

CREATING TRAGIC SPECTATORS: REBELLION AND AMBIGUITY IN WORLD
TRAGEDY

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Abstract.....	vi
Chapter One: Creating Tragic Spectators	1
Tragic Spectators Inside and Outside Tragedy.....	13
The Idea of Tragedy After Camus	24
Chapter Two: Tragic Misreading in Roth and Coetzee	35
Misreading Tragedy	39
The Life of Tragic Fiction.....	48
The Errant Paths of Tragedy.....	56
The Subject and Object of Tragic Language	65
Chapter Three: Greek Gods in Baltimore	78
Reading Backwards Through the Oresteia	84
The Dialogue Speaks Back: Epigraphs and Repetitions.....	85
The Tragic Staging in and of The Wire	104
Episode Listing for <i>The Wire</i>	115
Chapter Four: Silence in <i>Bintou's Antigone</i>	119
The Counter-Antigones of Kierkegaard and Kwahulé	123
Then a Silence Suffuses the Story... ..	131
The Violent Metamorphosis of Language	138
The Silent Spectator.....	142

Facing Bintou in Brussels	148
Afterword	150
Works Cited	154

Abstract

This dissertation considers adaptations of Greek tragedy in contemporary novels, television, and theater in order to develop a theoretical and comparative perspective on the possibilities of tragedy today. Adaptations in various genres and media are considered within the context of modern theories of tragedy, including a lecture by Camus delivered in Athens in 1955, and more recent debates among critics such as George Steiner, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton about the death and rebirth of tragedy. Rather than assuming a continuum between ancient and modern cultures, the dissertation argues that there is a distinct formal process according to which modern tragedy creates its tragic spectators.

The first chapter explores the idea of tragedy proposed by Camus, who argues that tragic consciousness is defined by rebellion and ambiguity, and the following chapters take up the implications of his call for the renovation of tragic form. Focusing on *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth and *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee, the second chapter demonstrates how these novels find a model of the spectator's relationship to tragedy in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The third chapter turns to *The Wire*, demonstrating how this HBO television serial uses epigraphs, repetitions of dialogue and self-consciously theatrical staging as a formal analogue to the symbolic network of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. The fourth chapter demonstrates how Koffi Kwahulé from Côte d'Ivoire creates a counter-Antigone in *Bintou*, a play recently performed in Paris, London and New York.

An emphasis on form in all these adaptations forces the spectator to acknowledge the aesthetic composition of tragedy and the process of modern adaptation itself.

The dissertation crosses boundaries of genre and nation in order to reflect on the emergence of “world” tragedy at the turn of the millennium. It contributes to the field of classical reception studies and the study of ancient Greek drama and tragic theory, as well as twentieth-century literary theory, studies in the novel, and performance/media studies.

Chapter One

Creating Tragic Spectators

The public is tired of the Atridae, of adaptations from antiquity, of that modern tragic sense which, alas, is all too rarely present in ancient myths however generously they may be stuffed with anachronisms. A great modern art form of the tragic must and will be born. Certainly I shall not achieve this; perhaps none of our contemporaries will. But this does not lessen our duty to assist in the work of clearance which is now necessary so as to prepare the ground for it. We must use our limited means to hasten its arrival.¹ – Albert Camus

In 1955, at the French Institute of Athens, Albert Camus gave a speech entitled “On the Future of Tragedy” (A. a. J. G. Camus). It was Camus’ attempt to outline in clear terms the possibilities and challenges for an ancient Greek tragedy that could take shape in the middle of the twentieth century. Camus advances the thesis that tragedy arises only under particular historical circumstances, such as those that obtained in fifth-century Athens, Siglo de Oro Spain, Elizabethan England and Neo-classical France. Each of these epochs were transitions from forms of religious faith to forms of individualist and rationalist thought: in Greece, from the pre-Socratics to Socrates; in England, from the mysteries of the Christian era to the Enlightenment. In these fleeting tragic eras, “the individual” stands up against ancient religious devotion, but does not yet bow down before the triumph of reason, which, in fourth-century Greece and then again twenty-two centuries later in Europe, sapped the productive capabilities of tragedy almost entirely. In much of his lecture, Camus focuses on the imagined individual of history, as in this description of

