieux and Janine. In Camus’ own life, it is the minor key of tragedy itself, existential and social, that compels him to sound the major keys of atheistic revolt, of political engagement, and of art.

#### Tragic Heroine: Janine

In “The Adulterous Wife” (1956), the opening story in *Exile and The Kingdom*, we encounter Camus’ first tragic heroine, Janine, who is fascinated by images of fixity, who imagines a land where “no one would grow old or die” (*EK* 26). Janine is moved by these unrealizable fantasies not to renounce a world in which time cannot be stilled, but to accept and endorse the nearest substitute: moments of satiety within time. Janine’s very desire for the sky’s immensity and longevity comes to revive her, to rekindle her waning fires – to reawaken her pleasure in existing.

A moment of being melts the cold around her, the icy solitude of her marriage, the insistent, frozen air of the desert of North Africa. Janine and her husband Marcel have left behind their comfortable quarters in the city to travel across this chill and imposing landscape because his business is not what it was; at the tail end of colonial rule, French commerce is on the

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<sup>47</sup> Camus’ fiction explicitly seeks to acknowledge and then to combat this “yearning to be nobody” (*FM* 279). Sartre, however, contends that Camus embraces a view of nature which can only trivialize history. Sartre maintains that Camus shows his hand in his (Camus’) *Letters to a German Friend*: “for so many years now, you have tried to *make me enter History*,” Sartre misquotes Camus. Yet Camus’ actual words have no such import: “For a long time we both thought that this world had no ultimate meaning and that consequently we were cheated. I still think so in a way. But I came to different conclusions than the ones you used to talk about, which for so many years now, you have been trying to introduce into history” (rpt. in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* 27). Foley notes that “In his essay ‘In Defence of *The Rebel*,’ unpublished at the time of his death, Camus alludes to this falsification. Ian Burchall notes that Sartre’s misquotation was immediately observed in a contemporary review (Jacques Carat, ‘Le Rupture Camus-Sartre,’ *Preuves*, October 1952), but doesn’t himself think the misquotation detracts from Sartre’s ‘fundamentally just’ argument (Birchall 1994: 194n.88)” (201).

decline. Marcel insists that Janine accompany him as he peddles his wares on foot, in order to provide for her, he says, a suitcase planted between his legs (*E* 8). It is Janine's perspective we follow. During the bus ride, she remarks that "[t]he sand now struck the windows in packets as if hurled by invisible hands" (*E* 4). Janine experiences the natural environment as a hostile and anonymous attacker, and feels herself too large among the bus' Arab travelers. Only the one other Frenchman on board takes notice of her, but not with desire; to her, then, he seems to resemble the sandy, impassive hardness of her surroundings.

Upon disembarking in a remote town, Janine again finds that an Arab man who will not move aside for her husband possesses the same alien, imperturbable desert rigidity that she has attributed to the Frenchman. Janine reflects, too, in free indirect style, that "probably he [Marcel] didn't love her" and that he does not satisfy her (*E* 27). Yet Marcel needs her:

But she did know that Marcel needed her and that she needed that need, that she lived on it night and day, at night especially – every night, when he didn't want to be alone, or to age or die, with that set expression he assumed which she occasionally recognized on other men's faces, the only common expression of those madmen hiding under an appearance of wisdom until the madness seizes them and hurls them desperately toward a woman's body to bury in it, without desire, everything terrifying that solitude and night reveals to them. (*E* 28)

Janine recognizes Marcel's loveless terror, his own desperation to escape time and death. In response to some inner prompting of her own, however, she insists that they visit an abandoned military fort, now, it seems, just a scenic lookout:

Janine, leaning her whole body against the parapet, was speechless, unable to tear herself away from the void opening before her. Beside her, Marcel was getting restless. He was cold; he wanted to go back down. What was there to see here, after all? But she could not take her gaze from the horizon. Over yonder, still farther south, at that point where sky and earth met in a pure line – over yonder it suddenly seemed there was awaiting her something of which, though it had always been lacking, she had never been aware until now. In the advancing afternoon the light relaxed and softened; it was passing from the crystalline to the liquid. Simultaneously, in the heart of a woman brought there by pure chance a knot tightened by the years, habit, and boredom was slowly loosening. She was looking at the nomads' encampment. ... Since the beginning of time, on the dry earth of this limitless land scraped to the bone, a few men had been ceaselessly trudging, possessing nothing but serving no one, poverty-stricken but free lords of a strange kingdom. Janine did not know why this thought filled her with such a sweet, vast melancholy that it closed her eyes. She knew that this kingdom had been eternally promised her and yet that it would never be hers, never again, except in this fleeting moment perhaps when she opened her eyes again on the suddenly motionless sky and on its waves of steady light, while the voices rising from the Arab town suddenly fell silent. It seemed to her that the world's course had just stopped and that, from that moment on, no one would ever age any more or die. Everywhere, henceforth, life was suspended – except in her heart, where,

at the same moment, someone was weeping with affliction and wonder  
[*quelqu'un pleurait de peine et d'émerveillement*]. (EK 23-25)

A certain experience, previously wanting in her life, is befalling her. The sky's light itself "relaxed and softened," passes from hard crystal to seeming liquid. By pure chance, she has glimpsed what she takes to be a tableau in which this small, free band of travelers manages to make an ever-shifting home within a "limitless" and inhospitable terrain – and this thought, this idea, helps to dissolve a calcified knot inside her. Janine imagines these nomads to have been there "since the beginning of time," "free lords of a strange kingdom." She claims to know, too, that this enduring realm, to which these outsiders are bound, has "been eternally promised her" – always the target of her desire – but that she can only take hold of it in this singular, initiatory moment. She beholds a silent and "suddenly motionless sky." She imagines a permanent stop to the "world's course," to both its temporal and spatial movement. As Mrs. Ramsay would say: "Life stand still here" (TL 161).

Yet even Janine's sensations of cessation and suspension are filled with mobile vitality. The motionless sky beats with "steady waves of light." And while life for her, externally, is paused, internally "someone" – a self barely knows, foreign and yet most intimate – is actively weeping with unprecedented, awe-struck feeling. This liberating hiatus from her married life, untethering her from the world's routine, from its oppressive emotional and economic transactions, then catalyzes a furious need in her later that night:

... she too was afraid of death. "If I could overcome that fear, I'd be happy. . . ." Immediately, a nameless anguish seized her. She drew back from Marcel. No, she was overcoming nothing, she was not happy, she was going to die, in truth, without having been liberated. Her heart pained her; she was stifling under a huge weight that she suddenly discovered she had been dragging around for twenty years. Now she was struggling under it with all her strength. She wanted to be liberated even if Marcel, even if the others, never were! Fully awake, she sat up in bed and listened to a call that seemed very close. But from the edges of night the exhausted and yet indefatigable voices of the dogs of the oasis were all that reached her ears. A slight wind had risen and she heard its light waters flow in the palm grove. It came from the south, where desert and night mingled now under the again unchanging sky, where life stopped, where no one would ever age or die any more. Then the waters of the wind dried up and she was not even sure of having heard anything except a mute call that she could, after all, silence or notice. But never again would she know its meaning unless she responded to it at once. At once – yes, that much was certain at least! (E 29-30)

Janine imagines this lapping, imploring wind to traverse the "again unchanging sky" of earlier that day, "where life stopped." Again, she feels "called" to reprise and pursue an experience akin to Mrs. Ramsay's "still space": a momentary sensation of reprieve from time and death that will sustain her in the face of them (TL 105).

Janine makes her way back to the fort, through the freezing darkness: "the cold, no longer having to struggle against the sun, had invaded the night; the icy air burned her lungs" (E 31). She arrives shaken and emotionally famished:

Her running had not warmed her and she was still trembling all over. But the cold air she was gulping down soon flowed evenly inside her and a spark of warmth began to glow amidst her shivers. Her eyes opened at last on the expanse of night.

Not a breath, not a sound – except at intervals the muffled crackling of stones that the cold was reducing to sand – disturbed the solitude and silence surrounding Janine. After a moment, however, it seemed to her that the sky above her was moving in a sort of slow gyration. In the vast reaches of the dry, cold night, thousands of stars were constantly appearing, and their sparkling icicles, loosened at once, began to slip gradually toward the horizon. Janine could not tear herself away from contemplating those drifting flares. She was turning with them, and the apparently stationary progress little by little identified her with the core of her being, where cold and desire were now vying with each other. Before her the stars were falling one by one and being snuffed out among the stones of the desert, and each time Janine opened a little more to the night. Breathing deeply, she forgot the cold, the dead weight of others, the craziness or stuffiness of life, the long anguish of living and dying. After so many years of mad, aimless fleeing from fear, she had come to a stop at last. At the same time, she seemed to recover her roots and the sap again rose in her body, which had ceased trembling. Her whole belly pressed against the parapet as she strained toward the moving sky; she was merely waiting for her fluttering heart to calm down and establish silence within her. The last stars of the constellations dropped their clusters a little lower on the desert horizon and became still. Then, with unbearable gentleness, the water of night began to fill Janine, drowned the cold, rose gradually from the hidden core of her being and overflowed in wave after wave, rising up even to her mouth full of moans. The next moment, the whole sky stretched out over her, fallen on her back on the cold earth. (*E* 32-33)

She projects herself upon the “sparkling icicles” of the stars, moves with them across the sky toward the horizon. As she associates herself with these flares of light, their “stationary progress little by little identifies her with the core of her being, “where cold and desire” vie for ascendancy. Like Mrs. Ramsay and Camus, before their own beams of light, Janine comes closest to herself as she revels in the landscape. She adopts its expansiveness and feels heady warmth steal over her. In their stillness, her stars nonetheless travel – make their “stationary progress” – and watching them, her desire begins to overcome the cold. Janine opens herself more and more to the night; her persistent thoughts of death recede from consciousness. She momentarily forgets “the long anguish of living and dying” – “she forgot,” that is, in the grips of an unmatched and heated attachment to the “cold earth.” Her renewed vitality makes for such amnesia, an alternative to the “mad, aimless fleeing from fear” that has only left her numb, sapless as petrified wood. It is this emancipation, this fearless, intuitive pleasure of being, that henceforward “roots” her to life. She banishes the stifling, weighty need of her husband. As it does for Mrs. Ramsay, something quickens inside her: “the sap again rose.” As Mrs. Ramsay’s wedge-shaped core of darkness brimmed with happiness when “waves of pure lemon ... curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind,” so the “water of night began to fill Janine, drowned the cold, rose gradually from the hidden core of her being and overflowed in wave after wave” (*TL* 65).

Janine is not tempted to become impassive stone, as Camus is in Oran and in the dry, mineral desert of Djémila. Hiroki Toura, in *La quête et les expressions du bonheur dans l'œuvre d'Albert Camus* (2004), traces Camus' own rapport with natural settings – the seaside of Tipasa versus the desert of Djémila, for instance – in *Nuptials*. It is the sun-warmed seascape of Tipasa that leads Camus to open his heart to the world, to feel his entire person in accord with the landscape, and to sense fully his love for others, imagining their shared responsiveness to such beauty. It is in the desert, however, as Toura shows, that Camus records the inhuman face of nature, which seems to rob him of personhood, and confronts him with death; to be in accord with this hard, wind-swept place is to imagine himself a stone, divested of sensibility. In Djémila, Camus has much the same experience he describes in Oran. Toura recounts: “It is among these ruins that Camus believes he can find ‘the right word between horror and silence to express the conscious certainty of a death without hope’” (102).<sup>48</sup> Janine, however, comes alive in this forbidding setting, comes to epitomize human warmth and desire.

Camus composes “The Adulterous Wife” alongside some of his most fervent political commentaries on Algeria – his appeals to end its “fratricidal” bloodshed, to establish a civilian truce, and to envision an equitable multiculturalism on its soil (AC 152).<sup>49</sup> But for postcolonial critics, Janine’s epiphanic love affair with the natural environment seems a particularly blatant instance of Camus’ erasure of colonial history from his fiction. These nomads who wander the desert far from any river are not timeless fixtures of the landscape; they have been methodically robbed of arable farmland. As Sartre makes clear in “Colonialism is a System” and “A Victory,” French Algerian countryside is first and foremost land taken and stolen.<sup>50</sup> It cannot be re-parceled and reallocated equitably, he argues, so long as the colonial machine, self-propagating and rapacious, persists. Thus Camus’ sense of existential common ground cannot make for common ground in point of fact. Sartre would find in Janine a romantic ahistoricity, and a romanticizing disregard for the very history of the fort in which she finds herself thawing and liberated. Janine, on such readings, is reborn only when she breaks from all memory of her own colonial past and culpability; she simply leaves Marcel and his baggage behind. Conor Cruise O’Brien and Edward Said persuasively read such forgetfulness of historical circumstance as Camus’ apology for colonial occupation, as the licensing of permanent amnesia.

These are damning critiques to be sure, reducing Camus to a particularly clever apologist for capitalist and colonialist exploitation and for right-wing ideology: pushing colonial violence from view out of moral turpitude, or out of nostalgic, obdurate love for the land of his mother and childhood.<sup>51</sup> Yet these indictments seem to miss the mark not simply because of the Camus of *Combat* or of “Misery in Kabylia,” but precisely because of Camus the fiction writer. Camus’ ethics is Hardy’s: existential pessimism dictates meliorism. Shared and foundational existential knowledge, awakening characters to common human value, is what gives historical injustice its meaning; injustice is, for Camus, the betrayal of this shared humanity. Injustice shows itself, as in Hardy, the handmaiden of death, marked by needless tragedy. Rather than a romanticizing defense of colonialism, Camus might suggest, with this story, that it is because Janine can

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<sup>48</sup> My translation.

<sup>49</sup> See Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*.

<sup>50</sup> See Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*.

<sup>51</sup> Conor Cruise O’Brien, in “Camus, Algeria, and ‘The Fall’” (1969), cites Camus’ comment to a reporter in Sweden, after he has received the Nobel Prize: “I have always condemned terror. I must also condemn a terrorism which operates blindly, in the streets of Algiers for example, and which one day may strike my mother or my family. I believe in justice but I will defend my mother before justice.” “Terrorism which operates blindly” echoes Camus’ characterization of tragic fate itself – to which he will not accord justice.

rediscover her innocent and unsullied taste for existence that she seems – not to divorce herself permanently from Marcel and from history – but to be poised to remake her marriage, and even Algeria’s future, on the basis of a universal human right to such moments. If natural vistas can awaken at once an appetite for life and despair at its impermanence, then this rapport with the land, far from eclipsing the significance of history, suggests that all have equal stake in it. It is this rule, which Sartre finds moralistic, that leads Camus to his promotion of pacific solutions to war in Algeria. He is not blind to French atrocities, inclined to overlook them as he focuses his eye upon an abstract, collective human fate. Instead, he finds that shared human response to that fate – one of loathing and defiance – serves as the fiercest indictment of historical dehumanization and murder. With a lyricism the opposite of his spare, “American” style in *The Stranger*, Camus celebrates Janine’s break from Marcel and all he signifies (*LCE* 348).

Discussing his upcoming publication of *Albert Camus the Algerian* in a 2007 interview, David Carroll also argues against postcolonial critics for the continuing value of Camus’ perspective:

[Camus] condemned the use of torture and summary executions by the French army and the politics of the extreme right, which supported at any costs the continuation of French rule in Algeria. In spite of harsh criticisms of his position from both the political left and right, Camus stubbornly continued to believe in the possibility of creating a democratic, multi-cultural society in a postcolonial Algeria in which all populations would have equal rights. ... During the cold war Camus attacked Stalinist forms of Marxism and wrote polemical critiques of both the concept and reality of revolution in general. But at the same time he remained critical of what could be called imperialist forms of democracy, as well as what he feared was an emerging Islamic empire rooted in political and religious fanaticism. ... By extension, he attacked all justifications for the assassination of political opponents, indiscriminate bombings of cities and villages, the torture and execution of suspects, and the use of both terrorist and counterterrorist tactics against civilians. Camus placed justice before politics, the protection of the lives of individual civilians before the achievement of political goals, no matter how just those goals were claimed to be or in fact actually were. This explains why during the Algerian War he repeatedly denounced the criminal nature of both the French army's counterterrorist strategy and the FLN's use of terrorism against civilians. ... [By an “age of terror,” Camus meant] an age in which politics is treated as religion, and religion, the belief in an absolute Truth, considered the unquestionable basis for politics. (<http://cuplive.ifactory.com/static/carroll-interview>)

It is Janine’s taste for a momentary reprieve from the “anguish of living and dying,” detached from fanatical politics and from theocracy, that signifies her taste for revolt, and is the basis for Camusian political action.

While for Sartre the foreign presence bleeding Algeria dry must leave in order to cease and desist, for Camus, Janine’s bodily and affective awakening might bear within it a promise of peace and reconstruction on Algerian soil. “The Adulterous Wife” hints that history could be made afresh, on the basis of a liberating and re-humanizing self-knowledge, one that stands apart from history – like a haven, a steadfast source of renewal – but inevitably bears upon it, by

throwing into relief history's own unconscionable ravages and forced exiles. Speaking of the lessons of Greek tragedy in "Helen's Exile," Camus writes in this vein:

... it is indecent today to proclaim that we are the sons of Greece. Or, if we are, we are sons turned renegade. Putting history on the throne of God, we are marching toward theocracy, like those the Greeks called barbarians, whom they fought to the death in the waters of Salamis. ... We live in the time of great cities. The world has been deliberately cut off from what gives it permanence: nature, the sea, hills, evening meditations. There is no consciousness any more except in the streets because there is history only in the streets, so runs the decree. And, consequently, our most significant works demonstrate the same prejudice. One looks in vain for landscapes in the major European writers since Dostoevski. History explains neither the natural universe that came before it, nor beauty which stands above it. Consequently it has chosen to ignore them. ... It is by knowledge of our ignorance, refusing to be fanatics, recognizing the world's limits and man's, through the faces of those we love, in short, by means of beauty – this is how we may rejoin the Greeks. (*LCE* 150–151, 153)

Camus thus incorporates the natural universe and its beauty into his fiction, not to deny history, but to gain a vantage point – like Janine's from the fort – from which to refashion it. Janine herself militates against the deformation and forgetting of the human body.

In keeping with this somatically-rooted vision of value, Dienstag argues that Camus' commitment to epiphanic moments of being does not require:

a kind of radical romanticism that tells us to abandon all thought of the past and future to experience as deeply and intensely as we can whatever is in front of us. ... we can only experience this view by withdrawing entirely from a historical perspective and narrowing our vision to the immediate, the instant. Living the moment is the attempt to reverse, or cancel, the fall into time. (141)

Camus and his characters do not live the moment in this escapist fashion. Their attachment to the momentary is not such a romantic endeavor to abolish time and to evade history.

#### Tragic Hero and Heroine: Jacques and Jessica

Camus' unfinished opus, *The First Man*, was to be his most sweeping novel, passing from the colonization of Algeria to the French Resistance, and from a beloved mother to an impassioned love affair. He imagined it as his *War and Peace*. Camus' notes for all that was to come (perhaps only one of three sections is provisionally drafted) shimmer and tantalize. The final pages of his manuscript just begin to introduce the novel's love interest:

He [Jacques Cormery] had loved her for her beauty and for the openhearted and despairing passion for life that was hers, and that made her deny, deny that time could pass, though she knew it was passing at that very moment .... Intelligent and outstanding in so many ways, perhaps just because she was truly intelligent and outstanding, she rejected the world as it was. ... Then, her blood on fire, she

wanted to flee, flee to a country where no one would grow old or die, where beauty was imperishable, where life would always be wild and radiant, and that did not exist; she wept in his arms when she returned, and he loved her desperately. (*FM* 283-84)

She “[denies] that time could pass,” longs for a land of imperishable beauty where “no one would grow old or die,” and weeps for this unrealizable place. She is very much like Janine, and Jacques, too, who is perennially “rebellious against the deadly order of the world” (*FM* 26).

Critic Agnès Spiquel, analyzing Camus’ recently unveiled notes for the novel – those only published in 2008 – identifies this unnamed woman as “Jessica,” a character Camus began to sketch for *The First Man* as early as 1953, in his journals and elsewhere. Spiquel notes that Camus was already taken with Shakespeare’s Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, celebrating her fiery, dauntless love in a 1939 essay on Pisa and Florence, “The Desert,” in *Nuptials*. As Spiquel describes Jessica in “What would have been the love story of *The First Man*?” (2010):

Jessica is the woman to whom love gives every audacity; she is the anti-Juliet, the happy lover who runs towards her happiness and sings the happiness of loving with the one she loves. Since 1939, everything is known about Jessica: marvelous, she is above all the marvelous occasion of love. Since 1945, Camus knows that she will be the heroine of the love story he will write one day; he notes in his *Carnets*: “love story: Jessica.” (18)<sup>52</sup>

Spiquel contends that “Camus represents Jessica as a Camusian heroine, very close to the narrator of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* for whom ‘there is no love of life without despair of life’” (23). Jessica indeed appears well matched to Jacques, who is repeatedly characterized by his “famished ardor, that mad passion for living which had always been part of him and even today was still unchanged” (*FM* 282-83). Spiquel cites Camus’ own envisioning of Jessica, from a newly available section of his sketches for the novel, which he entitled “The Pyre” (“*Le Bûcher*”), the name itself commingling life’s vital heat and irreversible losses:

One could believe that she was rebelliousness [*insoumission*] itself and it is true that this being crowned with flames burned like revolt itself. But she was above all acceptance. “I would accept dying today (at age 30) because I have had enough joy. And if I had to live again, I would want the same life, despite its extreme misfortunes.” (Spiquel 24)

Rather than nourishing a wish to flee the world, moments of happiness sustain Jessica, allow her even to pass Nietzsche’s test of eternal recurrence.

In contrast to Jessica, Spiquel introduces Marie, whom Camus also sketches in his plans for the novel. Marie, decidedly, does not believe in the promise of a salvific future, yet she is drowning, as Camus describes her, in an anguishing present. She is borne downward by her knowledge of suffering and death, with no countervailing joys to keep her afloat. She experiences happiness, Camus writes, only as the precursor to loss, betrayal, and pain. Camus evokes her in his notes:

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<sup>52</sup> All quotations from Spiquel and from Camus’ notes on the *The First Man* are my translations.

One of M.'s secrets is that she has never been able to accept, nor bear, or simply forget sickness or death. ... Life for her is nothing but time, which itself is sickness and death. She does not accept time. She braces herself in a battle already lost. When she yields, there she is drifting with the current, with the face of a drowned woman. She is not of this world, because she refuses it with all her being, except in *moments* of glory or beauty. (Spiegel 20-21)

Marie's despair comes of valuing what is insecure and terrestrial, and of wishing in turn to forgo it. She recognizes the inevitability of time's passing; she experiences temporal limitation as "a battle already lost." Her moments of glory and beauty act only as salt in the wound that is the world. Unlike Jessica, she cannot harness the power of these moments in a way that fortifies her, cannot make them life-rafts in the Dionysian flood of time. Jessica, like Janine, manages to stay afloat down the tragic river; Marie is going under, yielding to non-being. She is "not of this world" because she eludes it – not via hope for celestial or earthly perfection to come – but via a life-negating hopelessness that causes her to refuse the here-and-now.