¹ Quoted in Raymond Williams *Modern Tragedy*: “Albert Camus’s comment as reported by Marc Blanquet in *Opéra* (12 September 1945)” (Williams 209).

her place within the evolution of the tragic genre: "...[a] tragic age seems to coincide with an evolution in which man, consciously or not, frees himself from an ancient form of civilization and then finds himself in a state of rapture without, for all that, having found a new form that satisfies him" (*Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles* 1701).² The nature of tragic confrontation and dilemma was a subject that preoccupied Camus in his activities as a playwright, translator and director as much as in his philosophical works. Having translated and adapted William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*, Camus expressed his struggle, "...to make characters in costume speak in a language that is common [*quotidienne*] enough to be spoken in our apartments and yet unusual [*insolite*] enough to remain at the heights of tragic destiny" ("Préface" xii). Camus' biographer, Olivier Todd, writes that "Camus [saw] in Faulkner a deeply tragic dramatist, and in his plays saw a theme that was as ancient as it was modern, of heroes torn between responsibility and fate" (Todd).

Although Camus vacillates between descriptions of a tragic art and of the epoch that makes such art possible, he remains focused on the notion of "form," whether historical or aesthetic. Camus, at points, emphasizes that tragedy is an aesthetic form serving as a bridge between two historical "forms," allowing for a kind of makeshift continuity. Camus believes that, in 1955, he is living in a tragic age, but is unsure that the "interior rift [*déchirement intérieur*]" of his time has found its "tragic expression [*expression tragique*]."³ Because tragedy is such a rare phenomenon—occurring twice in

² All translations from Camus' writings are my own.

³ In his Athenian lecture, Camus uses the word "form [*forme*]" without providing a definition or a gloss on his intended meaning. Partly, this chapter is meant to elucidate the connotations of this word within the context of the lecture and of Camus' other writings on the subject tragedy.

two and a half millennia, Camus advises caution. He sees hope, though, in the fact that, after the modernist reforms of the influential director, actor and author Jacques Copeau, writers replaced producers [*fabricants*] and storekeepers [*commerçants*], who had, until the beginning of the twentieth century, dominated the theater industry.⁴ Now that writers were in charge, they could restore the possibilities for tragedy (*Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles* 1701). In defining tragedy, Camus first offers the example of *Prometheus Bound*, which had served as the foundational myth for *The Rebel*, published four years previously, in 1951. According to Camus:

There is tragedy when man, in pride (or even in stupidity [*bêtise*] as in Ajax's case) battles with the divine order, personified by a god or incarnated in society. And the more legitimate this rebellion, and the more necessary this order, the greater the tragedy will be. (1704)

Camus asserts not only that rebellion is a fundamental condition of tragedy, but that, for the first time, “society” can stand as a substitute for divinity, provided that it is somehow imbued with sacred or mysterious properties. By arrogating to the individual not only the capability to rebel, but also to translate the gods into an amorphous “society,” Camus allows for the possibility of modern tragedy. He elliptically suggests such a possibility in *The Rebel*, which adumbrates a theory of modern tragedy, first from a historical and then an aesthetic perspective. In *The Rebel*, Camus first traces a genealogy of tragic history according to which Sade’s glorification of totalitarian societies and unfettered freedoms marks the genesis of modern tragedy: “With [Sade],

⁴ Copeau was the founder of the Vieux-Colombier playhouse and a theater critic for a number of Parisian broadsheets. He was a co-founder of the *Nouvelle Revue française*, alone with André Gide and Jean Schlumberger. Camus declared that, “in the history of French theater, there are two periods: before and after Copeau” (*Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles* 1698) While still living in Algeria, Camus would insert in his theatrical adaptations the following quotation of Copeau: “It can be said of theaters whose watchwords are hard work, research and daring that they were founded not in order to prosper but to endure without self-enslavement” (Todd 121).

history and contemporary tragedy truly begin” (*L'homme Révolté* 70). Because absolute freedom necessarily leads to the ethical possibility of murder, it negates all limits, and therefore contradicts the scope and mandate of Camus’ rebellion, which presupposes an acceptance of boundaries and limitations. In much of *The Rebel*, Camus laments the abuse of tragedy by artistic or political extremists, who, like Marxists in one sense and Surrealists in another, “placed human tragedy in the service of their pragmatic ends” (127).