Jessica and Marie: both opposed to time, the first out of passionate defiance, out of love for a life she cannot bear to lose, the second out of unshakable despair at that same life and its losses. Camus' Janine thus begins as Marie – could weep for loneliness, for the fearsomeness of death – and ends as Jessica, exultant, weeping with the very love that accounts for death's fearsomeness. Janine ceases to drown in Marie's icy waters, and is bathed in Jessica's fires. Janine is "adulterous" because she experiences this heated passion apart from Marcel; Camus celebrates this life-affirming adultery. At the same time, in his notes for *The First Man*, particularly in the "The Pyre," he writes in a Proustian vein of the scorching pain of others' freedom:

They wept. About what they could no longer get back, about the crime of not having been side by side from their birth to their death, about the cruel earth where no one ever belongs to anyone.... (Spiegel 24)

Infinite desire to possess all and wild rage at failing. To keep this being in my presence – and far from her, I would not suffer if I knew her to be abandoned [to] everyone and sterile and turned toward me alone. (Spiegel 28)

In addition to the pain of jealousy, of unknowable otherness, the pain of eventual and irreversible loss that Camus here describes in relation to Jacques' and Jessica's love might also apply to Janine's brief tryst with the sky. As Spiegel evokes it: "the fragment that contains 'The Pyre' is one long cry in which suffering and wonder mix indissolubly, not only because the union of lovers is ephemeral and they end by separating, but above all because separation is inscribed in the very heart of the love relationship" (29). So Dienstag writes of Camus' rebel in love: "he acknowledges the tragedy of our condition by accepting that the intensity of feeling we call 'love' is not actually extended over time, as we pretend it is by insisting that love only finds its meaning in long-term, linear narratives. 'There is no noble love but that which recognizes itself to be both short-lived and exceptional' (*MS 74*)" (142). Janine, like Jessica, however, may carry her moments with her for continued warmth.

Janine's revived body prefigures Jessica's, as Camus evokes the latter in his notes: "her body was burning. It was literally consumed by a sort of incandescent fire which had to be

located inside her” (Spiquel 24). Janine may come to feel, too, what Jacques does: “And he knew that even if he had to return to this dryness where he had always lived, he would devote his life, his heart, gratitude [to this] being who had allowed him once, one single time perhaps, but once, to attain [*d’accéder*]...” (Spiquel 30). Janine and Jessica each embody Camus’ 1950 imagining, in his *Notebooks*, of a novelistic character to come; from his notebook he recopies the following line and places it at the head of “The Pyre”: “As if at the first warmth of love the snows accumulated in her melted gradually to give way to the irresistible gushing waters of joy” (Spiquel 31; Camus, *Notebooks 1942-51* 248). At the close of her story, too, Janine “weeps copiously, unable to restrain herself” (*EK* 33). She does not weep in Marcel’s arms, as Jessica weeps in Jacques’, but hers is the same love-induced, voluptuous testament to life.

### Anti-Tragic Hero: Meursault

Camus’ Meursault in *The Stranger* (1942) seems to possess not even a repressed consciousness of such moments of being. Meursault, up until the point at which he shoots another man, and even afterward, cannot fathom past or future losses, his own or others’. As Sartre finds in “An Explication of *The Stranger*” (1943), Meursault seems primarily to exist in “a succession of inert present moments”; for Sartre such immediacy demonstrates a kind of earthy candor, heroic rootedness, and existential realism (110). Yet Meursault’s is the timeless now of the absurd itself, unconscious and non-teleological, of the natural environment, of the sun-shattered landscape. He proves a stranger to real moments of being because for all their rich, sensuous mooring in the present, they depend upon a sense of past and future, of elapsing time; they are ballasts in the tide of life, anchors, safe havens, precious because their possessors feel their rarity and their fragility, and wield them (remember and commemorate them) against the specter of their passing, against linear time as tragic antagonist.

The famous conclusion to the novel’s first section, its midway-point and first of two apexes, is Meursault’s much vexing commission of murder, his seemingly inexplicable, unnecessary, and unmotivated act, little comprehensible to Meursault himself. It is a decisive and irreversible occurrence which fails to make sense either as the culmination of prior plot points or as the culmination of a prior nexus of thought and feeling; it is not a concentrated moment of being, but an eerie moment of near non-being. For all the lyricism with which Camus depicts the scene – the passage has quite a breathtaking poetry – Meursault does not seem, here, to be the lyric subject, a lyric self constituted by a moment of quickened affect or self-knowledge:

All I could feel were the cymbals of sunlight crashing on my forehead and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear flying up from the knife in front of me. The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes. That’s when everything began to reel. The sea carried up a thick fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire. (*S* 59)

Meursault’s already circumscribed interiority is melting away entirely; he becomes a sensorium only, receptive to light and heat. Only at the section’s close does he relay to us two lines of quasi-reflection, between which he recounts his further inexplicable action:

I knew that I shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I’d been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where

the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times at the door of unhappiness [*et c'était comme quatre coups brefs que je frappais sur la porte du malheur*]. (S 59)

It is this last line, with its ominous foreboding – its presentiment of future unhappiness – that seems so decidedly *out* of character. This simile seems too self-aware, too predictive, too conceptual for the sun-and-sea Meursault. But blindly and without motive, he has sealed his fate, shooting four more times.

And even though he presages his passage into unhappiness, even though he feels the loveliness of the day rent and spoiled, he does not feel motivated to fight for his own life during his trial. Even as he begins to speak aloud tirelessly in his cell, and to invoke and retrace past enjoyments in memory, resurrecting so many treasures – seeming to awaken, simultaneously, to voice and to personal history, to temporal consciousness – and even as he grows desperate to be spared the guillotine, to have more time with all that he has loved, his final epiphany appears a regressive disavowal of human time and human value. Meursault determines that “nothing, nothing mattered and he knew why,” and that he had always been right to live as he did, in nearly unconscious and somnolent, preferably pleasurable, apathy, giving no thought to past or future (S 122-23). Unless this is the disingenuous and anguished cry of a man who must persuade himself no longer to care about a world he has indeed come to love – because he must now lose it and that loss is unbearable – Meursault’s final, “enlightened” return to the complacency with which he began reveals the extent to which his philosophical recognition of absurdity proves sterile and life-negating, affords him only this rationale for self-satisfied indifference. Faced with the chaplain who insists upon God, Meursault denounces life as much as Camus, writing his university thesis on Saint Augustine and Neo-Platonism, believes that Christianity does.

When Sartre in *Les Temps modernes* accuses Camus of a self-absorbed embrace of ephemeral delights, akin to Meursault’s, Sartre overlooks Meursault’s frank and unnerving nihilism, the antithesis of Camus’ tragic ethics. This was never Camus’ conception of the consequences of the absurd. It was only Meursault’s. Camus resembles Meursault no more than Sartre resembles the fascist anti-Semite, Lucien Fleurier, of his own *Childhood of a Leader*. Yet Alain Robbe-Grillet maintains in “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy” (1958) that *The Stranger* does represent the querulous and apolitical tragedy of which Jeanson and Sartre accuse Camus. Robbe-Grillet writes that in the twentieth century “the novel is tragedy’s chosen field,” but that this mixed genre only resurrects anthropocentric humanism, shows characters hounded by a cruel God who expresses himself through wounding nature (“NHT” 73). Robbe-Grillet finds in *The Stranger* a personified landscape persecuting Camus’ hero and dooming him to death:

The crucial scene of the novel affords the perfect picture of a painful solidarity: the implacable sun is always “the same,” its reflection on the blade of the knife the Arab is holding “strikes” the hero full in the face and ‘searches’ his eyes, his hand tightens on the revolver, he tries to “shake off” the sun, he fires again, four times. “And it was – he says – as though I had knocked four times on the door of unhappiness.”

Absurdity, then, is really a form of tragic humanism. It is not an observation of the separation between man and things. It is a lovers’ quarrel, which leads to the crime of passion. The world is accused of complicity in a murder. (“NHT” 64)

Yet it is the impersonality and measureless time of nature which have become humanity's tragic antagonists in modern fiction; precisely because there is no tragedy from the willow's point of view, there is from Bernard's. Tragedy is anti-anthropomorphic. The sun does precipitate Meursault's act, but it is not made to human measure. As Raymond Williams maintains, Camus' "sense of tragic absurdity" consists in the "recognition of incompatibilities: between the intensity of physical life and the certainty of death; between man's insistent reasoning and the non-rational world he inhabits" (210, 212). Absurdity, for Camus, is what defies human beings' mythologizing, personifying tendencies; absurd nature has no love to withhold, nor any intention of ushering in fatal unhappiness. Meursault is not a tragic hero in Robbe-Grillet's sense – one for whom conflict still signifies underlying unity, the promise of reconciliation with a temperamental God, of "victory ... in being vanquished" ("NHT" 59). Nor is Meursault a tragic hero in Camus' sense, in which life's "incompatibilities" are recognized but cannot be resolved.

Meursault does fail to comprehend "the separation between man and things" – not because he personifies nonhuman nature, but because he too much resembles it. He is more of a barometer than a character: he is responsive principally to temperature, is controlled by climate. He burns, rages, and strikes as the sun does. In lieu of engaging in psychological realism – in lieu of depicting Meursault as mourning son, or as French colonialist, or even as persecuted, universal Other – *The Stranger* proves nearly science fictional in its representation of this "man" possessed by the elements.<sup>53</sup> Whereas Robbe-Grillet blames a persistently humanist conspiracy between hero and nature for Meursault's act, Camus signals that it is Meursault's failure to retain his humanity before the sun's insistent inhumanity that occasions his killing.

Meursault cares more for the scorching Algerian heat than for another's life or for his own. His sense of camaraderie lies with the "gentle indifference of the world" ("*la tendre indifférence du monde*"), "[f]inding it so much like myself – so like a brother, really"; indeed he maintains that the sky's indifference vindicates him, justifies his denial of God as well as his conviction that "nothing, nothing mattered" (S 121, 122-23). For all that he acknowledges his past pleasures, Meursault ceases to fantasize a stay of execution at the novel's close. A mob can greet him at the guillotine with "cries of hate" – such is his final wish – and he will relish the crowd's antipathy, precisely because these cries will confirm his defection from the human and his allegiance to the nonhuman (S 123). *The Stranger* is a cautionary tale, the portrait of nihilism incarnate, of a character with no sense of tragedy, who feels total equanimity in the face of not caring, who kills without compunction – as thoughtlessly as an absurd sun, and as the court that condemns him to death.

For Meursault, a reckoning with the absurd does not launch a recognition of life's value and of its tragedy – a sense that life is no less valuable for its absurdity, but tragic because loving makes for irremediable loss. It is this very sense of precarious value that grounds both Camus' and Mrs. Ramsay's revolt, that constitutes their resistance to the absurd and galvanizes their commitment to happiness. Camus makes explicit his own rejection of nihilism, and his sense that the tragic is coeval with a passion for life, in his 1938 review of Sartre's *Nausea*, and in his interviews of 1945 and 1951:

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<sup>53</sup> For postcolonial criticism of Camus, see Edward Said, "Camus and the French Imperial Experience," in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus of Europe and Africa* (1970). David Carroll, in *Camus the Algerian* (2008), reads Meursault as both Arab colonial subject, his humanity denied by the French, and Jew – "In a novel published in occupied Paris in 1942, Meursault, as a hated indigenous Other, thus also dies as a Jew" (37).

[I]t is the failing of a certain literature to believe life is tragic because it is wretched. ... Life can be magnificent and overwhelming – that is its whole tragedy. Without beauty, love, or danger, it would be almost easy to live. ... The realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning.

But does nothing have a meaning? I have never believed that we could remain at this point. ... Accepting the absurdity of everything around us is one step, a necessary experience. It should not become a dead end. It arouses a revolt that can become fruitful. (*LCE* 201, 346)

Camus shares Woolf's conception of the heightened, secular moment that "shines forth fleetingly," and finds life tragic because there *are* such moments of value to lose – whereas *Nausea's* principal character Antoine Roquentin deems existence unrelentingly repugnant, anathema to the "perfect moments" he claims for art alone (*RRD* 265; *N* 63). Unlike Proust's Marcel, for whom subjectivity is a site of full retrieval – all of Marcel's time is regained, none is lost – for Woolf and Camus, rare intervals, replete and unforgettable, must suffice for life's affirmation.<sup>54</sup> Camus records one such impression in his literary notebooks of 1936: "[i]f a cloud covers up the sun and then lets it through again, the bright yellow of the vase of mimosa leaps out of the shade. The birth of this single flash of brightness is enough to fill me with a confused and whirling joy" (8). The endangerment of what he loves and finds beautiful then awakens his sense of tragedy – "If I still feel a grain of anxiety, it is at the thought of this unseizable moment slipping through my fingers like a ball of quicksilver" (9).

To invoke Rei Terada's term, neither Camus nor Woolf "looks away," as Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* recommends – "looking away shall be my only negation" – in response to the tick of the clock, or in response to the ephemerality, as Camus writes, of "a delicate, transparent band of blue [in a stormy sky, whose] presence is a torture for the eyes and for the soul, because beauty is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time" (*Looking Away* 136; *Notebooks 1935-42* 6). Like Hardy, Camus and Woolf do not avert their gaze as *The Birth of Tragedy* encourages, nor do they look and affirm continuously, in all circumstances, delighting in transience, as mature Nietzsche counsels. They look and feel Mrs. Ramsay's "impulse of terror," Camus' impulse to despair, then look again and feel Camus' joy in the sunlit sky and Mediterranean, Woolf's in the candlelit dinner party. They brandish the one looking at the other, as Mrs. Ramsay "brandish[es] her sword at life," as the finest art for Camus "disputes reality, but does not hide from it" (*TL* 60; *R* 258).

Two convictions, therefore, run throughout Camus' work: "the perennial tension between beauty and pain," and "neither complete rejection nor complete acceptance of what is" (*RRD* 268, 264). To feel the first – "ecstasy of joy punctuated by ... sudden counterpunches" of sorrow – is to refrain from indifference, from nihilism, from absolute negation (*FM* 277). To feel the second is to refuse, like Hardy and Woolf, Nietzsche's indiscriminate affirmation of all aspects of life, for "[rebellion] says yes and no simultaneously. It is the rejection of one part of existence in the name of another part, which it exalts" (*R* 251). The rebel pits moments of

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<sup>54</sup> Camus therefore writes in *The Rebel*: "As for Proust, his contribution has been to create, from an obstinate contemplation of reality, a closed world that belonged only to him and that indicated his victory over the transitoriness of things and over death" (266).

happiness against absurdity and despair both. For love of that beautiful patch of sky hemmed in by dark clouds, the spirit of Camus' rebellion "protests, it demands, it insists that the outrage be brought to an end, and that what has up to now been built upon shifting sands should henceforth be founded on rock" (*R* 10). It hungers to say that "of such moments ... the thing is made that endures," to command "Life stand still here" (*TL* 105, 161). In Camus' view, art's task is necessarily double, and its lighting twofold:

In order to paint a still life, there must be confrontation and mutual adjustment between a painter and an apple. And if forms are nothing without the world's lighting, they in turn add to that lighting. The real universe which, by its radiance, calls forth bodies and statues receives from them at the same time a second light that determines the light from the sky. (*RRD* 264)

Art must inscribe life's tragedy and show characters heroic, Sisyphean resistance to it. Art must evoke the absurd Algerian sunlight, alien to all subjectivity, and the second light of the mind, which refuses such absurdity and toils to safeguard life's value. "The mind grows rings," Woolf writes in *The Waves*, determines a reality which is not absurd. It is this second light of the mind that Mrs. Ramsay sheds at her dinner, forging and memorializing a moment solid "like a ruby" (*TL* 105). Hers is the light that Meursault cannot shed upon the human being opposite him on the beach.

#### Anti-Tragic Hero: Clamence

Jean-Baptiste Clamence of *The Fall* (1956) represents the Camusian anti-hero desperate to elude tragedy's call to action. Beyond fate's curtailment of his freedom, Clamence fears, his own cowardice inhibits him. Clamence cannot clearly distinguish between externally wrought limitation and internal apathy – but he wagers that he has failed to sustain revolt in the sphere of action permitted him. Camus has invented, with serpentine subtlety, an egomaniacal yet self-loathing narrator who cannot bear the revelation of his own ethical shortcomings. Surveying his past, Clamence cannot prove himself innocent; he cannot exonerate himself for having made no move to intercede in a suicide in Paris, and for having drunk a dying man's water in a prisoner-of-war camp in North Africa. He abhors both the limits and moral failings which History and his own history have shown to be his; he abhors what he suspects to be his chronic weakness of character, brought to light by these fateful circumstances.

Clamence delivers a series of confessional soliloquies in *The Fall*, addressed to an unnamed interlocutor whose few responses are implied but not recorded. Clamence is a wordsmith, a charmer, previously a lawyer in Paris, a self-proclaimed master of the *plaidoirie*, of legal speech for the defense. He now practices the – intentionally mysterious – profession of "judge-penitent" in a seedy bar in the dank fogs of Amsterdam. He resides in Amsterdam's deserted Jewish quarter: "I am living on the site of one of the greatest crimes in history," he says in passing; whether this is a perverse point of pride or a macabre self-punishment is unclear (*F* 11). Striking up conversation with his prospective client, his elected listener, Clamence is full of conspiratorial contempt: likens the barman before them to a "worthy ape," to the "larger animals," to "the primates" (*F* 1, 3, 4). Disingenuously, he applauds this "Cro-Magnon man lodged in the Tower of Babel," who cannot understand the bar clientele's multiplicity of languages; Clamence praises the barman's animality, its straightforwardness, its absence of

ulterior motives (*F* 4). Yet he proceeds to vouchsafe that in the past he had felt himself wholly superior to these “human ants”; formerly he had “looked upon [himself] as something of a superman” (*F* 24, 28). Literally and figuratively, he tells his listener, he could only tolerate high ground, heights from which to dominate others.

He proceeds to detail his professional and personal triumphs; his intelligence, his wealth, his magnanimity; his physical and sexual prowess; the extent to which clients and peers alike were indebted to him. But his much-lauded charity, he pivots to confessing, was never sincere, was mere performance. He diagnoses it as exhibitionist self-gratification, masquerading as a spontaneous and uncalculated love for mankind. Clamence describes himself to his companion as a play-actor hungry for gratitude and deference, caring for no one. Clamence therefore recites his accomplishments and conquests, glories in them afresh, only to dazzle with his ensuing self-analysis: at every turn he was a paragon of concern for widows and orphans, but this goodness of heart was feigned. He makes the commencement of his undoing, his initial fall – into disquieting self-knowledge, knowledge of his duplicity – appear a virtue, once again setting him above the brutishness of the stock variety of man. This speaker who so frankly and eloquently owns his misconduct, his systematic degradation and humiliation of women, for instance, wishes to become something of a saint of self-scrutiny. How admirable a feat, he suggests, is the diagnosis of so immense a megalomania. At once Clamence convicts and stokes his narcissism. And this strategy will serve him throughout his narrative; his narrative itself is a carefully executed strategy.

Having hooked his prey with these preliminaries, Clamence discloses more of his past – for what has induced this access of insight? A laugh, he maintains, has initiated it. A hallucinated laugh he has heard one night upon the Pont des Arts in Paris; it seems to reach him from downriver, when no one is there:

I had gone up on the Pont des Arts, deserted at that hour, to look at the river that could hardly be made out now night had come. Facing the statue of the Vert-Galant, I dominated the island. I felt rising within me a vast feeling of power and – I don’t know how to express it – of completion, which cheered my heart. I straightened up and was about to light a cigarette, the cigarette of satisfaction, when, at that very moment, a laugh burst out behind me. Taken by surprise, I suddenly wheeled around; there was no one there. I stepped to the railing; no barge or boat. I turned back toward the island and, again, heard the laughter behind me, a little farther off as if it were going downstream. I stood there motionless. The sound of the laughter was decreasing, but I could still hear it distinctly behind me, come from nowhere unless from the water. At the same time I was aware of the rapid beating of my heart. (*F* 38-39)

Clamence claims that he initially forgets the incident. Yet this moment, this “surprise,” marks a definitive rupture in his complacency, his self-satisfaction, his assumption of easy dominance. His image in the mirror, he discloses, comes to seem to him “double,” as if he wore a comedian’s mask (*F* 40). He no longer feels vastly powerful and complete. On occasion, the laughter even appears to ring out from inside him: “once in a great while, I seemed to hear it within me. ... I must admit that I ceased to walk along the Paris quays. ... Its benevolent, almost tender quality ... hurt me” (*F* 42, 97). He begins to feel, too, that everyone, and the universe itself, is laughing at him:

I had the suspicion that maybe I wasn't so admirable. From then on, I became distrustful. Since I was bleeding slightly, there was no escape for me; they would devour me. (*F* 77-78)

But I was aware only of the dissonances and disorder that filled me; I felt vulnerable and open to public accusation. (*F* 78)

For a long time I had lived in the illusion of a general agreement, whereas, from all sides, judgments, arrows, mockeries rained upon me, inattentive and smiling. The day I was alerted I became lucid; I received all the wounds at the same time and lost my strength all at once. The whole universe then began to laugh at me. (*F* 81)

Lucidity entails the recognition that his supposedly infallible character, his vaunted strength, is a sham. Yet no one, he admits, is behaving differently toward him. It is true that one among his mistresses reports to another some small sexual inadequacy of his, that he receives a blow to the ear in public and fails to respond in kind, that he falls flat on his face in a crowded room. But only his own carriage and equanimity, and his attention to such incidents, has altered. It is Clamence who interprets this laughter as the universe's mockery of his pretensions to power, and as humankind's mockery also. At base, Clamence's laughter seems a symptom of his descent into self-accusatory madness. Becoming lucid undoes him; he does not resemble Oedipus or Sisyphus, as Camus reads them, who see that fate encroaches upon their liberty, but that they can nonetheless act and affirm that "all is well" within a limited compass. Clamence instead grows increasingly unwell and averse to action.

It is the suspicion of his own wanting virtue and heroism that seems to occasion the laughter in the first place, and that makes for Clamence's breakdown and subsequent subterfuges. At the novel's midpoint comes the climatic revelation – Clamence believes that he has overheard a woman committing suicide on the Pont Royal. This episode occurs two or three years, he tells us, prior to his hearing the laughter on the Pont des Arts. He passes the woman, dressed in black on the bridge, and begins walking eastward along the quays toward Saint Michel, cigarette in hand. He then hears what he interprets to be a body hitting the water, and hears a cry that, like the laughter, seems to come from downstream. He does not turn, see her, attempt to save her, or report the incident; he is paralyzed. Yet are darkness and distance mitigating circumstances in his inaction? Could he have rescued her, with the space between them, with the current and the cold? Was he under moral obligation to take this chance? Does his self-punishment match, indeed, a crime? Perhaps it is first and foremost a situation that he cannot control that appalls him. Following the laughter, however, he comes to laud slavery: he says that it relieves human beings of their freedom, their responsibility. Without freedom, he imagines, the guilt that he feels will be less shameful and less lonesome: "on the bridges of Paris I, too, learned that I was afraid of freedom. So hurrah for the master, whoever he may be, to take the place of heaven's law" (*F* 136). Clamence pretends that he would welcome the atrocities of history.

Indeed, this unknown woman's plunge haunts Clamence's speech. It renders his atheist's burden, self-determination – in lieu of "heaven's law" – intolerable to him. At the beginning of his monologue, even before any mention of laughter or suicide, he announces the unbearable dangers and expectations that accompany liberty, as he walks his listener home:

No, you will easily find your way now: I'll leave you near this bridge. I never cross a bridge at night. It's the result of a vow. Suppose, after all, that someone should jump in the water. One of two things – either you do likewise to fish him out and, in cold weather, you run a great risk! Or you forsake him there and suppressed dives sometimes leave one strangely aching. (*F* 15)

Either one must rise to the fearsome occasion or forsake another and ache with self-reproach. Clamence asserts that one must, in crossing a bridge, be prepared to “jump in the water” and to “run a great risk.” For all the ambiguity of the suicide, he nonetheless feels that in proximity to water, one must assent to a rescue mission – or be tormented by the angst that results from having done nothing. But if he has indeed been awakened to past error, he determines only to avoid such reminders and such circumstances in the future.

In his final, most feverish avowals, Clamence then returns to a past seemingly prior even to the woman's leap. Clamence tells us that he once found himself in a prisoner-of-war camp in Tunisia, during the Second World War. In Europe, he had “merely [been] asked to take part in the retreat,” had gone south “tempted by the Resistance,” and had then crossed to North Africa with the vague idea of reaching England (*F* 121). He had in desultory fashion become involved with a woman whose own clandestine activities, unbeknownst to him, issued in his arrest. Once in the camp, he encountered a fervent anti-fascist, a “Du Guesclin type,” whom he claims, unprecedentedly, to have loved. Clamence recalls that Du Guesclin sought to elect a local pope: “‘Who among us,’ asked Du Guesclin, ‘has the most failings?’ As a joke I raised my hand and was the only one to do so” (*F* 125). Jokes and laughter, however, are of the utmost seriousness to Clamence. And as all-powerful pope, leader of his faction of prisoners, he distributed their water. What transpires, we learn, is that Clamence drank the water of a dying man whom he maintains would have died regardless; yet he insists that had Du Guesclin, the courageous, principled warrior, still been alive, he would have resisted longer. Again, is he culpable for this action, under these circumstances? Is it in this concentrationary environment that a sense of unshakable guilt first overtakes him? Is it this action under duress that occasions, later, his horror at his paralysis on the quay? Does this moment account for his own fascination with suicide, water, and confession – his renaming himself Jean-Baptiste – and prophesying slavery in lieu of freedom? Is this why he wishes moral weakness and feigned heroism on everyone else? Because he cannot baptize in rivers like his namesake, because he is a withholder of water, playing pope under the scorching North African sun?

Existentially, socially, and psychologically, he grows ill at ease following the laughter that itself follows upon his perceived, water-related ethical failings: “[t]o begin with, that perpetual laugh and the laughers had to teach me to see clearly within me and to discover at last that I was not simple” (*F* 84). His existence, he narrates, then devolves into a relentless and ineffectual struggle to muffle the laughter – and to elude the judgment it signifies. Thus his espoused profession: he confesses, plays the penitent, the better to judge others, and ideally to elicit their own parallel confessions. He never aims to improve himself, only to prove that all are likewise guilty. For Clamence's great and saving realization, what has brought him to practice judge-penitence in Amsterdam, is that if he can maintain the guilt of all, his own guilt will weigh less heavily upon him. He wishes, that is, to smear the masses, to smoke them out, to seduce them into their own shameful revelations. He will preempt their derision with his admissions and

regain the upper hand when he reduces them to his likeness. Several times toward the novel's close he makes explicit his methodology:

Hence I had to find another means of extending judgment to everybody in order to make it weigh less heavily on my own shoulders. (*F* 137)

Now my words have a purpose. They have the purpose, obviously, of silencing the laughter, of avoiding judgment personally, though there is apparently no escape. Is not the great thing that stands in the way of our escaping it the fact that we are the first to condemn ourselves? Therefore it is essential to begin by extending the condemnation to all, without distinction, in order to thin it out at the start. (*F* 131)

He cannot presume *de facto* immunity from judgment, as he once did. He is quick to censure himself, because otherwise any aspersions he is wont to cast rebound back upon him:

Should I climb up to the pulpit, like many of my illustrious contemporaries, and curse humanity? Very dangerous, that is! One day, or one night, laughter bursts out without a warning. The judgment you are passing on others eventually snaps back in your face, causing some damage. (*F* 137)

Preemptive penitence and confession must therefore precede accusation. But “extending judgment to everybody” is essential: “You see, it is not enough to accuse yourself in order to clear yourself; otherwise, I’d be as innocent as a lamb. . . . The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you. Even better, I provoke you into judging yourself” (*F* 95-96, 141).

Clamence becomes the master of sweeping pronouncements. Having armored himself against charges of hypocrisy, by numbering himself among the offenders, he does in fact curse humanity, in an attempt to entice his listener into agreement:

I brought out the fundamental duplicity of the human being. (*F* 84)

I have no more friends; I have nothing but accomplices. To make up for this, their number has increased; they are the whole human race. (*F* 74)

Moreover, we cannot assert the innocence of anyone, whereas we can state with certainty the guilt of all. Every man testifies to the crime of all the others – that is my faith and my hope. (*F* 110)

This is indeed the desperate hope and faith of one filled with self-contempt, a guilt-monger who despairs of remaking himself. Clamence suffers both from self-hatred and from a still indomitable pride. He is the animation of Sartre’s and Jeanson’s unflattering portrait of Camus – the narcissistic judge, the play-acting pope, who lashes out at others because of his own inadequacy, and who should, in their estimation, be ashamed of his mad rationales for eluding ethical action.

Camus brings to life this self-absorbed, craven, and ineffectual moralizer. Rather, however, than Camus’ *mea culpa*, this exposé of Clamence seems a kind of bluff-calling: here is

what such a man would look like, and only such a man, attached to no one and wishing to be another, could embrace slavery and universal guilt as Clamence does. Indeed, Debarati Sanyal in “Broken Engagements” argues that, far from resembling Camus, Clamence embodies the ideology of state terror, and his language itself is totalitarian:

The narration thus stages the relentless articulation of a subjectivity that refigures the world in its image and constructs a totalizing ideology based on universal culpability. ... The totalitarian state creates its subjects in its own image and legitimates its violence through the imposition of universal guilt .... The narrative’s oscillating frames of reference (Paris, Amsterdam, Jerusalem, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, North Africa) underscore the pervasion of this violent representational logic to finally disclose its dormant presence in the everyday practices of even a liberal democracy. (38, 39, 40)

Clamence’s very apology for totalitarian violence is precisely what Camus, in *The Rebel*, denounces and ascribes to fascism and revolution both.

Certainly Sartre’s goals and motivations bear no resemblance to Clamence’s, but how telling, Camus’ work implies, if Sartre should find himself espousing a cause that issues in and sanctions the same brutality that this mad weaver of fictions claims to desire. Thus Shoshana Felman reads Clamence as a depiction of the culpability that attaches to a refusal of witnessing, to a determined irresponsibility before history. Felman connects Camus’ dispute with Sartre over Communism to this novelistic indictment, in her view, of Sartre’s silence and inaction in relation to the Soviet labor camps:

While Sartre thinks Camus has failed as witness since he has ceased to be the witness of a cure [as he was in *The Plague*], Camus thinks it is Sartre who is failing as a witness, since he neglects to witness and to take into account the labor camps in Soviet Russia, and fails to recognize through them the non-cessation of the Plague. While Sartre sees Camus as a *man of the past* who fails to recognize the progress made by history and thus essentially *fails to march toward the future*, Camus sees Sartre as a man who, in the name not of the real future but of the prophetic gesture –and projection – of an ideology, fails to *recognize the present* and thus *denies*, specifically, *the implications of the past*. ... Camus puts *side by side* the blindness and contradictions of historicism and the blindness and the contradictions of antihistoricism. “He who believes *nothing but history* is walking toward terror,” warns Camus; but at the same time, “he who believes *nothing of history* is authorizing terror.” (177-8, 174)

Felman reads Clamence, an “enlightened advocate of slavery,” as an embodiment of the failure to question and to intercede in history that Camus himself exposes in *The Rebel* (F 132). And is this not the very charge that Clamence lodges against himself – that for all his supposed strength, he does not rise to the occasion and act rightly? Conor Cruise O’Brien finds that Clamence is neither a complete caricature of Sartre, of left-wing French intellectuals who turn a blind eye to Stalinist terror, nor a total, self-ironizing portrait of Camus himself, as endless accuser of self and others. But O’Brien suggests that Clamence contains elements of both – that as Camus says, Clamence is a “game of mirrors” (AC 99). For O’Brien, however, Clamence represents first and

foremost an insincere commitment to justice, and expresses Camus' tortured rapport with justice in Algeria. In O'Brien's appraisal, Camus' increasingly reactionary politics, running counter to his theoretical commitments, leave him as torn, haunted, and disingenuous as Clamence.<sup>55</sup>

While Camus in *The Rebel* then critiques an unwarranted sense of justice and innocence – a sense of innocent, justified, or “logical” murder – Clamence wishes to prove all innocence and justice illusory, to retain the concepts only as unreal ideals. Rather than awakening his fellows to a complex nexus of culpability in which all might be implicated, the better to keep guilt to its necessary minimum, Clamence foists guilt onto others in an attempt to eliminate the moral grounds for his own past's haunting and reproaching him. Nonetheless, a language of aching, of pain, of wounds and suffering, of physical and emotional deterioration pervades his narrative:

Nothing definite, a dejection perhaps, a sort of difficulty in recovering my good spirits. ... It seemed to me that I was half unlearning what I had never learned and yet knew so well – how to live. (*F* 42-3)

Tell me, *mon cher compatriote*, doesn't shame sting a little? (*F* 68)

That's why freedom is too heavy to bear, especially when you're down with a fever, or are distressed, or love nobody. Ah, *mon cher*, for anyone who is alone, without God and without a master, the weight of days is dreadful. (*F* 133)

He seeks to numb this internal shamefacedness with debauchery, before he lights upon the more sustainable tactics of the judge-penitent:

Despairing of love and of chastity, I at last bethought myself of debauchery, a substitute for love, which quiets the laughter. (*F* 102)

Each excess decreases vitality, hence suffering. (*F* 105)

I lived in a sort of fog in which the laughter became so muffled that eventually I ceased to notice it. The indifference that already had such a hold over me now encountered no resistance and extended its sclerosis. No more emotions! An even temper, or rather no temper at all. Tubercular lungs are cured by drying up and gradually asphyxiate their happy owner. So it was with me as I peacefully died of my cure. (*F* 106)

Clamence experiences his own lacking involvement in life – his vapid egotism, the “sclerosis” of his indifference – as a failure and as a malady. He feels imprisoned by a shameful history that he is impotent to change, and subsequently seeks to demonstrate that all are likewise enslaved by it, all guilty in a world where innocence is irrecoverable.

It is his gnawing suspicion, however, that consistently caring as little as he has is itself criminal. He details his own troubling detachment further:

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<sup>55</sup> See O'Brien. “Camus, Algeria, and ‘The Fall.’”

I used to forget everything, beginning with my resolutions. Fundamentally, nothing mattered. War, suicide, love, poverty .... How can I express it? Everything slid off – yes, just rolled off me. (*F* 49)

Thus I progressed on the surface of life, in the realm of words as it were, never in reality. All those books barely read, those friends barely loved, those cities barely visited, those women barely possessed! I went through the gestures out of boredom or absentmindedness. Then came human beings; they wanted to cling, but there was nothing to cling to. (*F* 50)

I was like my Dutchmen who are here without being here: I was absent at the moment when I took up the most space. (*F* 87-88)

Whence, living among men without sharing their interests, I could not manage to believe in the commitments I made. I was courteous and indolent enough to live up to what was expected of me in my profession, my family, or my civic life, but each time with a sort of indifference that spoiled everything. I lived my whole life under a double code, and my most serious acts were often the ones in which I was the least involved. Wasn't that after all the reason that, added to my blunders, I could not forgive myself, that made me revolt most violently against the judgment I felt forming, in me and around me, and that forced me to seek an escape? (*F* 88-89)

Clamence "could not forgive" himself this disinterest in the world; the judgment came from "in me." He craves escape, "no more emotions!" He cannot get clean, overcome the "indifference that spoiled everything": "[i]n short, we should like, at the same time, to cease being guilty and yet not to make the effort of cleansing ourselves" (*F* 84). And in judge-penitence he only pretends to have found a solution, and remains the same immobilized play-actor incapable of real commitment: "I permit myself everything again, and without the laughter this time. I haven't changed my way of life; I continue to love myself and to make use of others" (*F* 141-2). But he does not love himself, and is coming undone at the novel's close: "I'm not weeping. ... But when you don't like your own life, when you know that you must change lives, you don't have any choice, do you? What can one do to become another? Impossible" (*F* 144).

He is beset by the "malaria, I think, that I caught at the time I was pope. No, I'm only half-joking" (*F* 119). He half-jokes that his entire illness comes from the prisoner-of-war camp. He closes his remarks as follows, shivering in bed, with his listener beside him:

Are we not all alike, constantly talking and to no one, forever up against the same questions although we know the answers in advance? Then please tell me what happened to you one night on the quays of the Seine and how you managed never to risk your life. You yourself utter the words that for years have never ceased echoing through my nights and that I shall at last say through your mouth: "O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us!" A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion! Just suppose, *cher maître*, that we should be taken literally? We'd

have to go through with it. Brr...! The water's so cold! But let's not worry! It's too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately! (*F* 147)

He hungers for a fellow coward – a fellow creature who needs, like him, a second chance to save himself, by saving another. But is this particular episode a clear-cut test of moral character, or is it his entire history of wanting engagement that it brings to light? Could he have controlled his or another's fate there on the quay or there in the camp? Or did he butt up against impassible limits – which in turn threw into relief his failure to act in other instances where he might have? These two incidents, with their equivocal characters, seem insidiously to have awakened him to his absence of conviction in all spheres of life, to his pantomime of caring. He can no longer distinguish between powerlessness for which he is not responsible and indifference for which he is.

Sharing Sartre's definitions of facticity and freedom, Simone de Beauvoir adds to Sartre's philosophy a consideration of circumstances in which we are *not* free – in which facticity overwhelms us – and like Clamence, dwells upon the line between culpable and guiltless inaction. According to Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), our very human ontology is "ambiguous." At once, human beings are facticity and transcendence of that facticity. We are not solely a brute, inalterable situation – but a lack of being, a negativity. Our negativity is the source of genuine selfhood: we must purposely recognize, seek, and will the refusal of being, by stepping back from the constraints (facticity) of our lives, and regarding them at a distance. This move of consciousness, which allows us to judge, interpret, and choose our attitudes toward the past and to elect the future, is what Beauvoir calls transcendence. Indeed we must desire there to be facticity, precisely so that we may assert and justify *existence* when we overcome facticity and establish our own willed endeavors. Our individual ethical determinations represent a "triumph of freedom over facticity" (97). Yet Beauvoir owns that we *can* be limited in our ability to act, restricted by oppressive forces and blamelessly so; facticity can indeed quash freedom, and such constraint demands opposition from those still empowered to contest it.

Beauvoir argues that we can also, however, blamably fail to assume transcendence, by falling into nihilism, deeming all choice arbitrary and inconsequential, or by promoting tyranny and forgetting freedom's value. And this promotion of tyranny, it should be noted, can come of the second form of nihilism we have seen (Marie's) in which the very impossibility of realizing or preserving what we *do* value drives us to denounce and renounce it. Clamence, in this way, endorses tyranny because he cannot satisfactorily parse and practice the freedom he has. But cognizance of any freedom, Beauvoir argues, should require from us a commitment to ever-increasing freedom for all. And knowing we must choose our projects, we should feel a considerable burden, a sense of risk and even anguish: "it is because there are real dangers, real failures and real earthly damnation that words like victory, wisdom, or joy have meaning. Nothing is decided in advance, and it is because man has something to lose and because he can lose that he can also win" (34). Evil, for Beauvoir, is a real possibility: it consists in refusing transcendence, action, choice, where it *is* possible. Clamence, then, is afraid that he has done evil – and in embracing tyranny, he does further evil.

Clamence has condemned himself because he has "managed not to risk his life," on the quay or anywhere else. He should like his interlocutor to confess an equal incapacity for selflessness and self-sacrifice. Clamence's is the opposite of Meursault's closing wish for "consummation": "for everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone," Meursault maintains, he would require "cries of hate," exile from human company, communion with the

indifferent sky. On the contrary, Clamence begs for entry into a human community, and all that he can permit himself to envision is an entire species of narcissists powerless to intercede on behalf of others – prohibited by some master from doing so. He hopes his interlocutor, too, is a policeman who will arrest and imprison for his theft of a panel of the Van Eyck painting *The Just Judges*: “You would arrest me then ... I would be decapitated, for instance ... . Above the gathered crowd, you would hold up my still warm head, so that they could recognize themselves in it and I could again dominate – an exemplar. All would be consummated” (F 146-7). Whereas Meursault craves censure and alienation, Clamence craves recognition – understanding and worship both. Clamence is anguished and broken in a way that Meursault is not; “indifference” for Clamence (his own) is neither tenable nor “gentle” (S 122).

He should not really welcome a second chance to save the unknown woman – for he fears and presages that this test would again issue in a confirmation of his failure. And yet this very formulation – that “fortunately” it is too late to once again fall short of proper feeling and action – epitomizes the cowardice that plagues him. Perhaps we should pity raving and feverish Clamence; he may well be mistaken to blame himself for the woman’s death, for the camp. And yet we are called upon to distinguish ourselves from Clamence as well: he must be wrong to champion the abolition of ethical responsibility altogether. He has turned away from Camus’ own ethics, from the limited agency of the tragic hero, who, hemmed in by circumstances, must act nonetheless – without safety and within a limited compass. If it is Meursault who, in Camus’ most famous negative example, fails to rebel against absurdity and never becomes fully human or alive to tragedy, it is Clamence who, in Camus’ most sophisticated negative example, is never reconciled to dangerous and rebellious action within a tragic world. Camus’ fiction depicts, then, not only tragic heroes and heroines, those who contend with painful limits, bent on making what strides they can toward compensatory happiness and justice, but characters who are themselves drawn to numbing indifference, and whose ethically disastrous, tragedy-averse philosophies leave no happiness or justice in sight.

### Camus and Pessoa: Against Nihilism

Meursault murders at random, with no adequate causal or moral explanation – because it is hot – and feels very little in consequence. He more closely resembles impersonal fatality, the gods of chance, than a tragic hero. Clamence is then confronted with chance, happens upon a suicide and finds himself in a prisoner-of-war camp – and does not respond with sufficient feeling, in his view, to these unforeseen tests of character. He, too, proves no tragic hero. Meursault, then, doesn’t care, isn’t concerned with loss and fragility – pure nihilism – and Clamence doesn’t want to be – second-wave nihilism.

Camus writes of this distinction in *The Rebel*. He remarks that “absolute negation ... is not consummated by suicide” (R 7). What he means is that the denial of all value is not, in fact, the cause of suicide; the sheer inexistence of value, Camus argues, should issue in sky-like indifference, and not in a despairing rejection of life. Instead, Camus determines, suicide suggests the loss or impossibility of some much cherished value. A wish for suicide attests to a character’s inability to attain or to retrieve what might, had it been acquired or restored to him, have furnished him with reason to live.<sup>56</sup> Thus nihilism in *The Fall* proves perennially pained

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<sup>56</sup> Again, Meursault’s nihilism is closest to pure nihilism, precisely because he is more absurd than human. Only a reading contrary to mine could retrieve Meursault from charges of nihilism. He could, that is, be read as “opening himself” to a “night alive with signs and stars” in the same way that Janine opens herself to the night; “the wondrous

because it is haunted by its antithesis; its “no” is the expression of a frustrated “yes,” an expression of Clamence’s belief in his own (unendurable) failure in the face of precarious, unpredictable life. Camus’ is Nietzsche’s insight, that nihilism should logically produce equanimity, but it often does not. As we saw Nietzsche contend in our introduction:

The philosophical nihilist is convinced that all that happens is meaningless and in vain; and that there ought not to be anything meaningless and in vain. But whence this: there ought not to be? From where does one get *this* “meaning,” *this* standard? At bottom, the nihilist thinks that the sight of such a bleak, useless existence makes a philosopher feel *dissatisfied*, bleak, desperate. (WP 23)

Nihilism rarely demonstrates the absence of valuing upon which it insists. Like Clamence, the distressed nihilist cannot maintain the conviction that the negation of value is itself an insignificant matter, that nothing in his life could give him pleasure, cause him regret, or be worth defending. He instead expresses despair at his failure to realize what he does desire.

Just as Nietzsche considers such a nihilist “*dissatisfied*,” Camus considers him, as he volunteers in a 1959 interview, exceedingly “discouraged”:

Your last hero, the narrator in *The Fall*, seems discouraged. Does he express what you feel at the present moment?

My hero is indeed discouraged, and that is why, as a good modern nihilist, he exalts servitude. Have I chosen to exalt servitude? (LCE 364)

Clamence – not Camus – is the discouraged nihilist. While it is true that Camus himself is haunted by the moral blurriness of wartime action – to obstruct German railways is to send innocent hostages to their deaths – he and not Sartre “manages to risk his life” in the Resistance and he does not exalt servitude. Rather, Camus’ concerted psychological exposé of Clamence, who derides all freedom because of its limitations, complications, and risks, allows us to understand a number of modernism’s narrators with suicidal and self-negating impulses. We will close this chapter with Clamence’s resemblance to Fernando Pessoa’s Baron of Teive, and we will see Beckett’s creation of such a character in the next chapter.