In his survey of metaphysical, political and artistic rebellion, Camus posits tragedy as both the result and condition of *hubris*, which he defines as the human propensity to imaginatively and actively disregard limits. Tragedy, in this sense, is both the subject and object of rebellion. In the latter case, the desire to overcome the limitations that circumscribe our lives constitutes the tragedy in and of itself. In the former case, we are immanently tragic, born as we are into an existence defined by scarcity and death. According to Camus, rebellion and tragedy are rooted in metaphysics: “Human insurrection, *in its exalted and tragic forms*, is only—can be only—a long protest against death, an enraged accusation against the universal death-penalty that is our condition” (132). Life is tragic because we die, and yet we can choose to sublimate our lives into tragic forms by rebelling against death. Tragedy, then, is both the substance of our condition and the form of our rebellion, just as it is both symptom and cause of nihilism. For this reason, Camus can, in turning to his analysis of political revolution, draw equivalences between historical and intellectual revolution: “The tragedy [of the Russian revolution] is that of nihilism. It becomes mixed up with the drama of the

contemporary intellect, which, aspiring to universality, amasses the mutilation of men” (300).

This is why Camus’ lecture on modern tragedy serves as such an enlightening gloss on *The Rebel*. When Camus suggests that the interior structures of tragic drama contain their own seeds of destruction—he adduces Euripides and Corneille as exemplary of this process—the implication is that all tragedy—historical or artistic—inheres its own subsidiary tragedy. Tragedy as historical substance can inspire tragedy as art, just as tragic drama can engender its own tragic substance. Although Camus claims, as have many theorists of tragedy since, that Christianity’s is an inherently anti-tragic mythology, he does believe that a single moment on Golgotha stands as a telling exception. When Jesus cries to his father, “Oh God, why have you forsaken me?” Camus believes that, “This fleeting doubt, and this doubt only, sanctioned the ambiguity of a tragic situation” (Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles 1704). In this sense, Christ’s life recapitulates the historical trajectory of tragedy. His ephemeral doubt, hovering between passive acceptance and rationalist inquiry, kindles and kills its tragic substance. Yet if the anti-tragic quality of Christianity provides such an apposite “form” for the tragic arch of tragedy itself, is secular tragedy made possible if not probable?

This is a question that Camus does not pose, even if he goes some way toward providing answers. Camus begins his discussion of an abjectly atheist or rationalist tragedy—a tragedy devoid of mystery—by denying its possibility. He recurs to his original definition of tragedy as ambiguity and transition: between mystery and reason, shadow and light, rebellion and order, faith and individualism, and finally, between extreme nihilism and absolute hope (1705).

As a consequence, everything interior to tragedy that tends to disrupt this equilibrium destroys tragedy itself. Camus believed that neither Aeschylus, in overemphasizing order, nor Euripides, who insinuated the forces of individualism and of psychology into his tragedies, achieved a necessary level of ambivalence. Sophocles, Camus believed, achieved the right balance, the proper ambiguity, between the two extremes of individualism and order. The excessive individualism of Euripides' tragedies, though, led to the eventual disappearance of tragedy in the fourth century. Camus also asserts that Shakespeare achieved the proper balance between cosmic and individual forces, but that Corneille, in glorifying the triumph of the individual, brought tragedy to its knees once again.