Pessoa’s Baron of Teive in *The Education of the Stoic* follows the same trajectory as Clamence.<sup>57</sup> The Baron pens his suicide note, a brief work, only because what he positively prizes, a complete and unblemished work of art, he despairs of creating:

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peace of the sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide,” Meursault says (S 122). He is even ready, like Jessica, “to live it all again” (S 122). If we read this tide as thawing rather than erasing Meursault’s humanity, we might also say that he welcomes the onlookers’ “cries of hate” as his due punishment for taking another’s life. Yet he continues to maintain that the “world ... now and forever meant nothing to me” (S 122).

<sup>57</sup> This short text, *The Education of the Stoic*, is compiled from Pessoa’s manuscript fragments, those signed by the Baron himself. Pessoa wrote under a multiplicity of so-called “heteronyms,” each with his own personality and history. The Baron’s pieces were not collected and published all together in Portuguese until 1999. This translation and presentation of the Baron’s materials was published in 2005. Pessoa wrote to his future biographer, Gaspar Simões, of heteronyms “yet to appear” in 1932; the Baron is most likely one of these, as translator and editor Ricard Zenith comments (ix). The Baron kills himself, according to Pessoa’s fictional newspaper report, on July 11, 1920.

And my will wouldn't collaborate if it had to have aesthetics as a partner and couldn't leave the thoughts in isolated paragraphs of the potential story – just a bunch of sentences that sounded striking but that would only really have been striking if I'd written the story in which they were expressive moments, pithy observations, linking phrases. ... Some were witty sayings, ingenious but unintelligible without the surrounding text that was never written. (34)

By this standard perhaps no creative work anywhere would ever have been made. I realize that. I realize that if all the great minds had scrupulously desired to do only what was perfect, or at least (since perfection is impossible) what was in complete accord with their entire personality, then they would have given up, like me. Only those who are more willful than intelligent, more impulsive than rational, have a part to play in the real life of this world. *Disjecta membra*, said Carlyle, is what remains of any poet, or of any man. But an intense pride, like the one that killed me and will yet kill me, won't admit the idea of subjecting to the humiliation of future ages the deformed, mutilated body that inhabits and defines the soul whose inevitable imperfection it expresses. (35)

To think that I considered this incoherent heap of half-written scraps a literary work! To think, in this decisive moment, that I believed myself capable of organizing all these pieces into a finished, visible whole! If the organizational power of thought were enough to make the work materialize, if this organization could be achieved by the emotional intensity that suffices for a short poem or brief essay, then the work I aspired to would have doubtless taken shape, for it would have shaped itself in me, without my help as a determining agent. (34)

Like Bernard, the Baron cannot move beyond “half-finished phrases,” “half-written scraps” (*W* 70; *E* 34). He cannot pass from poetic intensity to comprehensive narrative. He grows suicidal when he cannot reproduce his own life in the literary form he demands for it. It is his unfulfilled desire that drives him to discouraged nihilistic thought. The spate of prideful “no’s” that “killed me and will yet kill me” is, he avows, the negation of a mind too intelligent – too rational and too little impulsive – to delude itself into pursuing an impossible “yes.”

The Baron claims intellectual grounds for relinquishing his life, fashions himself an impassive Stoic, one who knows better than to regret what lies beyond his control. His resultant course of action, however, his supposedly Stoic resolve – strength of thought, inner action – goes hand in hand with the hardly Stoic feeling of unbearable failure. He cannot abide a certain existential and aesthetic powerlessness – the fact that he has never fit his impressions within a single narrative mold. His “rational” decision, in fact, is grounded entirely in fear and pain: “[m]y life was wracked by anguish,” he confesses, and foreseeing inevitable anguishes to come, he retreats from both art and love (21). He suffers from the same paralysis that besets Clamence on the quay: “feeling, which in other people enters the will like a hand in a glove, or like a fist in the guard of a sword, was always in me another form of thought – futile like a rage that makes us tremble so much we can't move, or like a panic (the panic, in my case, of feeling too intensely) that freezes the frightened man in his tracks, when his fright should make him flee” (22). Like Clamence, the Baron finds himself unable to act and so eschews those attachments that demand action.

His tells us that his initial grief at the death of his mother – “her love, which I'd never especially felt when she was alive, became all too clear to me once I'd lost her,” “I discovered, through its absence (which is how we discover the true worth of anything), that I needed affection – that it's something we breathe, like air, without feeling it” – gives way to his professions of indifference to it (15). He identifies this transition from paining loss to cold impassivity as the origin of his suicide:

I still remember – so vividly I can smell the gentle fragrance of the spring air – the afternoon when I decided, after thinking everything over, to abdicate from love as from an insoluble problem. ... And suddenly I was overwhelmed by a desire to renounce completely, to withdraw once and for all, and I felt an intense nausea for having had so many desires, so many hopes .... That soft and sad moment marks the beginning of my suicide. (11)

Like Clamence, he suffocates in this loveless void, his prideful reason and its forecasts insisting he turn his back on his desires. Unlike Janine, he determines to remain cold and leaden to stave off anguish. But the emptiness of his present proves lethal – not because pure nihilism, valuing nothing, is a death sentence, but because discouraged nihilism, finding value to be *missing* from life, is.

The Baron comes to share Miguel de Unamuno's insistence that “everything vital is anti-rational, not merely irrational, and ... everything rational is anti-vital. And this is the basis of the tragic sense of life” (*TSL* 22). All that instinctively confers pleasure seems to the Baron doomed upon reflection. The Baron echoes that “where intelligence exists, life is impossible. ... I confine to myself the tragedy that's mine. I suffer it, but I suffer it face to face, without metaphysics or sociology. I admit that I'm conquered by life” (16, 40). Like Marie, he recognizes tragedy, rationally confronts it, and forswears both the counter-tragic crutches that metaphysics or sociology might afford and the anti-rational, vital impulse to revolt – to break free, in moments, from the confines of tragedy. He will not be borne along by sanguine master-narratives or by unthinking *joie de vivre*, and he will not let flashes of joy counteract the findings of reason either. He “braces [himself] in a battle already lost,” as Camus writes of Marie.

Teive adopts a less callous tone than Clamence, but an equally downcast arrogance, claiming disdain for the very affections and accomplishments whose absence undoes him – and which could have allowed him partial revolt against conquering fate. Like Clamence, however, he, too, comes to testify that his attempted departure from all caring is itself a torture:

My conviction that all remedies for the soul are useless should naturally lift me to a summit of indifference, below which the clouds of that same conviction would cover from view all the hubbub on Earth. But powerful as thought is, it can do nothing to quell rebellious emotions. We can't choose not to feel, as we can not to walk. ... I'm like Buridan's donkey, dying at the mathematical midpoint between the water of emotion and the hay of action; if I didn't think, I might still die, but it wouldn't be from thirst and hunger. (22)

Like Clamence, he is hungry for action but immobilized, because he cannot imagine himself acting in a manner he should approve. He is drawn, too, to the waters of emotion – cannot “quell rebellious emotions” – yet remains frozen, bent on precluding pangs of longing, sorrow, and self-

reproach. Like Clamence, the aristocratic Baron aims to paint this refusal to have any “part to play in the real life of this world” as a sign of his superiority to lesser creatures. Like Clamence, he is a wounded narcissist who spurns the world because he himself appears inadequate. And like Clamence, who is dying of fever and of an apathetic character he cannot change, denying that he is weeping, the Baron is dying of a self-imposed requirement for perfect action he cannot perform.

He might instead have embraced incomplete and “expressive moments,” the “mutilated, deformed body” of work “that inhabits and defines the soul,” as victories to propel him forward. He admits that his inability to try for imperfect love or art ensures his disaster. He admits that his rejection, like Clamence, of less-than-perfect circumstances and of limited (but still committed and commendable) action, as well as of any second chances – where he would again meet with failure if he did not revise his standards – signifies his real defeat:

My whole life has been a battle lost on the map. Cowardice didn't even make it to the battlefield, or perhaps it would have dissipated; it haunted the chief of staff in his office, all alone with his certainty of defeat. He didn't dare implement his battle plan, since it was sure to be imperfect, and he didn't dare perfect it (though it could never be truly perfect), since his conviction that it would never be perfect killed all his desire to strive for perfection. Nor did it occur to him that his plan, though imperfect, might be closer to perfection than the enemy's. The truth is that my real enemy, victorious over me since God, was that very idea of perfection, marching against me at the head of all the troops of the world – in the tragic vanguard of all the world's armed men. (23)

God is “victorious” over Teive in the same way that God conquers Camus – not as a real and personal antagonist, but as a chimera whose inexistence ensures an incoherent, flawed cosmos. Yet “since God” has left the metaphysical stage it is now the thought of earthly perfection that plagues Teive. He now envisions this unrealizable ideal as the enemy, the foremost greaved soldier in terrestrial life’s “tragic vanguard.” Of all such metaphorically “armed men” – foes he cannot vanquish – it is this notion of an unattainable, perfect representational form that haunts him.

It is the impossibility of such seamless narrative that awakens him to “the tragedy that’s mine,” to his and the world’s imperfections and imperfectability. He is not satisfied, as are Janine, Jessica, and Jacques, as are Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, and Bernard, as are Camus and Woolf, with intermittent scenes that score and sustain receptive consciousness. The willfulness that Woolf accords to Proust in her diary – a perceiving center “tough as catgut” that is inimitably drawn to particular frames of life – does not suffice the Baron (*Diary III* 7). He instead resembles Sartre’s Roquentin in *Nausea* who can never say “that is the whole,” as Woolf does, of any swath of existence (*MB* 71). Like Teive, Roquentin cannot make peace with non-teleological time, with its want of guiding *mythos*: “Nothing happens while we live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition” (*N* 39). Like Teive, Roquentin desires “an inflexible order,” a “ribbon of steel” to weld all instants together meaningfully (*N* 21). Roquentin wishes for the trajectory of the realist novel, of the jazz song he treasures above all else. Within its melody, all moments, all notes, are necessary, none contingent. All are part of an Aristotelean sequence of beginning, middle, and end, one that is not tragic in its formal unity,

but a beautiful justification of time's passing. This is what escapes Roquentin in life, and what Teive cannot make in art:

Real beginnings are like a fanfare of trumpets, like the first notes of the jazz tune, cutting short tedium, making for continuity. ... Suddenly you see that it is the beginning of a great shape whose outlines are lost in mist and you tell yourself, "Something is beginning." ... Each instant appears only as part of a sequence. ... [W]hat summits would I not reach if *my own life* made the subject of the melody? (N 37, 38).

Roquentin concludes that such totality belongs solely to art: "I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered. ... But you have to choose: live or tell" (N 40, 39). He seems the caricature of an escapist modernism charged with exchanging the horrors of living for the redemption of writing. Yet for Teive, as for Bernard – who recognizes that "life had been imperfect, an unfinished phrase" – art cannot do what life cannot (W 283).

That is why Bernard, in life and in art, settles and battles for momentary coherence, wrested from formlessness:

I took my mind, my being, the old dejected, almost inanimate object, and lashed it about among these odds and ends, sticks and straws, detestable little bits of wreckage, flotsam and jetsam, floating on the oily surface. I jumped up. I said, "Fight! Fight!" I repeated. It is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together – this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit. The trees, scattered, put on order; the thick green of the leaves thinned itself to a dancing light. I netted them under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words. (W 269-270)

Roquentin, on the other hand, comes close to such a moment of hard-won cohesion only once in the entirety of his experience: "all has stopped; my life has stopped: this wide window, this heavy air, blue as water, this fleshy white plant at the bottom of the water, and I myself, we form a complete and static whole: I am happy" (N 56). Only once does he say with Janine and Jessica, Mrs. Ramsay and Bernard, "Life stand still here," this scene forms "a complete and static whole" (TL 161). For this reason, Roquentin describes the fluctuation between moments of being and non-being as largely illusory and never enough. Entirely dissatisfied, he nonetheless evokes this back-and-forth in terms that echo Camus and Woolf:

All of a sudden something breaks off sharply. The adventure is over, time resumes its daily routine. I turn: behind me, this beautiful melodious form sinks entirely into the past.

There are moments – rarely – when you make a landmark .... The time of a flash. After that, the procession starts again, you begin to add hours and days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. April, May, June. 1924, 1925, 1926. (N 38, 39).

Yet he denies that these transient forms, these landmarks, can have any great and lasting affective or aesthetic power. He denies even their intermittent existence. Like Teive, Roquentin

is instead furious that life lacks further integrity, innate and meaningful wholeness – that he cannot make “our whole story ... fairly beautiful,” “give it a few prods and it makes a whole string of perfect moments” (N 152). Instead he finds life to be “nothing but a huge hole” (N 64). For Roquentin, the comprehensive life “story, for example, [is] something that could never happen. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence” (N 178). Existence is repugnant whereas art and mathematics are otherworldly and unspoiled – “circles, bars of music kept their pure and rigid lines,” “a circle is not absurd .... But neither does the circle exist” (N 128, 129). The perfect story is unreal, can never be a true memoir of self. In turn all existing life forms are shameful and “superfluous,” never coalescing into satisfactory shape (N 170). Consequently, Roquentin ceases to distinguish himself from the novel’s famous chestnut tree, whose blackish, amorphous root overtakes him “like a bruise or a secretion, like an oozing” – “I was the root of the chestnut tree,” he proclaims, and his identification with it is life-negating and sordid (N 130). He conceives of himself as purposeless organic sludge.

Whereas Roquentin imagines himself the tree root seeping from the earth, abdicating distinctively human forms of caring as Meursault does, Clamence and the Baron are starved for human mooring. Just as Clamence approaches strangers to divulge his loneliness, the Baron, too, attempts an act of communication – not the masterful self-portrait he sought, but a slim disclosure of defeat. He details his exile from that inveterate, insouciant appetite for life that would have grounded a non-tragic account of self. He details his banishment to a realm of such paralyzing anguish that the loss of all feeling appears attractive. He specifies, even, that no life-affirming moments, scraps of happiness, can make for his forward momentum within a tragic cosmos. The Baron despairs of perfect reality and fiction both, just as Clamence despairs of perfect innocence. Yet it seems unlikely that Clamence, that anyone, could have saved the woman on the bridge; it seems uncertain that drinking a dying man’s water in a prisoner-of-war camp was necessarily unforgivable. Like the Baron, Clamence loses the battle, in fact, when he denies the possibility of even partial innocence, or of greater innocence in the future – when he consigns all to equal worthlessness, declares, for instance, early in his narrative, that a young boy entering Buchenwald deserves to be there. Rather than leap from a bridge himself, ending his life in direct expression of its shortcomings, Clamence lives estranged from it, like a ghost, like the Dutch he describes as haunting the canals. He yearns for human companionship and cannot achieve the calm that would come of true emotional vacuity.

The Baron himself surmises that had he sooner admitted his nihilistic posture sprang from frustrated desire, he might have wept for his unfulfilled passions. And weeping for them, he might have owned and pursued them afresh, even have accepted a new aesthetic and a revised form of self-representation. Yet loving nothing – inoculated against weeping – he now has nothing to live for. His refusal to weep is explicit, and he commutes his anguish into a proud and lethal stoniness:

To weep before the world – and the more beautiful the weeping, the more the world opens up to the weeper, and the more public is his shame – this is the ultimate indignity that can be wreaked on the inner life by a defeated man who didn't keep his sword to do his final duty as a soldier. We are all soldiers in this instinctive regiment called life; we must live by the law of reason or by no law.  
(36)

The world never opened up to him; his reason would not permit so “shameful” a practice as loving what was doomed to be lost or imperfect. He would not be subjected to limits. But weeping might have saved him; so much for his iron law of reason. Teive needed to weep before the world.

## Samuel Beckett: Against Nihilism

We have seen that counter-tragic theories of life understand individuals and the human species as a whole to be progressing toward ever greater at-homeness in the world – these theories hardly entertain “worstward ho” trajectories, to employ Beckett’s coinage. We have seen Darwin and Hardy, Woolf and Camus eschew such narrative arcs that promise all ends well. They do not proffer any systematic solution to the problem of evil, to the problem of undeserved suffering – what F. L. Lucas identifies as “the problem of tragedy” (99).

It is nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural optimism that numbers among its manifestations various religiously and philosophically inflected re-envisionings of tragedy as the genre that now solves the problem it raises. Such optimism inclines toward accounts of nature, history, and metaphysics that eliminate chance and justify pain, that surmount seeming evils. A shared objective, to describe the universe as a secure and rational place, well suited to human thriving, therefore belongs to a multiplicity of counter-tragic discourses. Such is the aim of much of philosophy’s response to the chanciness and vulnerability that Socrates identifies in Attic tragedy; such is the aim of the realist *Bildungsroman* as Lukács and Moretti describe it, of anti-Darwinian assertions of cosmic sentience or theistic design in nature, and of modernism’s own turn toward purportedly foundational and recuperative structures of mind and culture to be discovered in ancient ritual and myth. What such literature, philosophy, and science share is their portrayal of humankind at home in its encircling natural and social environment.

Presuming a tragic cosmos, however, issues in the depiction of characters who vouchsafe various states of existential homelessness – who are less certain of the unalloyed beneficence of physical life, or of the inherently ameliorative evolution of nature and society. We have seen two ensuing, opposing modes of response to this tragic view of personhood. First there is the activity that Camus names “revolt.” It involves defiant happiness in the face of fate, joyfulness that pushes tragic inevitabilities temporarily from view, as do the ecstasies of Mrs. Ramsay and of Janine. The fact of loss remains “immitigable,” fixed like Neville’s tree, and cannot be recast as a positive good – yet rebellious counter-measures are possible. Characters marshal moments of delight and replenishment to offset the sadness that accompanies tragic lucidity. Thus Jude clings to intervals of love with Sue. When Tess is abandoned to the tragic impassivity of nature and to the barbarities of men – one of which is the re-figuring of her story, replete with unasked-for ills, as the exposé of her tarnished character – it is her narrator who imagines for her these modernist moments of satiety, of pleasure and requited affection. When Bernard, too, encounters the falsity of anthropocentric chronicles of nature and of his own memoir of progressive *Bildung* – registers the ongoing dust dance of terrestrial life and feels that it reduces him to nothing – he experiences this eclipse of self, coincident with the eclipse of the sun, as a paining truth to be combatted with moments of renewed receptivity to the landscape and of intimacy with others. It is Meursault, on the contrary, who does not wrest what life-preserving powers he can – caring for his own life and for others’ – from dice-throwing time. It is Clamence who is tortured by the notion that he has not done all he can to hold death in check and to behave humanely; he champions enslavement to rid himself of the pressure to act. And it is Teive who feels that his own actions will never suffice and who commits suicide. In contradistinction, then, to Meursault’s assurance of his own absurdity and to Clamence’s and Teive’s shared sense of unbearable impotence is the ethical position Woolf devises: it does not promise comprehensive salvation, but the saving conviction that “the moment was enough” (*W* 278). This is the very expression of revolt that Camus embraces – as the alternative to both counter-tragic melodrama and tragic insight so intolerable it

issues in discouraged nihilism. In addition, then, to answering life-negating conditions with life-affirming moments, such revolt seeks to delimit the incursions of reasonless fatality into mortal life as much as possible, condemning persons and institutions in league with indefensible destruction. This ethical precedent is set in ancient tragedy, for instance in Euripides' *Hecuba*, as we have seen. When Achilles' ghost and an army of Greek men demand that Hecuba's daughter be sacrificed, Hecuba finds herself powerless to resist them and yet vows to contest entrenched injustice however she can – driven even to excess, to morally dubious revenge in the realm that permits it. When intractable fate, that is, sets senseless constraints upon human flourishing, action is most needful in those very spheres in which necessity most encroaches. What is most needful, in tragic ethics, is the refusal to concede one inch more to tyrannous ill luck, pain, and wanting justice.

Yet a second form of response to tragedy pervades the fiction we have seen: there is also what Camus calls "eluding," flight from tragic knowledge, either via narratives of a utopian terrestrial or celestial future or via self-negating despair. In the latter case, nature's fearsomeness is once again granted, but characters hunger for nature's impersonality and unconsciousness as their own. Eyelessness, evading consciousness, is now their means of holding tragedy at bay and of going on. In this way, characters cease to register what Nietzsche calls the great "cosmic stupidity," as well as manmade stupidities. Yet this strategy constitutes a retreat from ethics and ensures characters' relative inaction – means resembling the cosmic stupidity in order not to feel it. Such a procedure issues in a radically pared-down mode of survival, one in which happiness is not possible. To occlude the overwhelmingly painful, that is, characters forgo all chance of pleasure – in favor of an anesthetizing darkness that, unlike Mrs. Ramsay's wedge-shaped core, cannot bring elation. This pursuit of deadened feeling does not represent reconciliation to fate; it is flight and not endorsement. Refusal to contest fate's injurious encroachments upon human well-being and to counter them with rejuvenating moments – because the very lucidity required to launch such a battle is too excruciating – allows fate to go unchallenged. Such eluding marks fate's horror, a condition that cannot be borne, but it does not militate against it; it does not acknowledge and address a problem of evil so much as nullify the possibility of grappling with it. Thus this form of eluding courts nothingness in lieu of tragedy, while the act of revolt courts a series of small somethings that are tragedy's opposite. One mode is negative, the other affirmative – but without the absolute and systematic affirmation required of religious, philosophical, and historical optimisms, of paradisiacal dénouements and futures. Precisely piecemeal affirmation, halting and precarious, is the signature of revolt; each moment acts as a sandbag along the shore, protecting against fate's rising tide. Thus cosmically anomalous human consciousness either pursues unfeeling oblivion or some sustaining satisfaction in its anomalous capacity to feel.

Samuel Beckett's fiction distinguishes between and dramatizes both positions. *The Unnamable* (1953) animates one character's fierce labor to become Meursault-like, to elude all human characterization and consciousness – never confessing the paining past that Clamence does or passing on to actual suicide as Teive does. Yet this speaker is unable to flee himself entirely and his ineliminable discontinuity with the nothingness he craves is proof of his still existent character – of character despite itself, bent upon imagining only its own extinction. Here is the quintessence of nihilistic self-denial ("not to have been born is best") adopted as the sole means of persisting. Embodiment, one's own physical being, here registers as anguish only. Not external nature – Jude's impassive tree that cannot reciprocate his sympathy, Neville's immovable tree that signifies mortal fate, Bernard's deceptively long-lived but impermanent tree

that illuminates the maw of deep time – but now bodily, internal nature promises suffering without redemption. It is *Company* (1980), however, that models the dawning of a contrary set of impulses, the first hints of the reanimation of world and personhood that Bernard describes when he asks: “How then does light return to the world after the eclipse of the sun? Miraculously. Frailly” (W 287). *Company* revives a novelistic frame in which character can be designated after all. Rather than blanket unnamability and eluding, pronouns are once again permissible and spots of memory, both frail and miraculous, resurface to mark time. This revived narrative structure need not dictate old-fashioned content – the Aristotelian or Christian plots we have seen Tess’ narrator refuse, the Hegelian or Nietzschean plots that aim for a comprehensive love of fate, which we have seen Camus’ and Woolf’s characters refuse. Such narrative framing only makes possible the occurrence of lived moments, reinstating a center of consciousness to experience them. Rather than eroding personhood, *Company* displays its return in fits and starts. In this novella, the defensive edifice of self-abnegation cracks.