With the Enlightenment ensuring the disappearance of dramatic art, tragedy reappears in the form of revolution, translated, as it were, from the stage to the streets. However, as long as tragedy remained confined to its historical manifestation, its artistic renaissance would be delayed. Camus, writing in the mid-twentieth century, sees a renascent mystery rising from the ashes of our disenchantment with rationalism and science. In other words, in discovering the limitations of eighteenth-century rationalism, humanity once again found itself poised between the two extremes of religious and secular belief. According to Camus, the form will be historical rather than aesthetic, resulting from the fact that:

...individualism is visibly changing today and, under the pressure of history, the individual, little by little, recognizes his limits. The world the individual of the eighteenth-century thought he could subdue and model on the basis of reason and science assumed a form, in effect, but a monstrous form. (1707)

Although Camus never refers to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, published in 1944, it is clear that its distinction between

“scientific” and magical” modes of thinking and its critique of Enlightenment ideology informs Camus’ thinking on tragedy. In a chapter titled “Elements of Anti-Semitism: The Limits of Enlightenment [*Grenzen der Aufklärung*],” discussing the tendencies of rationality to self-destruction and barbarism, Horkheimer and Adorno write that, “Enlightenment itself, having mastered itself and assumed its power, could break through [*durchbrechen*] the limits [*Grenzen*] of enlightenment” (Horkheimer 172; Adorno). Our disenchantment with disenchantment, and the monstrosities of twentieth century history, make tragic art possible, but only because they have made history tragic. In rejecting the mysteries of divine fate, we apotheosize history, against which we now wage battle, and because of which we now find ourselves in a tragic state of ambiguity and doubt. The renaissance of tragic history brings with it the possibilities for tragic heroism. As Camus says in his Athenian lecture:

The man today who proclaims his rebellion knowing that this rebellion has its limits, who demands freedom but endures necessity, this contradictory man, torn apart, conscious of man's ambiguity and his history, this man is the tragic man par excellence.
(*Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles* 1707)

Importantly, Camus does not, as he first develops his thesis on the possibility of modern tragedy, refer to tragic drama. He describes human beings who negotiate a new historical situation rather than authors and spectators, who, through the medium of tragic art, give tragic history “a local habitation and a name.” Toward the end of his lecture, though, returning to the subject of dramatic artists and art, Camus reveals that the historical limits that bound the “tragic man” find an analogy in the language and generic demarcations of tragedy itself. The forms of historical tragedy must find their corollary in the forms of tragic drama, and on this principle of equivalence alone rests the possibility of modern tragedy:

Our dramatic authors are in search of a tragic language because there is no tragedy without language, and because this language is all the more difficult to form [*former*] such that it reflects the contradictions of the tragic situation. It needs to be, all at once, sacred and familiar, barbarous and wise, mysterious and clear, haughty and pitiful. Our authors, in their search for this language, have therefore returned instinctively to the source—in other words—to the tragic epochs of which I've spoken. We have seen among us a rebirth of Greek tragedy, but in the only forms possible for extremely individualistic spirits. These forms are mockery or a precious literary translation [*transposition*], which is to say, all in all, humor and fantasy, the comic alone belonging to the realm of the individual. (1707 – 1708)

Just as the effort of tragic man is to find a middle ground between a nihilistic embrace of total freedom and a rebellion that remains conscious of its own inherent dangers, the effort of the dramatic artist is to search for a literary equipoise between the communal forms of ancient Greek tragedy and the forms of language conditioned by the derisive comic spirit of an individualistic modernity. The search is for a modern adaptation that that can “recreate a new sacredness [*recréer un nouveau sacré*]” through some process of translation [*transposition*] that will mediate the sacred texts of ancient Greek tragedy with the profane mockery of an inevitably comic modernity. In *The Rebel*, Camus explores the possibilities and problems attendant on this search for a practicable tragic form. After refusing the frenetic license taken by the artists and writers of the Surrealist movement, Camus surveys the extreme boundaries of artistic production, all in attempt to stake out the territory of ambiguity that lies between hyperbolic stylization and an equally hyperbolic realism.

Camus strongly believes that the art of his day has not found such a middle ground. Running to the extremes of either crude realism or abstract formalism, his epoch's, “is an art of tyrants or slaves, not of creators” (*L'homme Révolté* 338). To Camus, content [*le fond*] cannot supersede form [*la forme*], nor can form content: “in this

sphere [of art], as in the others, any unity that is not a unity of style is a mutilation” (338). As Camus suggests in his Athenian lecture, this stylization will provide a form for reality, in the same sense that tragic art will provide a form for the realities of tragic history. But if stylization succeeds in reshaping historical content into an artistic form, the resulting form will, in turn, reshape reality. By way of style, “creative effort remakes [*refait*] the world and always with a light deformation [*une légère gauchissure*] that is the mark of art and protest” (338). As Camus works his way toward his peroration, it becomes increasingly evident that the search for artistic form is as much a necessary act of rebellion as the act of rebellion is a search for form: “We find great art, style and the true face of rebellion somewhere between these two heresies” (339).

To say that Camus does not or cannot offer an example of modern tragedy is to say that he has failed to define a tragic aesthetic that allows for a rebellion and a drama that are mutually constitutive and mutually reinforcing. And yet, in reconciling the authoritative order of an ancient form with the limitless freedoms of creation, modern adaptation performs exactly the task Camus set out for the tragic artist of 1955. In researching and incorporating antecedent forms, and thus assenting to limitations, the dramatic artist rebels against absolute freedom by accepting limits; and in pushing to reshape these received forms into a tragic vision rooted in history and in the present, she rebels against the tyranny of both tradition and trends. The search for a modern form into which the artist insinuates tragic history, is rebellious in its identification, acknowledgment and expression of limits. What Camus does not explain, in his final statement on the possibilities for modern tragedy, is the role the modern spectator will play in the construction of a tragic consciousness commensurate with the tragic substance

of its time. That Camus does not speculate on the role of the tragic spectator is unexpected only in that, toward the end of his lecture, after his discussion of tragic artistry, he returns to the collective “we,” calling upon us all to join in the search for modern tragedy:

The path that remains must be tread by ourselves, in search of a synthesis of freedom and necessity, and by everyone among us, who must preserve in ourselves our force of rebellion without giving into our power of negation. At this price, the tragic sensibility that takes form in our epoch will flower and find its proper expression. It's enough to say that I cannot cite an example of true modern tragedy because it does not yet exist.
(1709)

Camus discusses tragic history, tragic substance, tragic art, tragic artists and tragic man; but he remains silent about the possibility and nature of the tragic spectator for whom modern tragedy will be written and performed. Yet if tragic art is to provide a form for tragic history, there must be an act of reception that completes the process, and therefore situates the artist’s rebellion in history. If, in the search for an apposite and modern form, the tragic artist understands and expresses her rebellion—by adapting tragedy to her time—then she will translate this consciousness of form, of limits, to the audience. It is the argument of this dissertation that “true modern tragedy” does exist, and that its existence is rooted in forms, not insofar as they fulfill any particular set of aesthetic categories—Aristotelian, Hegelian or otherwise—but insofar as they channel tragic content out to the spectator sitting in the ancient Greek *theatron* or the living room today. In many ways, Camus took as fundamental assumptions the arguments that would later be developed and expanded by George Steiner, Raymond Williams and, more recently, Terry Eagleton. The emphasis in these theoretical investigations of tragic art have largely centered on the possibility of atheist, democratic or bourgeois tragedy. It is a question posed much earlier than Camus’ conference lecture in Athens. According to Hegel, it was

Napoleon who first proposed a definition of modern tragedy, that has, in many ways, altered little in the past fifty years since Williams published his groundbreaking response to Steiner's *Death of Tragedy*. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel reports that:

Napoleon, in a conversation which he once had with Goethe on the nature of Tragedy, expressed the opinion that its modern phase differed from the ancient, through our no longer recognizing a Destiny to which men are absolutely subject, and that Policy occupies the place of the ancient Fate. [*La politique est la fatalité.*] This therefore he thought must be used as the modern form of Destiny in Tragedy—the irresistible power of circumstances to which individuality must bend. (Hegel 289, italics and bracket author's)