*The Unnamable*: “alleviations of flight from self”

Beckett thus tackles the causes and outcomes of tragedy in his fiction. He tells us in his early study of Proust that “tragedy is not concerned with human justice” (P 67). Tragedy is not concerned, in Beckett’s view, with “a miserable expiation of a codified breach of a local arrangement, organized by the knaves for the fools” (P 67). Rather than quotidian crime and punishment, tragedy pertains to some un-codifiable disruption of a much more universal state of affairs, maintained – by whom, for whom? Certainly not by a rational or loving power. Coming to exist in human form is the trouble; Beckett writes that the tragic hero commits “the original and eternal sin ... of having been born” (P 67). Beckett suggests that it is the origin of species rather than any ordinary transgression that seals human fate. Like his characters, Beckett does not accept the Christian postulate of original sinfulness and a fallen world as causal or moral explanation for human suffering. Beckett’s fiction instead evokes a mortal sentence conferred at birth, without rationale – a congenital tragedy. Yet Beckett pens one of the twentieth century’s most trenchant indictments of the endeavor to evade tragic knowledge. *The Unnamable* is so hermeneutically cryptic, so interpretively elusive, precisely because its protagonist aims to elude all stories, Christian or tragic, that could figure him as doomed – either because of original sin or for no reason at all. He wages a battle against the genesis and molding of his character against his will; his refusal of both biological and social fate becomes his act of will. Beckett captures the appeal of such self-erasure, its motivating protest, but also its personal and ethical toll, and in this narrator’s case, its impossibility.

The Unnamable himself, on the contrary, would have us believe that his aversion to life stories represents a principled refusal of the specific characters they demand we play – as Hardy shows us the dangers of conscripted character, of heroines forced into condemnatory plotlines. Beckett’s narrator would have us believe that not only are contemporary political and religious narratives harmful to us, but that ontologically and epistemologically life does not fit a story mold, does not build to any conclusive and satisfying dénouement. Yet when Woolf’s and Camus’ characters adopt this position, they cultivate salient, climactic moments of intimacy instead. In *The Unnamable*’s case, however, the ideal alternative to traditional plots is coma-like silence, immobility, and solitude. And it is visceral pain, not intellectual conviction, that motivates his negation of all narrative architecture. As Stanley Cavell finds in *The Claim of Reason* both “skepticism and tragedy” can issue in refusal to own “that I am I” (387). Rather

than the post-recognition revolt upon which Woolf's and Camus' fiction insists, tragedy for *The Unnamable* produces the insight, as Cavell puts it, that "the alternative to my acknowledgement" of a limited and vulnerable self "is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him" (387).

Thus to acknowledge rather than to avoid selfhood, and moreover to endorse it in conventional and counter-tragic language, appears to be the *pensum* – the burdensome task – that plagues Beckett's narrator in the novel. The only means of delivering himself from this charge, he comes to feel, is to talk himself out of existence. Like Clamence and the Baron of Teive before him, *The Unnamable* both disparages his human form and tries to be quit of it. He claims, in the first person, that his "I" does not represent him. Yet how can he judge his "I" false without a certain degree of self-knowledge? Why is he at pains to pour corrosive epistemological doubt upon the entirety of his identity? Because he is weary, as he repeats, of being saddled with an affliction whose justice eludes him. He is weary of being a tragic subject – a culturally unacceptable self-designation, and a personally insupportable one as well. What dread deed has he committed, he asks, other than being born? There is a biting sarcasm that pervades his speech: if you have the temerity to exit your mother's womb, the genre of your life is tragedy. So this narrator wagers that if he can deny his character, he can also escape his fate.

The Unnamable's life-denouncing "logorrhea" stems from the very rage at senseless pain that Aristotle means reassuringly to eliminate from tragedy. Let us revisit Jonathan Lear on the Aristotelian aversion to suffering whose origins appear incomprehensible:

The world of tragic events must, Aristotle repeatedly insists, be rational. The subject of tragedy may be a good man, but he must make a mistake which rationalizes his fall. The mere fall of a good man from good fortune to bad fortune for no reason at all isn't tragic, but disgusting. The events in a tragedy must be necessary or plausible, and they must occur on account of one another. Insofar as we do fear that tragic events could occur in our lives, what we fear is chaos: the breakdown of the primordial bonds which link person to person. For Aristotle, a good tragedy offers us this consolation: when the breakdown of the primordial bonds occurs, it does not occur in a world which is in itself ultimately chaotic and meaningless.

It is significant that, for Aristotle, *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the paradigm tragedy rather than, say, *Antigone*. The point of tragedy, in Aristotle's eyes, is not to portray a world in which a person through no fault of his own may be subject to fundamentally irreconcilable and destructive demands. In Aristotle's conception of tragedy, the individual actor takes on the burden of badness, and the world as a whole is absolved. ... the world remains a rational, meaningful place in which a person can conduct himself with dignity. Even in tragedy, perhaps especially in tragedy, the fundamental goodness of man and world is reaffirmed. (325-26)

Yet instead of an irrational fall that "isn't tragic, but disgusting," in Beckett's fiction the inexplicable fall – into humanity, into mortality – is the quintessence of the tragic. And rather than disallow disgust with it, Beckett suggests that such disgust is an appropriate response to tragedy. His novel as a whole also suggests, however, that to turn against the entirety of existence on the basis of a legitimate repugnance to part of it is to go down the path of discouraged nihilism. It is Beckett's narrator in *The Unnamable*, epitomizing this

discouragement, who aims to relinquish consciousness of himself as a fragile human subject – and who might in turn spur readers to behave otherwise.

*The Unnamable* is a fifty-two thousand word monologue without a story, but with a tone and an objective now familiar to us. Its narrator's torrent of words expresses angry impotence in the face of fortune. We again meet an anti-hero who, with self-negating bravado, holds subjection to the world's limits to be repellent and untenable. Beckett's speaker, as if channeling the lesson of Woolf's brackets, introduces a plight whose origins are impenetrable, and if known would not satisfy: "No matter how it happened," he says of his condition on page one of the novel (*U* 283). All appears ill-explained and contradictory: "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me" (*U* 283). What narrator, we are compelled to ask, disowns his narrating "I," devalues his every assertion, and insists that his existence cannot be verified? His first person interior monologue seems to him no guarantee of personhood. Yet how can he be wholly fraudulent, ventriloquized, or inhuman, as he variously surmises – and still articulate the murmuring opposition of some truer "I," demanding expression and subsequent peace?

Misleadingly, *The Unnamable* initially presents the recovery of his first person perspective to be his goal. Our speaker behaves as if he has mislaid his memories, rather than actively repudiated them. His preoccupation at first appears to be the very pursuit of origins and identity: "I. Who might that be?" (*U* 330). He refers to himself as disembodied, or as a head only, and reiterates that his insatiable desire, his determinative compulsion, is to materialize more fully and speak his way to greater self-knowledge. Indeed, he tells us that a chorus of insinuating voices insists that he establish his past and person once and for all. His supposed aim is to gratify them: to articulate self and surroundings satisfactorily, and in this way find relief from further questing speech. He says optimistically, even, that "I do not despair of one day sparing me, without going silent" – that is, he does not despair of finishing his investigation by suitably voicing his character to these listeners (*U* 296). His pretense is that he, too, hopes one day to possess the information expected of a narrator:

And that day, I don't know why, I shall be able to go silent, and make an end, I know it. ... Then it would be a life worth having, a life at last. My speech-parched voice at rest would fill with spittle, I'd let it flow over and over, happy at last, dribbling with life, my pensum ended, in the silence. ... I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps ... Strange task, which consists in speaking of oneself. Strange hope, turned towards silence and peace. (*U* 296, 304, 305)

Here he entertains the notion that were he to affix his "I" to the self and story that these "masters" provide for him, "whose burden is roughly to the effect that I am alive," he would at last be contented (*U* 329). He would "dribble with life," his character confirmed and further narration superfluous. This would be comedic closure: narrating himself into a man "happy at last," his pensum completed. He imagines, with yearning even, that could he emulate the voices who prod and encircle him, the reward would be happiness.

Yet he also avers with ferocity that these invasive voices expect the impossible. To behave as they command, he would be obliged to evince the following:

Warmth, ease, conviction, the right manner, as if it were my own voice, pronouncing my own words, words pronouncing me alive, since that's how they

want me to be. I don't know why, with their billions of quick, there trillions of dead, that's not enough for them, I too must contribute my little convulsion, mewl, howl, gasp and rattle, loving my neighbor and blessed with a reason. ... The same old sour teachings I can't change a tithe of. A parrot, that's what they're up against, a parrot. ...[I must] look as if I mean what I'm saying. (*U* 329)

He rebels against this “same old sour” identity formation. This pedagogy, this catechism, were he to parrot it, would bless him with a reason to live, to die, to act – a comprehensive characterological rulebook – but he claims that to adopt it would be self-perjury. To overflow with ebullient life would be a sham. He does not believe in such counter-tragic vitality, he says; life is suffering, not satisfaction. Life must be avoided, not accepted.

Although his lava of words could cease if the self on offer were to seem to him credible – such is the tempting bargain – at base he wishes to pair silence with selflessness. He considers the assumption of the character held out to him to be a hopeless undertaking:

It's of me now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language, it will be a start, a step towards silence and the end of madness, the madness of having to speak and not being able to, except of things that don't concern me, that don't count, that I don't believe, that they have crammed me full of to prevent me from saying who I am, where I am, and from doing what I have to do in the only way that can put an end to it .... Ah a nice state they have me in, but still I'm not their creature, not quite, not yet. ... It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in a vomit. (*U* 318)

He cannot lastingly imagine and does not want full inscription within an intelligible narrative – belonging to the species possessed of words, “their breed.” He is now incensed by the expectation that he will eventually speak in a manner acceptable to these voices: “having to speak” of “who I am, where I am.” He finds himself “not being able to,” never deploying words that feel to him representative and right – indeed the requisite words, he asserts here, only prevent authentic expression of his condition and his desires. The supposed relief of assuming the prescribed persona would only, he now argues, preclude his putting an end to the voices' promptings in a way he can tolerate. To “put an end to it” now means not salivating with life but exempting himself from their kind. He vows that “nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted me with” (*U* 318).

He mounts an insurrection against their false promise of happiness, as he now sees it. He will not pretend to adopt the character scripted for him, called “Mahood” – that nearly recognizable man, that imperfect human specimen, as close to manhood as they can push him. If the pensum allotted him at birth is to accept the role of Mahood – to own, explain, and endorse this personhood in the customary manner – he will not do it. He will not be saddled with Mahood's reasons for suffering, nor will he perennially face the tragic alternative: a self who suffers for no narratively explicable reason. He seeks to separate himself from the voices' discourse, from their mendacious account of his former life. For if he concedes to being their protagonist he is born into their world, at which point (as he conceives it) they are satisfied, even

quiet, but he is forever self-aware, endowed with a revolting body and history – expected to relish a life he abhors. He comes to assert that only the silence of a voiceless void will save him from these intrusive fabricators. Their call to know, to reason his way to knowledge, he would like to evade – to end its tyranny and to seek no further. Here is a speaker at pains to deny his experiences and the words that might name them, words that engender second-order reflection and retrospection.

The Unnamable alternates, therefore, between the desire to mollify the voices, to play along with them, and the desire to exterminate them, to refuse their definition of selfhood, as well as any rival definition:

I'll scatter them and their miscreated puppets. ... Do they consider me so plastered with their rubbish that I can never extricate myself, never make a gesture but their cast must come to life? But within, motionless, I can live, and utter me, for no ears but my own. They loaded me down with their trappings and stoned me through the carnival. I'll sham dead now, whom they couldn't bring to life, and my monster's carapace will rot off me. But it's entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate. They've blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it's them I hear. Who, them? ... Ah but the little murmur of unconsenting man, to murmur what it is their humanity stifles, the little gasp of the condemned to life, rotting in his dungeon garroted and racked, to gasp what it is to have to celebrate banishment, beware. (*U* 319)

Now he is derisive and defiant. These others who illegitimately lay claim to him manufacture only “miscreated puppets” that he will “scatter.” He will make impotent dolls of them. Nor will he be “plastered” into a human cast – because, as he insists, their sanguine version of “humanity stifles” and misrepresents him. And his own abdication from an alternative, pained, unendurable human being must be professed to his ears alone (if he has any), for at the suggestion of an audience, he again becomes their “monster,” their construct, socialized, sanitized, and endowed with a comprehensible story. The very “trappings” of personality (a pun) constitute a shell to be shed, a purportedly protective “carapace” that must “rot” away. If these voices, as he admits to metaphorizing them, shove their humanizing creed down his gullet, to force his rebirth, he will abort it. If they inflate him with personhood, like a balloon, he will deflate their triumph: his simile conveys the attraction that physical and psychological “collapse” holds for him. His much-desired exile from “their” world is transformed into a threat: “beware.”

A refusal to long for stable, secure life, to value it as the voices do, will be the weapon he brandishes against them. He will mutinously shout that he feels “condemned to life.” He finds it incumbent upon him, in this moment of eloquent superiority – which, in its willful expressiveness, is indicative of articulable self after all – to advocate for full banishment from the miseries of existence. To acknowledge himself a man, possessed of body and family, and to attain a mind at rest – merrily immersed in quotidian habit and done with questions – is precisely the outcome which he forecloses, and of which he despairs. He will never swallow this picture of peacefulness, pretend that he does not feel “garroted and racked” by his human body. He cannot concede Mahood's purported contentment and thereby quit his dissident's prison, “walled round with their vociferations” (*U* 319). The silence which he now craves will not accompany a euphoric attainment of supposed normalcy; it will instead be the “bliss of coma,” motionless sham death. The Unnamable wants identity “out of sight and mind”: “pupil Mahood, repeat after

me, Man is a higher mammal. I couldn't" (*U* 334). He will not assent to higher faculties and higher purposes; he dreams of lowered consciousness.

The philosopher Emil Cioran, Beckett's contemporary and admirer, also expresses this pain of human specieshood, which motivates such a self-negating attitude, in his nonfictional *On the Heights of Despair* (1934):

Is it not tragic to be man, that perpetually dissatisfied animal suspended between life and death? I'm weary of being a man. If I could, I would renounce my condition on the spot, but what would I become then, an animal? I cannot retrace my steps. ... As far as I am concerned, I resign from humanity. I no longer want to be, nor can still be, a man. (43)

To refuse to play sunnily alive Mahood, Cioran recognizes, is to enter a tragic universe. But such lucidity, in its painfulness, Cioran also sees, may issue in the desire for diminished consciousness, for non-being. Rather than Camusian revolt that finds a new basis for going on, those small non-narrative happinesses that nourish the tragic hero, a nihilistic anti-Mahood will pose Cioran's question: "When all the current reasons – moral, esthetic, religious, social, and so on – no longer guide one's life, how can one sustain life without succumbing to nothingness?" (*HD* 10). Cioran, too, sides against self-recognition in the absence of these traditional crutches: "Nobody would dare look at himself in the mirror, because a grotesque, tragic image would mix in the contours of his face with stains and traces of blood, wounds which cannot be healed, and unstoppable streams of tears" (*HD* 12). "What meaning," Cioran asks, "is there in the tragic suffering of a man for whom everything is ultimately suffering and whose only law in this world is agony?" (*HD* 14). As we saw Miguel de Unamuno conclude in *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1913):

There is something which, for want of a better name, we will call the tragic sense of life, which carries with it a whole conception of life itself and of the universe, a whole philosophy more or less formulated, more or less conscious. ... man, by the very fact of being man, of possessing consciousness, is, in comparison with the ass or the crab, a diseased animal. Consciousness is a disease. (35-36)

Unamuno would characterize The Unnamable's battle as that between an instinctive will to live and a life-negating thought process – a reasoning mind that sees only the anti-Aristotelian senselessness of its undisclosed pains. Unamuno calls this "the contradiction between my heart which says *Yes* and my head which says *No!*" (*TSL* 33). In a more complicated manner, The Unnamable's heart inclines toward existence involuntarily, on the automatic, physical plane, yet his heart, emotionally speaking, pounds with fear, with rage, with a torrent of feelings that only indisposes him toward existence – and which stymied higher consciousness proves unable to stem. His terror gives rise to thought, but his thought fails to subdue the terror that prompted it: "I only think, if that is the name for this vertiginous panic as of hornets smoked out of their nest, once a certain degree of terror has been exceeded," says The Unnamable (*U* 344). He therefore prefers mental activity that extinguishes rather than heightens sensation: "For sometimes I confuse myself with my shadow .... And often I went on looking without flinching until, ceasing to be, I ceased to see" (*U* 334). At sunset, he imagines himself his shadow; when the light is gone, then so is "he." Yet he views the situation in a backward and dissociative manner; it is not

“ceasing to be” that occasions his no longer seeing. It is his projection of self onto the shadow, and his ceasing to behold it, that affords him the pleasing illusion of disappearance.

“The absence of the imagination,” writes Wallace Stevens in “The Plain Sense of Things,” “had itself to be imagined” – “plain” sight, free from subjectivity, must be imagined (13, 14). As long as *The Unnamable* persists in his fancies, even those of self-negation, his imagination remains active and attests to his continuing responsiveness to the world around him; ending imagination, as Stevens writes, is only a further pretense. Beckett’s short prose piece of 1965 makes this point in three words, those of its title: “Imagination Dead Imagine.” Rather than a narrative sequence – the death of imagination, followed by its opposite, a renewed imperative to imagine – this title, like Stevens’ poem, expresses the impossibility of the lived experience “imagination dead,” for we can only ever fantasize such a total extinguishing of perspective. Beckett’s piece opens with this admission: “No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet” (*SP* 182). As long as imagination persists, it indicates, maintains, even manufactures – if need be – traces of life all around it. Once it is imagined “dead,” however, all that remains in the story world is black and white, heat and cold. The universe grows colorless, mathematical, and two speechless bodies lie back to back in semi-circles, eyes gazing on nothingness: “Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit” (*SP* 182). Vision gives way to omission. “Ceasing to see” again affords the impression of ceasing to be. Yet for an instant in this omitted world, in this fantasized sensory deprivation chamber, “hear a ring as in the imagination the ring of bone” (*SP* 182). Even in this forsaken place, sounds (“a ring”) and stored associations (“as in ... the ring of bone”) galvanize a quiescent head back to life. Now for this reanimated “one who still remembers” the world as it used to be, the vacancy and lifelessness all around him are striking in their “absolute stillness” (*SP* 184).

Stevens, too, runs this thought experiment, imagines “the plain sense” of a pond in winter, “without reflection” – without perceptual distortion, without human reflection upon it (2, 15). He conceives of the unseen, unregistered pond as the pond sans “leaves, / Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence / Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see” (15-17). Like *The Unnamable*, Stevens weds the idea of perceptual clarity – the elimination of dirty glass, mud, leaves – to the idea of silence. To obtain an (imagined) objective perspective is here to eliminate the sensing subject and to silence his consciousness. The removal of visual clutter goes hand in hand with auditory peace and with voicelessness – one imagines all human routes to knowledge omitted. Such “silence of a sort” Stevens then assigns to the nonhuman rat, as *The Unnamable* assigns it to the even more insensate Worm.

### Losing Species: from Mahood to Worm

Toward *The Unnamable*’s close, Beckett’s speaker introduces his own vegetative test subject, Worm – the epitome of the Woolfian eyelessness he craves. Worm first inhabits a world of solitude and has neither sense perception nor emotion nor insight. A kind of primal oblivion envelops him, anesthetizes him against suffering. Our narrator describes him as “one alone turned towards the all-impotent, all-nescient,” adopting Hardy’s word (*U* 340). “Before Life and After” (1909) is Hardy’s own exploration of insentience, of “nescience”:

A time there was – as one may guess  
And as, indeed, earth's testimonies tell –

Before the birth of consciousness,  
When all went well.

None suffered sickness, love, or loss,  
None knew regret, starved hope, or heart-burnings;  
None cared whatever crash or cross  
Brought wrack to things.

If something ceased, no tongue bewailed,  
If something winced and waned, no heart was wrung;  
If brightness dimmed, and dark prevailed,  
No sense was stung.

But the disease of feeling germed,  
And primal rightness took the tinct of wrong;  
Ere nescience shall be reaffirmed  
How long, how long? (1-12)

Worm, too, is turned toward unconsciousness, toward this “primal rightness,” and lies motionless and passive. The “disease of feeling” has not yet “germed” in him – has not entered his germline as an invariable biological inheritance. Instead, The Unnamable has “reaffirmed” nescience, a vision of the organism “before the birth of consciousness,” as “earth’s testimonies tell,” when nothing near to manhood adorned the tree of life. Such a creature as Worm is powerless, but his want of agency cannot trouble him. “Before Mahood,” The Unnamable theorizes, “there were others like him, of the same breed and creed, armed with the same prong. But Worm is the first of his kind” (*U* 331). Worm is envisaged as an alternative, creedless, new species, set apart from the familiar, stock variety whose distinguishing feature is its sadistically administered dogmas. Like Stevens’ rat, Worm is valorized, set above spurned Mahood. Worm emerges as the most enviable of nonhuman creatures. Imagined devolution to unconscious form – before life or after – is presented here as a fresh mode of (dubiously) realizable being.

And yet even in The Unnamable’s fantasy, Worm is hammered into human shape against his will. The Unnamable admits that Worm, too, will be molested by insinuating voices. Like his inventor, Worm will be coerced irrevocably into self-awareness – will face extreme pressure to become Mahood. Despite the coma-like tranquility of his den, Worm will be expected to take on flesh, to perceive, navigate, and contemplate the larger world, to live and to die in the common way. Even he will not be “spared by the mad need to speak, to think, to know where one is, where one was, during the wild dream, up above, under the skies, venturing forth at night” (*U* 340). Unsolicited demands from without will force upon him this defining “transit ... from darkness to light” (*U* 351). The slightest notice of a whispering sound, the barest recognition of the external world, promises the end of Worm’s slumber, his exodus from the primordial pit, and an onslaught of troubles. Incipient perception is the first damning marker of matter “condemned to live.” It is an admission of just enough cognition to call down the voices and to encourage them in their campaign. As The Unnamable imagines it, cries and flickers bruise Worm’s inchoate sensibility, and when raw sound fills his head, some irreversible chemistry occurs, generating emotive responses; next comes receptivity to language. From there, it is but a step to witting misery. Worm evolves through stages of sensation and self-consciousness at lightning

speed. Worm *will* develop into one who thinks about his physical and metaphysical anguish, and his sorrows will ravage and absorb him.