Napoleon's "Policy," and then Camus' "society," will eventually constitute, in the course of twentieth-century theory of tragic drama, either a replacement for divinity or an empty signifier that dilutes tragedy into melodrama. Camus' essays outlined, as his plays and novels exemplified, tragedy as a historicized, politicized practice. Deeply influenced by writers such as Melville, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kafka, Camus adumbrated political theories that, in their absurdist, tragic leanings, transcended the positivist, utilitarian leanings of liberalism and socialism. Rooted in history and politics, Camus' writings did not suffer the willful blindness of extreme metaphysics. In *The Rebel*, Camus excoriates the touchstone of "productivity" to which human beings and political movements were forcibly subjected. Although his condemnations of this productivity were framed within the context of Italian, German and Spanish fascisms, Camus' criticisms of ideological regimes that postulate the teleological supremacy of productivity and reductive utilitarianism, apply, with much qualification, to extreme brands of neoliberalism in which humanity is relegated to categories of either use or waste. In fact, Camus, in *The Rebel*, offers a reminder that totalitarianism could only have

arisen in conditions of stark inequality that undermined liberalism's claims to justice. In *The Rebel*, Camus draws a distinction between friendship based on particularity and a friendship based on teleology. The pursuit of perfection, of future utopias (the "Empire of objects," as Camus articulates the concept), vitiates friendships based on selectivity and particularity. The exclusive pursuit of profit or of fundamentalist ideology can do the same, as they are more literalized empires of objects. *The Rebel* implicates a modern hubris whose genealogy can be traced back to Rousseau's faith in abstract, formal justice. Post-Socratic, pre-Nietzschean morality, because unmoored from the reality of the world, must be countered with a tragic, politicized and historicized ethics. An abstractly moral politics soon becomes both immoral and apolitical.

As Camus suggests in *The Rebel*, Marxism, because it deifies man, can offer only a vitiated, ahistorical brand of socialism that poses no challenge or threat to capitalism. Similarly, Nietzsche's *amor fati*—"love of fate"—runs contrary to Camus' vision, which demands that we consider the consequences of our own actions. Camus' is a pragmatic political vision. His humanism, devoid of any utopian *telos*, denies that humans hold any special or central place in the universe, and makes no special claim to absolute value; but it does require that we search for a meaning that will always and necessarily remain contingent and contestable. Camus, in advancing his concept of rebellion, advocates a circumspect ambivalence inherent to tragedy that can also serve as a bulwark against the certainties and monologic dogmatism to which revolution can give birth.

For Camus, there is no utopia, no messiah, no second coming of ultimate global justice; but we pursue justice despite its eternal disappearance and recurrence. Camus articulates a pessimistic brand of tragedy, a political progressivism that can only spring

from a direct gaze at the horrors and absurdity of life. It is for this reason that Camus justifies a tragic art rooted in realism. This dissertation will argue that, while theorists such as Williams and Eagleton are astute in theorizing the tragic as revolutionary and modern, Camus' vision of rebellion proves the more apt model for the contemporary tragedies under discussion, primarily because the ambiguities which inform his theories of the tragic also set the stage for an investigation of modern tragedy that incorporates comparative formal analysis of ancient and modern tragedy. Camus finished his lecture in Athens by noting that modern tragedy did not exist and would not exist until it found a form apposite to the political, social and economic realities that defined the post-industrial world: "But it seems to me," declared Camus, "that tragic language will constitute itself and that it will free us to explore more than drama itself" (Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles 1708-09).

Tragic Spectators Inside and Outside Tragedy

This dissertation argues that works as diverse as HBO's *The Wire*, Philip Roth's novels of the 1990s, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Côte d'Ivoirien playwright Koffi Kwahulé's *Bintou* have discovered this language, both within and without the ancient Greek tragedies that serve as sources of theoretical and aesthetic exploration. It is the formal means by which modern tragic art interacts with its spectatorship that defines this language. It is also the means by which tragic spectators understand themselves as tragic actors in history—as rebels in Camus' sense—and by which the aesthetic alloys with the historical properties of modern adaptation.