Worm's doom is inaugurated by his body, by his senses on alert. Once Worm cocks an ear, his "life-warrant" is issued (*U* 351). His inadvertent *hamartia* is this unsought attainment of some degree of mind. In the early stages:

[Worm] merely hears, and suffers, uncomprehending, that must be possible. A head has grown out of his ear, the better to enrage him, that must be it. The head is there, glued to the ear and in it nothing but rage, that's all that matters, for the time being. It's a transformer in which sound is turned, without the help of reason, to rage and terror, that's all that is required, for the moment. The circumvolutionisation will be seen to later .... (*U* 349)

The ear proves a dolorous conduit – makes for "nerves torn from the heart of insentience, with the appertaining terror and the cerebellum on fire" – and allows for the ceaseless racket of the indefatigable voices to commence, and to madden the listener (*U* 349). Even before Worm comprehends these voices, they assault and frighten him. And the very shattering of Worm's silence inaugurates a host of further violations:

... he suffers more and more, as time flies, and the metamorphosis is accomplished .... But for the moment let him toss and turn at least, roll on the ground, damn it all, since there's no other remedy, anything at all, to relieve the monotony, damn it all, look at the burnt alive, they don't have to be told, when not lashed to the stake, to rush about in every direction, without method, crackling, in search of a little cool, there are even those whose sang-froid is such that they throw themselves out of the window. No one asks [Worm] to go to those lengths. But simply to discover, without further assistance from without, the alleviations of flight from self, that's all, he won't go far, he needn't go far. Simply to find within himself a palliative for what he is, through no fault of his own. (*U* 360, 361)

This palliative needn't be suicide, but whatever inside Worm that can help him to forget his condition. Here we have The Unnamable's own strategy. Once brute emotion has robbed Worm of equanimity – Plato's charge against tragedy – and desperate and unavailing reflection pools in his mind, The Unnamable recommends Worm do his utmost, imaginatively, to reenter his former, nescient state.

But Worm as he was, the nameless undisturbed Worm, is no more – pre-birth, pre-human paradise is definitively lost. The Unnamable surveys and recapitulates Worm's fall. Here is Worm's reversal and subsequent recognition of a self he cannot tolerate:

Feeling nothing, knowing nothing, capable of nothing, wanting nothing. Until the instant he hears the sound that will never stop. Then it's the end, Worm no longer is. We know it, but we don't say it, we say it's the awakening, the beginning of Worm, for now we must speak, and speak of Worm. It's no longer he, but let us proceed as if it were still he, he at last, who hears, and trembles, and is delivered over, to affliction and the struggle to withstand it, the starting eye, the labouring

mind. Yes, let us call that thing Worm, so as to exclaim, the sleight of hand accomplished. (*U* 342)

“Affliction and the struggle to withstand it” prove the culmination of Worm’s tragedy. But the very means of withstanding it, in The Unnamable’s view, is to elude it, is flight – that which, paradoxically, this tale of Worm has shown to be impossible.

In a telling formulation, Worm has no eyelid to close. He has no hands with which to gouge out his eyes, and no clear verbal or mental route to quelling “the starting eye, the labouring mind.” He can only weep – the mark of having seen – in response to his nascent, inexplicable, and species-demarcating suffering:

Tears gush from [Worm’s eye] practically without ceasing, why is not known, nothing is known, whether it’s with rage, or whether it’s with grief, the fact is there, perhaps it’s the voice that makes him weep, with rage or some other passion, or at having to see, from time to time, something or other, that’s it, perhaps he weeps in order not to see, though it seems difficult to credit him with an initiative of this complexity. The rascal, he’s getting humanized .... (*U* 353)

Worm comes to “regret being a man, under such conditions, that is to say a head abandoned to its ancient solitary resources,” resources that do him little good (*U* 355). For The Unnamable, to weep with grief or rage or “some other passion” is to graduate to humanity.

Our narrator finishes this strange parable of forced re-humanization by turning its lesson upon himself: “when I have failed to be Worm I’ll be Mahood, automatically, on the rebound? ... Worm proving to be Mahood the moment one is he?” (*U* 341). Having imagined this anti-character who is only passingly without self-consciousness, The Unnamable now sees that he cannot atavistically become him, “be Worm.” If he were to know himself Worm, he, too, would be on his way to playing Mahood after all. So The Unnamable crystallizes his lament, still analyzing Worm’s case: “others conceive him and say, Worm is, since we conceive him, as if there could be no being but being conceived” (*U* 340). The Unnamable balks at this necessity, “being conceived,” in others’ beds and in others’ minds, and in his own mind. Neither the voices’ propagandistic version of manhood, nor his own tragic sense of it, can be borne. Made to speak in the voice of outsiders, dissenting in a voice that he would also like to relinquish, senselessly suffering and beset by weeping – what resources of the head, what conceptions of the imagination or of reason, can remedy this condition? The Unnamable is highly disturbed by his and Worm’s “life-warrant.” Insofar as he would like to suppress every painful manifestation of it, The Unnamable seems to epitomize a nihilistic, counter-tragic mania – demanding the cancellation of his humanity.

But because even his beloved Worm is bound for internal soliloquizing, cast in a drama not of his choosing, it at last dawns on The Unnamable that total *esquive* in this manner is not possible. He acknowledges, fleetingly, that the incessant narratorial voices that hound him are projections from within, and make him no candidate for dormant Wormhood at all:

... this state of affairs, what state of affairs, so it is, so be it, don’t fret, so it will be, how so, rattling on, dying of thirst, seeking determinedly, what they want, they want me to be, this, that, to howl, stir, crawl out of here, be born, die, listen, I’m listening, it’s not enough, I must understand ... it’s I am talking, thirsting,

starving, let it stand ... I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I'm the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I'm all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words. (*U* 380)

He, too, finds that an external world permeates his subjectivity, and that his own perspective encompasses it. At last, he accepts that his living tongue devises these others, these supposed strangers. Yet he quickly returns to maintaining the farce, to proclaiming the impossible: that he has no voice, that selfless silence can be his. Nothingness of character, we see, is his greatest and most laborious fiction. It is the nihilistic antidote to human fate, specially imagined for Worm but rescinded as a real and viable possibility – the fantasy of “he the famished one, and who, having nothing human, has nothing else, has nothing, is nothing” (*U* 340). Even this much-desired “cure” is tinged with sadness – Worm, admittedly, is “famished,” is starved for life. But if Worm exchanges his unknowing, “unchanging stare” for livelier, quickened existence – if he does have something human – alas “he who seeks his true countenance, let him be of good cheer, he'll find it, convulsed with anguish, the eyes out on stalks” (*U* 340).

The Unnamable feels the terrors of existence as Woolf's Rhoda in *The Waves* does:

I, who could beat my breast against the storm and let the hail choke me joyfully, am pinned down here; am exposed. The tiger leaps. Tongues with their whips are upon me. Mobile, incessant they flicker over me. I must prevaricate and fence them off with lies. What amulet is there against this disaster? (*W* 106)

The Unnamable, too, cannot abide exposure. He, too, avers that tongues whip him mercilessly. But while Rhoda clings to others for protection, The Unnamable hates all reminders of human connection. Rhoda, in the end, is not persuaded that she belongs to any corner of the world. Whenever she exerts herself to join her friends' confederacy, she feels repulsed and ashamed. The others, she imagines, succeed in netting their instants together, forming a satisfying whole – are insiders weaving a seamless narrative together. She commits suicide because she cannot bear to be nothing: “The world is entire and I am outside of it, crying, ‘Oh, save me, from being blown forever outside the loop of time’” (*W* 26). Beckett's narrator feels a parallel horror: he cannot bear to be anything. And yet he frames his own crisis as a triumph.

### Nothingness and Ethics

In the world of *The Unnamable*, the human body is synonymous with human life. There is no anti-Darwinian dichotomy between inanimate matter and living soul. Life is now a certain organization of matter. From physical processes and substances, from animal biology, human sensation and cognition emerge. Varying creatures present gradations of consciousness and sociality. But nature's chances and necessities, its materials and forms – all that supports and constitutes the tree of life – takes on a tragic cast in Beckett's novel. The Unnamable does not feel any sense of terrestrial belonging, nor does any unreflective force of will, any propulsive *élan vital*, act as a prophylactic against nihilism. He certainly possesses no counter-tragic

Humean constitution. Hume writes, that is, in his brief essay “The Sceptic” that by nature we distance ourselves from an overwhelmingly tragic sense of life; therein lies the “amulet ... against this disaster.” Prefiguring Darwin, Hume places persons entirely within the frame of natural history, and treats them as animals hungry for life – remarks “the general appetite between the sexes, which nature has infused into all animals,” remarks that “nature has given all animals a like prejudice in favour of their offspring” and that “the fabric and constitution of our mind no more depends on our choice, than that of our body” (*E* 164, 165, 171). Our natural propensities, he says, are akin to a “stream” which “necessarily follows the several inclinations of the ground, on which it runs” (*E* 171). And for Hume, one of these inborn propensities is an invincible preference for life, a failsafe vitality that rushes in to rescue us from too melancholy, too debilitating a course of reflection. Teive’s and Cioran’s cheerless reason finds its opposite in Hume’s resurgent and prevailing will to live. Unamuno’s tragic conflict between head and heart, rendering human “life ... tragedy and ... perpetual struggle, without victory or the hope of victory,” resolves itself in Hume (33). In Hume’s words in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40):

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (175)

Yet human nature appears to The Unnamable to be a mark of doom; life for The Unnamable disgorges and devours human creatures. Rather than a counter-tragic elixir, life for this narrator is an insufferably tragic dram. Nor does The Unnamable evince that defiant appetite for life that carries Camus and his tragic characters into battle – fueling their revolt. What insistent and irrepressible impulsion The Unnamable does feel seems the negative image of the *élan vital* or of Camusian revolt – the urge to dam up the stream of life and to quash memorable moments. And yet it is this aim that galvanizes and maintains such a character, that marks him with a dissident’s voice, an “I” perennially pronouncing life a punitive sentence.

Thus Beckett’s narrator endeavors, however vainly, to refuse conscription into both conventional narrative and human being per se, and critics have read this vociferous retreat from self-vocalization as both socially productive and socially destructive. At issue is ethics: whether such a character’s incantations against self then empty Beckett’s novels of all ethical content. Certainly Beckett’s character is wary of human meanings – but is his pained stance equivalent to the novel’s? As I have argued, Beckett masters the negative example, holds a mirror to a certain view of nature which his readers are called upon to entertain – but from which they may also be invited to recoil. Beckett animates a tortured subjectivity, poised between, as his character understands it, the compulsory suffering that is life, which he will not mask with narratives of cheerful Mahood, and the attempted abdication of such life, an endeavor which motivates him – but also torments him with its ever-receding possibility. Beckett shows us the unabating, paradoxical contortions of this protagonist who finds personhood to be only a stagnant hell, best left unknown. That this character’s unflagging will should cry “yes” only to its own annihilation

reads as gutting irony. That this characters' words are meant to dissipate evasively, their potential exhausted in feats of denial, is what makes the novel, at times, so heart-breaking. What of a work, then, that postulates a tragic cosmos and responds to it with such life-negating invective that its readers may be provoked into yearning for some – for any – escape hatch? What is it to be indirectly prodded by a “racked and garroted” voice to fantasize some alternative to his words that circle and circle, dog-like, panting after silence and never achieving it, continuing to live only in so contrarian a manner? What is it to wish for some diversion of this narrator's formidable energy toward the establishment of a less perverse foothold among the living? It is in this retreat from our narrator's retreat from life – in this negation of his compulsive negating – that the novel's ethics lies.

In a political reading of Beckett, Theodor Adorno understands this narrator's refusal of all participation in ordinary life to be ethically productive in a similar manner. The Unnamable's nay-saying, in Adorno's reading, is a political statement unto itself: if contemporary consciousness is de facto collaboration in atrocity, a mixture of witting and hapless complicity as Clamence fears, then wholesale renunciation of such a world *is* moral action. To denounce the entirety of this state of affairs is to compel us to dream another – and to abstain from whitewashing, from justifying status quo horrors. Simon Critchley describes the Adornian defense of such a posture as follows:

... the most common and banal accusation leveled at Beckett's work is that it is apolitical and nihilistic because it lacks any of the critical social content evident, say, in the theatre of Brecht or Sartre. Yet, Adorno shockingly suggests that Beckett's work is the *only* appropriate response to the Holocaust, more so than direct witness accounts, precisely because it is not part of the manifest content of Beckett's work, as if it were subject to a *Bilderverbot* [image ban]. What is being alluded to here ... is Adorno's belief that the best modernist artworks, like Beckett's, in their aesthetic autonomy and their refusal of meaning (hence the superficial accusation of nihilism) function as determinate negations of contemporary society and can give the formal semblance of a society free from domination. Beckett's work successfully negotiates the dialectic between the necessary autonomy of modernist art and the function of social criticism not by raising its voice against society or protesting against the obvious injustice of the Holocaust, but rather by *elevating social criticism to the level of form*. This means that Beckett's work, in its steadfast refusal to mean something – a refusal of meaning that is still achieved by way of dramatic or novelistic form – exhibits an autonomy that, far from conspiring with apolitical decadence or 'nihilism,' gives an indication of the transformative political praxis from which it abstains, namely 'the production of a right or just life' .... as Adorno astutely points out, what seems like Stoicism on Beckett's part ('I can't go on, I'll go on') is 'a legacy of action' that 'silently screams that things should be otherwise. Such nihilism implies the opposite of an identification with the Nothing.' (22, 23)

Adorno thus applauds Beckett's characters for their comprehensive negation, treating it as a potent call to action – as an appeal for desperately needed and wholly new praxis that has yet to exist. Just as The Unnamable's wanting connection to the world might make us miss it, crave it, feel its needfulness – on new terms, not by way of the “same old sour teachings” – Adorno sees

in Beckett's characters' sweeping evacuation of social content from their speech, in their refusal to pronounce life right or just, this same ethical prod. Beckett unleashes a gaping negativity that screams for something novel, something better.

Whether *The Unnamable's* is the determinate negation of contemporary society or the determined negation of human being, this pointed withdrawal from an existence pervaded by tragedy is the ethical crux of the novel. It demands its opposite: that tragedy not go unnamed, unexposed, unfought, eluded via "right and just," rosy-hued narrative or via the despairing eclipse of all first-personhood. So Beckett flouts Lukács' prohibition on the representation of "anti-realism" and "anti-humanism," on the animation of characters who do not behave as the Aristotelian *zoon politikon*, the social animal, should (*I* 395, 404). Novelistically, Beckett gives free rein to untethered consciousnesses – depicts implausible voices shunted into lonesome and darkened spaces. But this does not mean that he advocates absurdity or nihilism; if he pens defeated and self-defeating minds, as Lukács would say, these may be stimulants to distinguish our own urges and aims from his characters'. Beckett's modernist case studies, revealing pained and painstaking exile from everyday reality, force us to protest that we might like to grapple with sensation, grief, and rage – even culture and history – differently, aware that each runs the risk of becoming so intolerable that we, too, could defect to this anti-human position. Thus Martha Nussbaum's severe critique of Beckett's novels, of their characters' eschewal of viable ethics, might be the very proof of such fiction's ethical power – the fulfillment of its experimental, ethical wager. Nussbaum understands such characters' refusal to see earthly life as the basis for a sturdy and practicable ethics to be the nihilistic premise of Beckett's novels. Her diagnostic interpretations in "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love" show us routes to life's affirmation that such characters broach, only to retreat from them into negation. Let us consider, then, these affirmative roads not taken – those that Beckettian negativity, like so much narrative dynamite, might provoke its readers to travel, precisely because the obverse path comes to seem impassable. In tracking characters' forays into nihilism, that is, Nussbaum shows us the capacious Beckettian "no" that cries out for spots of "yes." We see not an ethics of revolt, but a foreclosure of lived possibilities that, contrary to *The Unnamable's* own agenda, might fire his audience to live tragically rather than evasively.

Nussbaum first identifies what, in her view, Beckett's characters do aim to attain in the trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*) – freedom from Christian indoctrination that teaches them to spurn a fallen world and a corrupt human body. Nussbaum reads Beckett's *Molloy* in particular as the staging of this endeavor to renounce self-hatred. Yet she finds that such attempted re-education nonetheless pivots back into self-loathing – never constructs ethics on other grounds. This, I argue, is the Beckettian cautionary tale; what Nussbaum sees as proof of the unbroken chokehold of Christianity, I read as the price of eliminating the tragic – the turn toward nothingness, self-abnegation, and a famished humanity. Nussbaum, however, understands this extinction of all hints and glimmers of satisfied personhood to be the novel's moral and artistic failure. She concludes that neither *Molloy* nor *The Unnamable* nor Beckett himself can abandon the notion that earthly life is too imperfect to be accepted:

It is as if Beckett believes that the finite and frail can only inspire our disgust and loathing .... And this is because, as we said, mortality in Beckett's world is seen not as our neutral and natural condition but as our punishment for original sin. The complete absence in this writing of any joy in the limited and finite indicates to us that the narrative as a whole is an expression of a religious view of life.

Lucretius and Nietzsche stand apart from what they condemn [a religious view of life]. They have a separate and uncorrupted sense of pleasure and of value; and because of this they can see how a finite life can have its own peculiar splendor. Beckett's narrative does not see this. (*NE* 251)

For Nussbaum, Beckett's speakers' unremitting repulsion to physical and sexual life binds them to the religiously-based fear and degradation they seek to eschew.<sup>58</sup> It is continuing to view mortality as a punishment for being born, Nussbaum suggests, that leads characters "from a perception of human limits to a loathing of the limited, from grief to disgust and hatred, from the tragedy and comedy of the frail body to rage at the body, seen as covered in excrement" (*NE* 251).

Of signal importance is that Nussbaum expects not only characters' Camusian embrace of love within limits, but a love of "natural" (as opposed to cruelly manmade) limitation. Like Nietzsche, she might suspect that if any inalterable facet of human being becomes the target of loathing, within a Christian or non-Christian framework, nihilistic disparagement of the world will ensue. Nussbaum sees the Beckettian narrator, therefore, passing from a specifically Christian maligning of the perishable human body into the crisis of nihilism that Nietzsche theorizes, in which neither old (Christian) nor new (post-Christian) values seem equal to championing the terrestrial world and to upholding a coherent ethics:

Now [at the end of the nineteenth century] the human being is so radically alienated from natural bodily humanity, so thoroughly immersed in longing for a happy ending in another world, by contrast to which this one is seen as poor and loathsome, that the removal of religious hope creates a crisis of nihilism. Religious teleological patterns of desire are so deep in us, the horror of the body is so deep in us, that it is not clear that there is any vivid life in us that is not made in religion's image, nothing, therefore, to motivate us to construct a new life after its demise. The threat of nihilism is the prospect of the collapse of the will, the refusal to continue ordering and valuing. (*NE* 249)

Critchley recognizes, however, that a Christian monopoly upon imagination is not such nihilism's only impediment to the affirmation of earthly existence: the godless "world of becoming" can also, in its own right, occlude what Nussbaum call the "peculiar splendor" of

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<sup>58</sup> Nussbaum concludes: "We could summarize the emotion story that is Molloy's life by saying that it is the story of original sin, of the fear of God's judgment, and of the vain longing for salvation. This would begin to show us how these voices' experience of fear and love differs from the experience of those emotions in a non-Christian culture; but it would not, being a summary, contain the particular and highly specific learned tonality that makes the Christian world of these people a world of highly concrete and distinct form and feeling, in which the ubiquity of guilt and an anal form of disgust (and humor) color every emotion and perception. We want not only to say that these people feel guilt at original sin; we want to say also that it is guilt at a parental sexual act that is seen as immersing the mother in excrement and causing the birth of the child through excrement. Not only that they feel disgust and loathing, but also that their disgust has as its object, above all, the female body – and their own bodies seen in the aspect of virility and desire, seen, by extension, as mortal, since mortality is seen itself as the punishment for sexual guilt. Not only that they feel fear but that it is a fear of being punished by a supreme being who watches their every feeling, and a punishment that they more than deserve simply in virtue of existing. Not only that they feel hope, but that it is hope for 'succour' and for a merciful waiving of just punishment. And even this is so far too abstract. What they feel is best given in the concreteness of the sentences of the story" (239).

“finite life.” Critchley describes Nietzsche's etiology of modern nihilism as Nussbaum does, but ends with an acknowledgement of a non-Christian impediment to forging ethics anew:

For Nietzsche, the cause of nihilism cannot be explained socially, politically, epistemologically, or even physiologically (i.e. decline of the species), but is rather rooted in a specific interpretation of the world: *Christianity*. For Nietzsche, the ‘Christian–Moral’ interpretation of the world had the distinct advantage of being an antidote to nihilism by granting the world meaning, granting human beings value, and preventing despair (WM 10-11/WP 9-10). However, for Nietzsche – and this is decisive – there is an antinomy or antagonism within nihilism, namely that the Christian–Moral interpretation of the world is driven by a will to truthfulness, but that this very will to truth eventually turns against the Christian interpretation of the world by finding it untrue. That is to say, Christian metaphysics turns on the belief in a true world that is opposed to the false world of becoming that we inhabit here below. However, with the consciousness of the death of God, the true world is revealed to be a fable. Thus, and this is the antinomy, the will for a moral interpretation or valuation of the world now appears to be a will to untruth. Christianity, like ancient tragedy, does not so much die as commit suicide. And yet – here’s the rub – a belief in a world of truth is required simply in order to live because we cannot *endure* this world of becoming. (VL 7)

Beckett’s narrators might epitomize not a Christian but a post-Christian horror of the “world of becoming,” a world that Nietzsche is determined wholly to re-value in order to conquer nihilism, to overcome “a loathing of the limited,” as Nussbaum calls it. Yet Critchley finds in Beckett a laudable refusal to make a virtue of tragic finitude – finds in Beckett “a response to nihilism and its crisis of meaning [that does] not consist in the restoration of a new totality of meaning derived from the datum of finitude: a new thesis on Being, the creation of new values, the achievement of philosophy as revolutionary praxis, or whatever” (VL 27). Whereas Nussbaum finds that Beckettian characters are still beholden to the hope for salvation – evince a “second-order longing (for a redemption from the longing for redemption),” and persist in this desire which they can neither fulfill nor relinquish – Critchley sees Beckettian characters truly forgo “the rose-tinted spectacles of any narrative of redemption,” sees their “radical de-creation of these salvific narratives, ... *a redemption from redemption*” (NE 246; VL 28). Contra Nussbaum and Nietzsche, Beckett’s narrator might echo Critchley’s own conclusion in *Very Little, Almost Nothing*: “Can I assume my finitude affirmatively as a source of meaning in the absence of God? ... I cannot” (25). Limited time will not be the grounds for The Unnamable’s new attachment to life – it will be what he labors to unknow. Yet in Critchley’s case, affirmation is possible on other grounds, for tragic finitude (even loathing for tragic finitude) and happiness are by no means incompatible. Very little, almost nothing, can still be a sustaining portion. It is instead The Unnamable’s practice of eluding tragic time entirely that renders wholesale renunciation his *telos*.

The Unnamable has glimpsed all too well the “worstward” trajectory that he toils to keep at bay: “and but suppose, instead of suffering less than the first day, or no less, he suffers more and more, as time flies, and the metamorphosis is accomplished, of unchanging future into unchangeable past. Eh?” (U 360). It is the accumulation of time and the fate it must uncover that

appalls him: “the question may be asked, off the record, why time doesn't pass, doesn't pass from you, why it piles up all about you, instant on instant, on all sides, deeper and deeper, thicker and thicker, your time, others' time, the time of the ancient dead and the dead yet unborn, why it buries you grain by grain” (*U* 383). Beckett's narrator therefore sides not with Mahood, but with a rival figment, one who counsels him to gain “quittance” of this measureless time and of this horde of imagined voices, by committing suicide: “come come, a little cooperation please, finish dying, it's the least you might do” (*U* 324, 326). Picture yourself buried alive by time, whispers this other voice – this “other voice, of him who does not share this passion for the animal kingdom” – in order to motivate and precipitate self-destruction (*U* 329). The Unnamable's rejection of the “wrong” words – in Nussbaum's view, the conceptual vocabulary of sinfulness and redemption, in Adorno's view, the language of fascism, of the concentrationary – passes into a rejection of all symbolic representation.

Nussbaum is right, then, that mortality in Beckett does not appear as “our neutral and natural condition”; a language of “badness” or “disease” does apply to it. But must this entrap Beckett's characters within a Christian worldview? Can an alternative vantage point also see death as a loathsome ill? Heathen suspicion of original sinlessness might also propel characters from grief to disgust, from tragedy to rage. If as Nussbaum suggests in *The Fragility of Goodness*, tragic events cannot themselves be applauded (suffering must be decried not defended), then why must the limits and frailties that set the stage either for manmade abuses or for cosmic mischances be embraced (xxx-xxxii)? “Not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments,” as Camus says, might be modernism's formulation of an anti-Christian tragic ethics – one that need not reframe finitude itself as no longer an ailment (*MS* 38). Thus Nussbaum identifies, too, a number of ancient philosophical schools that aim to refashion one's *weltanschauung*, to revise one's view of finite mortal life and of human powerlessness, to which Beckett's characters do not subscribe.

Nussbaum argues that Beckett's speakers vainly pursue these ancient philosophical treatments, in their attempts to overcome religious patterns of thought and feeling. For the Greek and Roman Stoics, for instance, Nussbaum explains that “emotions are forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to things and persons outside the agent's own control great significance for the agent's own flourishing .... [T]he Stoics go on to argue that all these judgments are false, and that we ought to wean ourselves from them to the extent that we can” (*FG* xvi). Thus Stoicism provides first and foremost a means of eradicating the belief that external powers and unsolicited fates largely rule our lives, can compromise our well-being, and limit our self-determination. Stoicism restricts one's sphere of caring; if it can be used against Christian thought, as Nussbaum argues in relation to Beckett, it also shields its practitioners from tragedy. No wonder The Unnamable might relish its promise of detachment, as Teive in *The Education of the Stoic* did. Nussbaum describes Stoicism's tenets as follows:

For now we see that if we really get someone to hold the Stoic belief that no external or uncontrolled item was of any value at all, that person would have (as, indeed, the Stoics insisted) no emotional life at all. We would not want to teach a person this if we think their emotion beliefs are either true or helpful. But if we should believe, with the Stoics, that they are both false and in other ways pernicious, if we believe that a life with emotion beliefs in it is bound to be in certain specifiable ways a life in which we both suffer agony ourselves and do harm to others, then we would have a good reason to set about undoing those

beliefs. This project of undoing would take different forms in different societies, for each society structures emotion beliefs in certain highly specific ways, and the undoing will have to be correspondingly specific in order to counter the very thoughts that grip us. It is my suggestion the Beckett's [narrators] are engaged in one form of this project of radical undoing. (NE 233)

For Nussbaum, therefore, Beckett's characters aim to target and eliminate Christianity with such mental re-conditioning. Yet Nussbaum's objection is that, in doing so, they also in Stoic fashion refuse to admit the chanceful tragic universe that can re-emerge in the wake of Christianity.<sup>59</sup> Stoicism's own evacuation of emotion indeed sets it at odds with tragedy's recognition of human weakness and subjection to unpredictable fortune: for "tragedies, and philosophical works that learn from tragedies, can enrich our sense of how the human values are vulnerable to chance, and can thus call into question projects of redesigning our schemes of ends and goals so as to remove the influence of chance altogether from human life" (FG xxix-xxx). Stoic, Christian, and nihilistic stances all aim to suppress our intimate involvement with luck and fragility – back away from values bound up with them. Nussbaum therefore argues that Beckett's characters adopt and extend the counter-tragic, Stoic premise that "stories first construct and then evoke (and strengthen) the experience of feeling. So criticism of emotion must be, prominently, an unwriting of stories" (NE 234).

Thus Moran in *Molloy* eventually tells us that "with a great disgusted sweep of all my being, I swept myself clean of them [beliefs, their initiatory stories] and surveyed with satisfaction the void they polluted" (NE 243). As the Stoics object to caring what befalls us and how our plans turn out – for only what is under our control, our thoughts in response to what befalls us, and our plans themselves, matter – Beckett's characters, in Nussbaum's view, mean to cease to care about Christian guilt and redemption, and proceed to care for nothing in their stead. When Moran, on this reading, retires to his garden "swept clean" of invidious ideas, his escape from an emotional life predicated upon shame and sinfulness seems nearly complete, but he has left Christianity for a terrestrial world still void of value. So Nussbaum compares Moran to his philosophical predecessors, whom on her reading he does not resemble:

Beckett alludes, in this ending [to *Molloy*], to two powerful stories of antireligious salvation; and these allusions strengthen our conviction that the constraints of religious emotion really have been transcended. The ending in the garden refers, most obviously, to the conclusion of Voltaire's *Candide*, in which the return home to one's own and the choice *cultiver son jardin* represents the overthrow of the Leibnizian search for a religious meaning in all events, and the decision to live in the world as in a chancy arbitrary place made partially habitable by the decency of friendship. But Beckett's and Voltaire's gardens have, as well, an earlier reference: to the garden of Epicurus, in which pupils learned, by a patient therapeutic criticism of the emotions that society had taught them, to live a life free from religious fear and longing, and the love that is based upon these. Epicurus's doctrine that the root cause of human unhappiness lies in our desires and emotions and that these bad desires are "empty" social constructs, erected by convention and capable of being dismantled by opposite habits, is the doctrine about emotion

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<sup>59</sup> For Nussbaum's further explication of the procedures and limitations of Stoicism and Epicureanism both, see *The Therapy of Desire*.

that is being worked out in this book as a whole. So it is not really surprising that the ending to Moran's story should have this Epicurean setting. Even Beckett's interest in animals parallels that of Epicurus (and Lucretius): animals have forms of life apart from the pollution of religion; they show us what it could be to be alive without hope or fear or disgust or even love. (245-246)

Yet Nussbaum finds that Moran cannot produce any new narration or community – even momentary intimacy – that would allow him to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of his cleansing negation. Stoicism and Epicureanism should banish fear and pain and proffer fortifying autonomy or friendship in their stead; Beckett's *The Unnamable*, however, continues to feel powerless and is bent on isolation. Even non-human animals, as we have seen, represent not a clean slate in Beckett – personhood inoculated against shame and disquietude – but amnesia and silence.

Nussbaum views Moran, then, as the antithesis of both Lucretius and Nietzsche, because they sweep clean in order to rebuild:

Both Epicurus' great poet-pupil and the evangelist of God's death believed that a religious view of the world had deeply poisoned human desires in their time, constructing deformed patterns of fear and longing. Both believed, too, that certain influential art forms were powerful accomplices of religious longing ... and that a successful attack on religion required the undoing of these forms. And yet neither ended by embracing silence. Both, indeed, imagined a fruitful life for human beings beyond religious expectation, and both constructed forms of writing that seemed to them appropriate for that more fruitful life, or at least for the movement toward it. ... Nietzsche did hold out hope for human life beyond nihilism. And he believed his task as a writer to be the creation of that hope as a vivid possibility. The first step in the creative task must be negative: the thorough, detailed dismantling of religious beliefs and teleological desires .... And beyond the "nay-saying" stage of the spirit, Nietzsche foresaw, and held out as a possibility, a joyful affirmative life for the spirit and the body together, a life truly beyond the constraining oppositions of disgust and awe, loathing and longing. (*NE* 247-48, 249).

Nietzsche tells us, as we have seen, to positively relish the dangers, even the sufferings, of existence. Lucretius, for his part, maintains that poetry is the soundest means of dispensing restorative medicine to humankind, of curing us of unnecessary angst. Lucretius disputes the necessity of lamentation altogether; he entirely refuses a tragic sense of life.

Epicurus himself in his famed "Letter to Menoeceus" instructs his disciple that whatever produces anxiety and grief is rooted in false belief; naturalistic explanation of the cosmos is in fact the treatment prescribed to relieve this needless suffering. Epicurus' empiricist's vision does not inaugurate its own host of fears – because he has dispensed with the myth of a nightmarish afterlife and has shown all other reasons for mortal fear to be specious. His followers can resemble the Epicurean gods, who themselves forgo commerce with our messy Earth and know permanent peace; his followers can be tranquil and self-sufficient, invulnerable to loss. So averse to tragedy are the Epicureans that they recommend the tameness of moderate enjoyments – no risky loves – over the perils of passionate endeavor and attachment. They embrace a

simultaneously emancipating and circumscribed existence. “Beckett is a member of this therapeutic company,” Nussbaum determines, but “his pessimism (or that of his voices) denies a possibility that they [Lucretius and Nietzsche] hold open”: the possibility of atheistic affirmation, whether of the Stoic, Epicurean, and Nietzschean (counter-tragic) persuasion or from a position of tragic self-knowledge.

Hardy, Woolf, and Camus have dramatized such tragic, rebellious “going on” for us. Aristotelian critic Nussbaum also finds that both the Greek tragedians and Aristotle present a vision of human frailty and limitation that fosters empathy and ethical action – that sounds the trumpet call of the meliorism for which Hardy’s tragic ethics advocated. But Nussbaum does not concede that any detours through nihilism might be necessary to convince audiences of the benefits of facing, rather than evading, a tragic condition. Nussbaum sees in the Attic playwrights and in Aristotle an understanding of tragic fate not as good in itself, but as an (at times) ineliminable accompaniment to all that is humanly good – such that the tragedians and Aristotle can write of lives subject to extreme misfortune yet still enfolded within and conducting to a coherent system of values. Their heroes and heroines, then, would not need to brave the anesthetizing darkness of negation, perhaps to win courage to quit it. Such a broken swing toward the negative would seem to afford the genre too much power to inspire the very disgust and hopelessness that foreclose ethical action, as Socrates feared. Nussbaum, then, reads the inefficacy of Stoic and Epicurean regimens in Beckett as his fiction’s lapsing into resignation and amorality – for his characters do not use these treatments to abolish a Christian ethics and then advance one step further to delight in and to protect an existence prone to tragedy. Yet Beckett’s very withholding of Stoicism’s and Epicureanism’s alternatives to religion and to tragedy – as well as his withholding of any ethics predicated upon tragedy itself – could be seen as both his anti-Aristotelian admission of the very real despair that tragedy can produce and his strange, circuitous antidote to such despair. It might now be *The Unnamable*’s internalized nihilism, rather than external nature’s absurdity – absurdity which motivated Woolf’s and Camus’ characters to revolt – that spurs Beckett’s readers to a defiant commitment to life. Such nihilism could now act upon readers, steeped in its self-loathing volubility, as reverse, re-humanizing psychology. Could this be Beckettian purging, Beckettian catharsis – predicated upon our entering wholeheartedly, immersively, into the mind of this character, but feeling extreme relief that we are not him?<sup>60</sup>

### The Unnamable as Oedipus

Camus is determined to read Oedipus as the rebel who affirms (“it is enough”) in the full, harsh light of the tragic dawn. *The Unnamable*, however, dreams of Oedipus’ eyelessness. He dreams of being without human senses, of residing in an inhuman, blindly impassive state.

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<sup>60</sup> Today classical scholars have come to suggest that catharsis in Aristotle is neither purgation nor purification of the emotions (two long-standing interpretations), because spectators’ fear and pity are neither pathological nor impure, are in need neither of removal nor cleansing. Critics instead debate catharsis in terms of Aristotle’s position on the educative or pleasure-inducing ends of tragedy. Nussbaum prefers the “cognitivist” view in which tragedy fosters learning and moral improvement – in her reading, it is a school for sympathy. Lear argues, on the contrary, that tragedy’s special pleasure lies in the very relief that audiences derive from its fictionality (as Hume, following Fontenelle, had suggested). Perhaps Beckett combines these myriad views of catharsis and self-improvement: renders hard-won understanding of a character the prerequisite to any pleasure we might take in having escaped his fate. Beckett provokes a purgative saturation in and separation from *The Unnamable*’s thoughts – a treatment that itself is ethically productive.

Whereas Camus in his treatment of both Oedipus and Sisyphus praises what he takes to be these figures' contention that "all is well," that happiness is possible within the confines of fate, Beckett's *The Unnamable* has responded to the specter of self-knowledge with willful self-blinding – and stopped at that. He does not pass on to the Camusian third stage of renewed attachment, on recalibrated grounds, to tragic existence. He is the nihilistic Oedipus.

Both *The Unnamable* and Oedipus fixate upon the ill luck of birth itself: "That dreadful mark – I've had it from the cradle," Oedipus realizes (1.1134). Initially, he, too, professes that "I must see my origins face-to face" but like *The Unnamable* he comes to loathe what there is to uncover: "for all your power / Time, all-seeing Time has dragged you to the light," says the chorus, and light is never gentle in its illuminations (1.1085; 1.1339-1340). Oedipus experiences his Camusian moment of terrible lucidity:

O god –  
all come true, all burst to light!  
O light – now let me look my last on you!  
I stand revealed at last –  
cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,  
cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands! (1.1306-1310)

Following this "O light" agony, Oedipus eschews the light of life, of the sun – the dual meaning that the Greek word carries – and the shepherd who features in Oedipus's scene of recognition names the congenital sentence that *The Unnamable*, too, then seeks to elude: "you were born for pain" (1.1305).

Oedipus' first act of self-assertion, post-recognition, is to recoil from the character to which he has been awakened. His response to knowledge, his acknowledgement of it, is his refusal to see:

Apollo, friends, Apollo –  
he ordained my agonies – these, my pains on pains!  
But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,  
mine alone – no one else –  
I did it all myself!  
What good were eyes to me?  
Nothing I could see could bring me joy. (1.1467-1473)

Oedipus distinguishes between hurt ordained from birth by Apollo, about which he can do nothing, and this his own response to it. The messenger echoes: "Terrible things, and none done blindly now, / all done with a will. The pains / we inflict upon ourselves hurt most of all" (1.1359-1361). Oedipus pronounces *The Unnamable*'s very credo:

No, if I could just block off my ears,  
the springs of hearing, I would stop at nothing –  
I'd wall up my loathsome body like a prison,  
blind to the sound of life, not just the sight.  
Oblivion – what a blessing...  
For the mind to dwell a world away from pain. (1.1518-1523)

At the end of *Oedipus the King*, it is this disgust-laden sentiment that fuels the tragic hero's denunciation of the world. Oedipus comes to embody the nihilistic "wisdom of Silenus" that the chorus speaks in *Oedipus at Colonus*:

Not to be born is best  
when all is reckoned in, but once a man has seen the light  
the next best thing, by far, is to go back  
back where he came from, quickly as he can.  
For once his youth slips by, light on the wing  
lightheaded... what mortal blows can he escape  
what griefs won't stalk his days? (1.1388-1394)

Even in this later play, blinded Oedipus has not made peace with his fate – although he does go on by way of his daughters' guiding hands – and he repeatedly professes his total innocence, the unjustifiable nature of his sufferings. As tragic hero engaged in retrospection, he refuses the idea of a rotten nature responsible for his destiny, an original guiltiness:

But no, no –  
how could you call me guilty, how by nature?  
.....

But in fact,  
knowing nothing, no, I went ... the way I went –  
but the ones who made me suffer, they knew full well,  
they wanted to destroy me. (1.288-29, 1.292-295)

I am innocent! Pure in the eyes of the law,  
blind, unknowing, I, I came to this! (1.615-616)

I have suffered it all, and all against my will!  
Such was the pleasure of the gods, raging,  
perhaps, against our race from ages past.  
But as for me alone –  
say my unwitting crimes against myself  
and against my own were payments from the gods  
for something criminal deep inside me ... no, look hard,  
you'll find no guilt to accuse me of – I am innocent! (1.1098-1105)

Like *The Unnamable*, he is dealt an unearned, a chance fate; like *Worm*, he assumes it blindly. If any explanation is to be found for his current condition, it lies in the constitution of his "race from ages past," not in "something criminal deep inside me." Both *Worm* and *The Unnamable*, then, like Oedipus, would prefer self-blinding to sight. They cannot share the Sophoclean chorus' nearly Christian hope for justice for the wronged and tortured tragic hero: "Numberless agonies / blind and senseless, came his way in life – / now let some power / some justice grant him glory!" (*Colonus* 1.1775-1778)

## Beckett's Ancients

Beckett is exceedingly well versed in Greek philosophy. Nussbaum does not arbitrarily compare his narrators' strategies to those of the Stoics and Epicureans. Yet Beckett himself is drawn to philosophical schools that embrace the irrational, the uncontrollable, the tragic. To Platonism and Pythagorism – rationality and mysticism – Beckett prefers Democritus' materialism, Heraclitus' ceaseless mutability, and Sophism's overthrow of reigning transcendental truths. Sophism, Plato's nemesis, is the philosophy most concordant with tragedy; it refuses any given fate a predetermined and fixed meaning, legible within a single conceptual schema. Gorgias, the master-Sophist, takes up this interpretive uncertainty in his "Encomium of Helen," for instance, revisiting a central figure of myth – whose guilt is presumed to be indubitable – in order to argue for her blamelessness. Gorgias rereads Helen's story in multiple lights, affording her supposedly guilty defection four separate points of origin, each of which reveals her to be innocent, a victim of insuperable circumstance. What Beckett then tests in his own fiction are the most extreme psychological responses to Gorgias' tragic universe – the most radical unmooring of subjectivity, the most desperate attempts to re-anchor the mind to infallible verities.

In David Addyman's and Michael Feldman's recent work on Beckett's "Philosophy Notes" – notebooks in which Beckett tracked his intensive private studies from 1932-1933 – we see clear evidence of Beckett's partiality to the Sophists.<sup>61</sup> While Beckett's principal source for the ancients, as Addyman and Feldman write, is Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* (1893), which champions Platonism and its rationally ordered universe, Beckett gravitates toward the very positions Windelband finds objectionable. Addyman and Feldman show, for example, that when Beckett recopies passages from *A History of Philosophy*, seemingly verbatim, he in fact omits Windelband's negative framing of Sophism. Windelband writes:

But as they considered what they practised and taught – viz. the skill to carry through any proposition whatsoever – the *relativity* of human ideas and purposes presented itself to their consciousness so clearly and with such overwhelming force that they disowned inquiry as to the existence of a universally valid truth in the theoretical, as well as in the practical sphere, and so fell into a scepticism which was at first a genuine scientific theory and then became frivolous. With their self-complacent, pettifogging advocacy, the Sophists made themselves the mouth-piece of all the unbridled tendencies which were undermining the order of public life (*HP*, 69). (Addyman and Feldman 764-765)

Beckett retains only the following, beginning, as Addyman and Feldman note, by dropping the "but" which for Windelband marks the advent of criticism:

As the Sophists considered what they practised and taught – viz. the skill to carry through any proposition whatsoever – the relativity of human ideas and purposes struck them with such overwhelming force that they disowned inquiry as to the existence of the a universally valid [sic] in both theory and practice, and so fell into a scepticism which was at first genuine scientific theory and then became frivolous (TCD 10967 40-40v). (765)

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<sup>61</sup> See also, Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of the Interwar Notes*.

Doubt, incessant reframing, and the undermining of dominant, ostensibly unassailable narratives can certainly be counted among The Unnamable's tools, taken to the extreme. Whereas Windelband, as Addyman and Feldman explain, defends the discipline of philosophy as that which uncovers and articulates the norms governing all other disciplines, in order to prove, not the relativism of belief systems, but the immutable laws that permit their operation, Beckett prefers the Sophists' admission of interpretive instability. Addyman and Feldman write: "Windelband again devalues the Sophists, contrasting their 'pettifogging' with 'the plain, sound sense, and the pure and noble personality' of Socrates; again, Beckett omits this phrase" (765). Whereas Windelband seeks the truths contained within "normativity," hewing to ancient realism, Beckett argues for the "nominalism" of human perspectives, for the uniqueness of individual sensations (Addyman and Feldman 763). While Windelband disparages Protagoras' "sensualism," Beckett praises Protagoras, preserving a line from J. Archibald Alexander's *A Short History of Philosophy* that defines Protagoras as "the first *great* individualist, relativist and agnostic" (Addyman and Feldman 764). Beckett makes Sophism's philosophical linchpins – perspectivalism and agnosticism – foundational features of his fictional universes. Although Windelband condemns Sophism for going too far, for veering into hyperbolic doubt, Beckett indeed allows his own narrators to do just that – testing the limits of their anti-rationalist positions, of their distrust of metaphysical and physical certainties. Thus as Addyman and Feldman contest in relation to *Murphy* (1938), Beckett presents its protagonist's approval of absolutely untethered interiority, and yet the novel as a whole proposes that such a descent into solipsism is not so salutary to those who live it (767).