What the works under discussion in this dissertation do is employ what are commonly thought as postmodern strategies—the layering of fictions within fictions, for example—in order to draw the spectator’s attention to the processes of modern adaptation, thus inspiring a rebellious and tragic awareness. Philip Roth and J.M. Coetzee, whose works differ markedly in their thematic, structural and stylistic concerns, have both written novels that allude to and exemplify ancient tragic drama. Roth is an American novelist who, throughout his career, enjoyed and suffered intense media attention. Roth often draws material from his childhood in the Weequahic neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey, where he was the child of Jewish first-generation Americans from Galicia. A select few protagonists—David Kepesh, Nathan Zuckerman and “Philip Roth”—dominate Roth’s oeuvre, often serving as lenses through which to critique and complicate notions of authorship, autobiography, fiction and reality. In the late 1990s, Roth published three novels that have been classified, variously, as his “American trilogy,” the “Roth Problem Novels,” and his tragicomic later novels (Parrish). *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000) all examine particularly American permutations of Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, to whose plays and characters Roth often alludes. Coetzee, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, is a South African novelist, literary critic and translator whose works are renowned for their spare prose and uncompromising examination of ethics, politics and identity. His novel *Disgrace*, published in 1999, recounts the political and personal ruination of a weak man negotiating the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa.

In the summer of 2002, HBO premiered *The Wire*, a television series that purported to tell the story of America’s rustbelt tragedy through the prism of a single

American city, Baltimore. On one level, *The Wire* tracked the Baltimore Police Department's struggle to investigate and prosecute the city's drug dealers; on another, the show fictionalized the sociological and political problems of a decaying rustbelt city and the "other America" that lives there. Each season centered its plot and thematic concerns on a different aspect of the city: the drug trade and the urban underclass; the stevedore's union and the death of work; city hall and reform; the middle school and education; and finally, the Baltimore Sun and media failure.

Whereas *The Wire* employs formal strategies unique to episodic cable television to communicate its tragic vision, Kwahulé, in his play *Bintou*, operates within a theatrical tradition less removed from the Festival of Dionysus. Born in 1956 in Côte d'Ivoire, Kwahulé first studied at the Institut National des Arts d'Abidjan, before moving to Paris, where he earned his Doctorat d'Études théâtrales at Paris III. In 1992, for his play *Cette vieille magie noire*, Kwahulé won the Grand Prix International des Dramaturgies du Monde. Although Africa has a long and rich history of theatrical productions that adapt and challenge ancient Greek tragedies, Kwahulé's plays take a novel approach to this same material.⁵ Generally set in unnamed and unspecified *banlieues*, never in his homeland of Côte d'Ivoire, Kwahulé's plays address territories and themes within the borderlands between the present and past, Europe and Africa, Parisian and Côte d'Ivoirien French, as well as between contemporary Parisian suburban social problems

⁵ The most comprehensive discussion of African productions, translations and modern adaptations of ancient Greek tragedies can be found in Kevin Wetmore's *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky* (Wetmore). Wetmore mostly focuses on Anglophone African works such as the Nigerian playwright John Pepper Clark's *Song of a Goat*, the Nigerian Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*, the Nigerian Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, the South African Athol Fugard's *Orestes*, and the Barbadian Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *Antigone, Odale's Choice*. Wetmore largely ignores Francophone writers, and does not mention Kwahulé.

and ancient Greek tragedy. Among Kwahulé's plays, *Bintou*, produced in 1997, has been most often discussed as a modern adaptation of an ancient Greek tragedy, and specifically of Sophocles' *Antigone*.⁶

Bintou dramatizes the story of a teenage girl living in a violent and racially diverse *banlieu*. Opposed to all forms of authority, Bintou, who dreams of landing a job as a belly dancer, leads a gang of adolescents obsequiously devoted to her every whim. Her father, having lost his job, hides out in his room, ceding all authority to Bintou's uncle, Drissa, who insists on imposing his own version of patriarchal "law". When Bintou resists his attempts at control, he and his wife--Aunt Rokia--arrange to have a woman from their never-specified African village, the 'Knife-Lady,' perform female genital mutilation (FGM), which eventually kills Bintou.