Anthony Cordingley, too, writes of Windelband as the champion of counter-tragic philosophies from which Beckett formatively distances himself: "Windelband's enthusiasm for the virtues of a Greek education (*paideia*) and the assimilation of Aristotelian ethics into Christian morality is exemplary of the teleological current of intellectual and artistic history against which Beckett's own oeuvre stands" (385). Cordingley contends that in *How It Is* (1961), for instance, Beckett now takes aim, not at extreme subjectivism, but at its opposite: an all too ferocious conviction of *a priori* rational and moral order. On Cordingley's reading, Beckett creates a main character hounded by an "ancient voice" that insists that all be made intelligible, indubitable. Cordingley finds in *How It Is* "Beckett's parody of ratiocination," in which Beckett's "English translation – 'ancient voice' – accentuates an underlying discourse with the ancients, for the transferal of voice and its learning finds its allegory in principles of Pythagorean and Platonic education" (385, 386). The speaker of *How It Is*, argues Cordingley, cannot bear that others should remind him of muddy irrationality, and so is sadistically bent upon converting the sophistical Pim:

Like a surd, the irrational number *pi* cannot be expressed as a fraction of two rational numbers, and Pim's prelinguistic emergence out of unformed chaos is an affront to the Pythagoreanism of the "I," provoking his most violent effort to inscribe Pim within the *Logos*. Commenting on the irrational in Beckett's work, David Hesla observes that Latin translations of Euclid use the term *surdus* (deaf) for *alogos*, which was an irrational or "deaf root" (7). Pim is also deaf and his *absurdity* must be hammered into order until his "song ascends in the present" (81; 2.80). In the eye of the narrator/narrated, Pim's song is stripped of the pure absurdity of its primary being, for Pim has been coerced into a prevailing

“tropism towards” the mysterious “deity” of the “I,” his “other above in the light.”  
(391)

Such is the “transit ... from darkness to light” that The Unnamable holds to be Worm’s lamentable fate. Like one of The Unnamable’s insatiable, creed-mongering voices “the narrator/narrated” of *How It is*, as Cordingley describes him, “conceives of his universe through a wilful blindness to the irrational” (393). Yet Cordingley concludes that even this “I” fails – as Beckett’s characters tellingly do, in these myriad experiments – in his suppression of chaos. This narrator finds that “his breath will never be refined into *Logos* or imitate the breath of Christ, the Christian *Logos*, for it is fundamentally ‘ill-captured ill-murmured’ and thus ‘ill-said’” (Cordingley 393, 392). Cordingley contends that in Beckett “Plato’s *eidos* or Soul-as-Form is translated as Species (the same word is adapted by Aristotle)” but even this text’s rigidly rationalist “narrator/narrated eventually laments his ‘loss of species’” – his failure to demonstrate a wholly intelligible and clearly reasoning essence (392).

While Cordingley therefore claims that this character’s “species,” understood as soul, never achieves its fully realized, transcendental form, it is also true that this character’s terrestrial, biological species is never fully shed:

I hear me again murmur me again in the mud and am again

the journey I made in the dark straight line sack to my neck never quite fallen  
from my species and I made that journey (*H* 126)

It is Beckett’s The Unnamable who cultivates species loss – neither immaterial Platonic Form nor bodily biological form attracts him.<sup>62</sup> He refuses the education which Pim, like Worm, experiences as a kind of brutalization. He resists fictions and philosophies that promise to make sense of his pains, as well as the tormenting irrationality of the pains themselves.

#### Counter-Tragic Calm

“How many times, since I’ve known Beckett,” writes Cioran in his reminiscences in *Anathemas and Admirations* (1986), “have I wondered (an obsessive and rather stupid interrogation) about his relation to his characters. What do they share? Who could conceive of a more radical disparity?” (134). How, asks Cioran, can the flesh-and-blood Beckett whom he knows (and so keenly admires) resemble these haunted husks? Reading Beckett, Cioran tells us that he has “the sensation of entering into a posthumous universe, some geography dreamed by a demon released from everything, even his own malediction” (*A* 134). Cioran’s words precisely and piercingly capture The Unnamable’s wish: if only he could have, a contradiction in terms, a posthumous life, released from everything, even his own self-loathing, he might become a happy ghost. If he could exist before or beyond or beneath his humanity – assume a prehuman or posthuman character – without subjectivity, not I, he should be released from everything, especially his own maledictions. He should be, paradoxically, protected and extinct.

Yet rather than contend with the eeriness of Beckettian characters as Cioran does, much Beckett scholarship pursues the philosophical moral of Beckett’s story, the lesson it is presumed

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<sup>62</sup> For connections between Beckett’s stage drama and evolution and species-being, see Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett*.

to teach. As Joshua Landy remarks: “Many critics appear to assume, as though it goes without saying, that Beckett is simply trying to *inform* us of something: that free will is an illusion, for example, that the self is in language, that Descartes is wrong, or that there is no ground for epistemological certainty” (226). Cioran’s contrary mode of reading presumes characters who exist along a continuum of shared humanity with readers and writer, and yet become fantastically distorted – such that a “radical disparity” seems to exist between real and fictional persons. Landy, too, treats Beckett’s characters as fellow sufferers; yet he finds that readers can in fact share in their habits and might indeed resemble them. Landy argues in “Passion, Counter-Passion, Catharsis: Flaubert (and Beckett) on Feeling Nothing” that Beckett’s character studies do present readers with a cure for a disease of the mind – the disease of ceaseless rumination, of philosophy itself. In Landy’s view of Beckett the experimental doctor, *The Unnamable* labors to achieve post-philosophical peace and succeeds.<sup>63</sup> Beckett’s trilogy becomes a practicum in the banishing of disquietude, in Landy’s reading, that meets its objective, whereas Nussbaum sees its failure to quiet malaise. The trilogy is not, on this account, a negative example of discouraged nihilism, as I have argued, but a model that readers may emulate:

[R]eaders of Beckett are suffering from the same disease as Beckett’s characters, in search of the same recovered health, and eager to undergo the same treatment. ... Now health here, let me add, means peace of mind; the disease, here, is philosophy; and the treatment, here, is nothing other than the trilogy itself. (Landy 220)

Now the ailment is not grief at the tragic precariousness of mortal life, but the very philosophy, perhaps, that tries and fails to subdue such feeling (Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism). Landy contends that Beckett’s narrators practice Pyrrhonian skepticism, an extreme form, that effectively dissolves the agitations of cognition into *antaraxia* (peace of mind, freedom from rumination).

While Hegelian philosophy synthesizes opposites, Pyrrhonian skepticism dissipates philosophical disquiet into mental blankness. Landy cites Molloy’s contention that “to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is where peace enters in” (226). Landy affirms:

Molloy could not be any clearer: the ultimate *telos* of the Beckettian quest, whether or not such a *telos* may in practice ever be attained, is *peace*. And this means that Molloy, like most of Beckett’s heroes, is not just a skeptic but an *ancient* skeptic, indeed a *Pyrrhonian* skeptic. For him, that is, epistemological questions, questions about what can and cannot be known, and with what degree of certainty, are *secondary*, merely instrumental to the primary goal, which is *ataraxia*, freedom from disturbance, enduring peace of mind. (226)

Landy outlines a methodology of intellectual cancellation – let no thesis or antithesis prevail or combine – that nullifies certainty on all points. Audrey Wasser, following Deleuze, argues for a similar (Deleuzian) logic in Beckett’s prose: a logic of “exhaustion,” in which every permutation or possibility, epistemologically-speaking, is tried and discarded, spent and rejected, until

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<sup>63</sup> See also Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, Chapter 5, “Beckett: Antithesis and Tranquility.”

nothing remains. One is not weary afterward (exhausted as in fatigued); one is simply empty.<sup>64</sup> Landy celebrates as curative this Pyrrhonian flight from tragic experience and philosophical reasoning. Here skepticism is both counter-tragic (will curtail all feeling) *and* counter-philosophical (will curtail all thinking):

... *there is no way to make an end-run around intellect*: once we are started on the game of ruminating, we cannot simply will ourselves to stop. ... The sole remaining solution, at this point, is to convince the intellect to abdicate (as Proust would say) of its own accord, out of sheer despair. It must somehow be convinced not only that it *does* not know, but also that it *cannot* know; it must be convinced, as Molloy puts it, that it is “beyond knowing anything.” And in order to bring about this blissful condition, one must bring before it *opposite hypotheses* in answer to every question that arises, the equal plausibility of which is sure to leave the intellect in the appropriate state of *epoché* (suspension of judgment). Silence and resignation are not givens, but require to be *made*; nothingness is not a state that pre-exists objects and beliefs but is, instead, a state that results from their mutual cancellation.

All this, of course, is straight out of the skeptical playbook. “Skepticism,” writes Sextus Empiricus, “is an ability ... which opposes appearances to judgments in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of ‘unperturbedness’ or ‘quietude.’” *Antilogoi, epoché, ataraxia*; in Beckettian terms, “find again, lose again, seek in vain, seek no more.” (Landy 227)

Landy therefore suggests that for both Pyrrhonian skeptics and Beckettian characters “[t]he intellect refuses to take orders from the intuition and the emotions,” and can cease and desist only once it has practiced this art of “mutual cancellation,” convinced itself that no answers to the mind’s myriad questions are possible (227).

Yet it would seem that the intellect’s crisis in *The Unnamable* is that it cannot silence these instigators to thought (emotion and intuition), cannot satisfy their craving for an end to pain and ensure peacefulness. As Critchley puts it:

Our difference with antiquity, for good or ill, is that there is little sense of philosophy as a calmative or consoling influence that prepares the individual stoically for his passage on to either nothingness or eternal bliss. Beckett’s Murphy strapped into his chair has replaced the garden of Epicurus as an image of the philosopher in late modernity. (VL 25)

Landy concludes, nonetheless, that while “[w]e do not begin from nothing,” we can “*end* there, if we are lucky. (Emotional) nothingness is not a given: it is something that needs to be made” (228). Landy evokes the Flaubertian “goal of ‘loving nothing,’ the goal of being at last out of desire” (228). Indeed, throughout *The Unnamable*, nothingness – epistemological, and in particular, emotional nothingness – is the speaker’s “strange hope, turned towards silence and

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<sup>64</sup> See Audrey Wasser, “A Relentless Spinozism: Deleuze’s Encounter with Beckett.”

peace” (*U* 296). Yet The Unnamable’s incessant excoriation of self and world seems to betray the impossibility of achieving this end, and the inefficacy of the therapy in question. Such an emotionally purgative course seems to do The Unnamable more harm than good – to leave him in a state of partial animation, of living death, his desires more warring than becalmed. He is akin to Oedipus, who is still tormented in his darkness by an “unspeakable” fate. Oedipus cries:

dark, horror of darkness  
my darkness, drowning, swirling around me  
crashing wave on wave – unspeakable, irresistible  
headwind, fatal harbor! Oh again,  
the misery, all at once, over and over  
the stabbing daggers, stabs of memory  
raking me insane” (*Oedipus the King* 1.1450-1456).

The Unnamable is tortured by prods to fully revive and he is tortured by prods to “finish dying” (*U* 326). Certain practices of ancient philosophy, like certain practices of modern psychology, would aim to rid him of his anxieties. Yet it would appear that only if The Unnamable were to embrace his bodily fragility and finitude, as Nietzsche imagines we must do in order to reach a wholesale affirmation of existence – only then could The Unnamable forgo this “medicine” that aims to extinguish reflection and empty him of love.

Beckett’s fiction, however, comes to pursue a third option: without 1) eradicating our susceptibility to loss, making us invulnerable to it via some Platonic or Epicurean or Stoic or Skeptic therapy, or via some Christian or historical optimism, and without 2) compelling us to love all of “natural” life indiscriminately, including its finitude, foregoing lamentation at its pains, might we 3) live with grief and still evade nihilism? If *The Unnamable*, rather than elaborating such a possibility, only drives us to desire it – precisely by withholding it – *Company* begins to outline its realization.

*Company*: “That was I. That was I then.”

It is the narrator of Beckett’s *Company* who reproduces The Unnamable’s self-negating logic only to renounce it: who emerges from the dark via stabs of memory which, like a mnemonic touch of the hand, reattach him to the light of the living. Whereas The Unnamable had said, “Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it” – meaning that one must recognize the failure of all pronouns to capture identity – the narrator of *Company* comes to “see through” his “he’s” and “you’s” to the governing “I” beneath (*U* 336). Exactly the schema The Unnamable devises to cast doubt on his “I,” the narrator of *Company* foregrounds and questions: he investigates the source of these voices who convey intimate information to one “alone on his back in the dark,” who is not certain such information pertains to him (*N* 4). *Company* capitalizes on novelistic form, relays the musings of an unnamed “he,” akin to The Unnamable in his habitat and predicament. But this “he” does not prove, as we read on, an independent character rendered at times, for instance, in free indirect style and ensconced within omniscient narration. Instead, “he” proves the transposition of a submerged “I” who tells of himself. This retracted first person projects his own circumstances upon a third-person pronoun, as if this posture will help “he” to materialize, to puzzle out self and surroundings – as if “he” will grow more real when summoned forth and addressed as a character.

As a “devised deviser” – posing as an omniscient narrator – this undercover “I” is empowered to range across extrahuman and human time with greater confidence (*N* 33). As Percy Lubbock writes of such a third-person advantage in *The Craft of Fiction*:

For now, while the point of view is still fixed in space, still assigned to the man in the book, it is free in *time*; there are no longer stretches, between the narrator and the events of which he speaks, a certain tract of time, across which the past must appear in a more or less distant perspective. All the variety obtainable by a shifting relation to the story in time is thus in the author’s hand.... (257)

*Company*’s protagonist begins by adopting this stance that affords certainty, immediacy in relation to his “character’s” past – that overrides temporal distance, that is never skeptical. From there, he moves to the more intimate addresser-addressee relation of second-person narration. To “he,” become “you,” to his character (not to the reading audience), this second-person narrator also whispers incontestable memories – those not “held in a more or less distant perspective.” He fabricates this rapport with a character who is himself. He fictionalizes, that is, a narrator’s command over his character in order to recover his own personhood.

One might counter that such projection is only a sign of inhibited self-reference, and it does attest to our story-teller’s reluctance to fully appear as the realist hero of his own life. Nonetheless, our narrator intuits and discloses his substitution of “he” for “I.” Whereas *The Unnamable* shuns identity under any guise, *Company*’s speaker finds his identity’s conferral upon made-up characters problematic, and so is one step nearer to resuscitating it. While *The Unnamable* insists that his “I” is mendacious because it is *not* his, the creator of *Company* confesses that all his characters and voices (including that of narrator) are dubious because they *are* facets of a long-lost first person. *The Unnamable* will credit no imaginings which, thanks to *his* imagining, seem to come from without, claims that no speech originates in him; only fleetingly, gaspingly, does he glimpse his agency and admit to his self-denial. *Company* recognizes, more schematically, more calmly, that externalized voices, and their appeals to imagine, are misleading because they *do* come from within, indicate identity, refer to both an imagining “I” and an external world.

Lyrical passages, moments of being, intersperse *Company*’s third-person tale: quite beautifully worded memory infiltrates dimmed third-person prose. These forays into various pasts and places come addressed to the unnamed “you,” in the second person. For instance: “Kneeling at your bedside you included it the hedgehog in your detailed prayer to God to bless all you loved” (*N* 21). Nor does “he” accuse this voice of sophistry, as *The Unnamable* would. “He” does not comment at all on these moments of resurgent memory; they appear involuntary, and testify to some still existent rapport with a lovely, anguishing, outside world. Indeed, the voice proclaims: “You first saw the light on such and such a day and now you are on your back in the dark” (*N* 3). In the next sentence “he,” or the narrator, thinks: “A device perhaps from the incontrovertibility of the one to win credence for the other” (*N* 3). So a known sensation, “you are on your back,” paired with an evocation of a birthday (“you first saw the light...”), may attach past and present with some credibility, just as *The Unnamable* had feared. Were our unacknowledged “I” to admit that he generates this narrator and character, this voice and its addressee, and these images of a young and old man, he could embrace these stories and presences as his own, become *one* “on his back in the dark.” Despite his dissociative tactics, “he” (the listening “you”) comprehends this underlying desire: “As if willing him by this dint to make

[these infusions of life] his. To confess, Yes, I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes, I remember. What an addition to company that would be! A voice in the first person singular. Murmuring now and then, Yes I remember” (N 10).

Our character in *Company* hasn't the rage of *The Unnamable*. Sunk into doubt and darkness, as desolate as his predecessor, he finds his situation, not disgusting, but lonesome, dreary, and unfulfilling: “If he were to utter after all? However feebly. What an addition to company that would be! You are on your back in the dark and one day you will utter again. One day! In the end. In the end you will utter again. Yes I remember. That was I. That was I then” (N 14). Our effaced storyteller has passed from a third, to a second, to a first person in these few lines. Initially, he invokes “he,” proceeds intimately to address him as “you,” and then conjures up an “I” for remembering and affirmation. He glimpses the extent of his fictionalizing, understands that his narratorial practice is that of a “devised deviser devising it all for company,” “devising figments to temper his nothingness” (N 33). He understands that some real first-person must animate a “devised deviser,” a narrator. Our supine figure is on the verge of granting his authorial status, admitting to autobiography. But he pulls back in a panic. Still, *The Unnamable's* ranting, multi-page tirades against fearsome *anagnorisis* – his elaborate “alleviations of flight from self” – become *Company's* crisp and pared-down self-admonishment, “Quick leave him” (N 33).

This narrator, in rushing from direct self-knowledge, seems to choose unreal company over a real “I” bound to real others. But as he abdicates from his first person, it splinters into these other pronouns, and “lying” in both senses, his splinters pain him; he is troubled by this solipsistic companionship in a perennially suspect world. So he *does* establish an indirect procedure for remembering, and as a result, for owning his “I.” Populating his lonesome outpost with remembered persons and pasts, his imagination hardly lies dormant; it satisfies a veritable hunger for human connection, for others' acknowledgement of him. As Wayne Booth remarks: “What a joy it is to find [Beckett], in *Company*, daring to imagine once again, ‘from naught anew,’ a life, even though another bleak one” (445). Booth himself imagines that in another version of this tale, we might learn “the full story of why the ‘you’ is ‘numb with the woes of his kind.’ Indeed, even in this brief version we know enough about ‘him’ in the end – about what he loves, what he fears, what he longs for – to imply a novel richer than most” (449). Indeed this character who knows woe is not wholly numb, bent on numbing himself to grief and on exiling himself from “his kind.”

Booth sums up *Company* as a “metaphoric evocation of ‘how it is’ to be alone, and old, and lacking all faith, unable to believe even in the effort to tell your story but still determined to exercise your failing powers of reason and wit as best you can: making something, imagining something ...” (450). “Imagination not dead yet,” Beckett would say. Guaranteeing no supremely gratifying result, Beckett does make “imagining something” – rather than nothingness – seem noble, humanizing, and now unavoidable. Booth in particular mentions *Company's* moments of “meaning in the meaningless dark ... moments when the light breaks through into the book” and calls them “deceptive miracles” (455). Here is Lily Briscoe's realization that “the great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” (TL 161). And these moments that burst upon the speaker of *Company* – that haunt and return to him, that attest to the passage of time, that do present his human “I” as something others may register and conceive – represent all that *The Unnamable* wishes to deconstruct and to resist.

The more an evocative lyricism washes over *Company's* "you," the more he is vulnerable to the pain that attaches to remembrance, to the realization, as Proust writes, that "les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus" – the true paradises are those we have lost (*TR* 177). They are treasures not because they are gone, not because loss confers their glory, but because any happiness now exists in time only, belongs solely to terrestrial life, and cannot be held forever. So The Unnamable flees from this sobering rapport with time past, flees from moments of self regained, from memories beloved or agonizing, into the isolation of nihilism; the narrator of *Company* does the opposite, commences his defining "transit ... from darkness to light." Perhaps *Company's* narrator suspects what Fernando Pessoa's pseudonymous Alberto Caeiro avers: "songs that deny me" "give the lie to everything I feel," "are the opposite of all I am" ("Four Songs" 18, 3, 4). They "are the landscape of my soul at night, / The same one but its opposite..." ("Four Songs" 20-21). Whereas Beckett's The Unnamable protests a need to escape his own lonesome company, in a veritable paroxysm of attempted self-annihilation, his racked and garroted voice gives way to the suppressed but re-emergent "I" of Beckett's *Company*. This strange hero speaks of himself in the second and third persons to people an otherwise intolerable solitude. He comes to recapture, in Camus' words, "these two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened" (*LCE* 27).

### Conclusion

The Unnamable harbors no Platonic hopes of human flourishing in a moral universe, in which justice and happiness walk hand in hand; nor does he aim to create his own modest happiness, a precious citadel, poised precariously atop a mountain of Darwinian chance and Dionysian time, as Tess' narrator and Jude, Bertrand Russell and Camus' Sisyphus, Mrs. Ramsay, Bernard, Janine, Jessica, and Jacques do. He is the tragic hero manqué, so sickened by what he has seen that no moments of being can attract and sustain him. Innocent, he will not take a "burden of badness" upon himself to explain his condition. Instead, he denounces the species that could envision such rationalizations. He will not think in such a way, either, so as to have an Epicurean emotional life, impervious to harm. He cannot think in such a way as to have a Stoic emotional life – entirely in command of his feelings. He may attempt to think skeptically, a further ploy to have neither emotion nor knowledge – the most radical departure from a tragic worldview – but he does not achieve such calm. No Platonic, Epicurean, Stoic, or Skeptic "cure," it seems, can eliminate tragedy without eliminating much of the patient. This is Zeno's realization, following his own Freudian treatment, in Italo Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* (1923): "Unlike other sicknesses, life is always fatal. It doesn't tolerate therapies. It would be like stopping the holes that we have in our bodies, believing them wounds. We would die of strangulation the moment we were treated" (435). So The Unnamable tries to stop up his senses, to stop life, to become Worm, to abolish weeping, to imagine imagination dead. Yet he cannot put an end to the two great "diseases" that assail him: tragedy and philosophy. Like Gorgias, he finds that tragic fate has no absolute meaning; it is a problem he cannot solve. Like Clamence and Marie, Caeiro and Teive, Rhoda and Little Father Time, and like Oedipus in the act of blinding himself, The Unnamable is despairingly drawn to nothingness. But such an end seems little satisfactory. The Unnamable's ailments continue to hound him, and he can neither philosophically master his fate nor accept the feelings that attend a tragic sense of life. He cannot reconcile himself to his pains, and he cannot elude them. His revolted consciousness tries and fails to produce a self-annihilating "no." Only *Company* begins to generate antibodies,

momentary affirmations. To *Company's* narrator, alone on his back in the dark, no glaring floodlights reveal the totality of his woes, or any remedy for them, in one bright flash. But he does not seek the blanket blackness of non-being either. Perhaps he uncovers what The Unnamable obscurely craves, speaking of Worm: a lyrical “palliative for what he is, through no fault of his own” (*U* 361).

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