It is not that the spectator has played a small role in the philosophy of aesthetics and the theory of tragic drama. *Aristotle*, in the *Poetics*, followed by Hegel, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard among others, discuss the role and emotions of tragedy's spectators. In *Truth and Method*, Hans Gadamer reminds us that, "In his famous definition of tragedy Aristotle made a decisive contribution to the problem of the aesthetic: in defining tragedy he included its effect (*Wirkung*) on the spectator" (Gadamer 126). In developing his aesthetic analysis of ancient Greek tragedies, Aristotle gave a privileged position to the spectator, who, Gadamer argues, is a fundamental component of the tragedy. In other

⁶ In a French "dossier" on Greek tragedy, Virginie Soubrier observes that Koffi Kwahulé's plays, "are often inspired by the ancient Greek model...A number of characters remind us of tragic heroes. Bintou is a contemporary Antigone--she has her insolence and the pride, her intransigence and lucidity. At the end of the play, the young girls [sic]--the chorus--which surrounds the Uncle--Bintou's murderer--embody his guilty conscience, and remind us of the Furies hounding Orestes in Aeschylus's tragedy" (Virginie Soubrier, "La Tragédie Grecque Retrouvée," *Le Dossier: Historique: Qu'est-ce que la tragédie ?* 114 (2005): 24...)

words, the spectator is constituent to any dramatic production that serves as the object of a tragic hermeneutics. Gadamer, taking his cues from Aristotle's theories of spectatorial emotion defines catharsis as a communion in which the audience participates, thus breaching any aesthetic gap literalized by the distance between the *theatron* and the *orchestra*. Tragic art, accordingly, must conflate tragedy as both subject and object of aesthetic experience. As Gadamer writes, "Tragic pensiveness flows from the self-knowledge that the spectator acquires. He finds himself again in the tragic action because what he encounters is his own story, familiar to him from religious or historical condition" (128)...

Although Gadamer offers this conception of spectatorship as a counter to Romantic-era mythologizing of the artist and her genius, his theoretical maneuver lays further groundwork for the "death" of tragedy. Were it contingent on shared tradition—on shared "cultural literacy"—tragedy would expire with the onset of industrialization, mass entertainment, democratization and the resulting fragmentation of collective tradition. Once again, the spectator's relation to the action on stage is reduced to the notional, and in so doing, preempts the possibility for a remaking of ancient tragedy based on form. Gadamer allows that artists evolve in tandem with their audience, and in so doing, participate in a "continuity of meaning" deriving from the essentialness of the audience-artist relationship itself. In short, the presence of the spectator is the only constituent element of tragic art that assumes the ontological status of essence.

But if Aristotle's aesthetic theories generalize in applying exclusive criteria drawn from Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, what is the case when it comes to theories of tragedy that rest preponderantly on *The Poetics*? In Gadamer's case, the problem is especially

tricky in that he is primarily concerned with developing an aesthetic theory of hermeneutics. In arguing for the inherently aesthetic nature of tragic spectatorship, Gadamer ignores the same formal specificities of individual tragedies in critiquing hypostatized theories of the tragic that derive from generalized readings of tragedy. In interpreting Aristotle's notions of catharsis and pity, Gadamer imagines the emotions an audience at a tragedy would feel on witnessing recognitions and reversals on stage, but he does not describe the formal means by which particular dramas achieve such transference. Simon Goldhill, in his essay, "Generalizing About Greek Tragedy," provides a salutary check on theories of the tragic that also pretend to describe the generalized phenomenon of tragedy from which they derive (Goldhill). Goldhill prescribes a renewed and particularized focus on socio-political context, which, while serving as a healthy antidote to theories rendered platitudinous by individual plays' internal contradictions and ironies, does not account for the possibility that these same contradictions and ironies might be generalizable enough to constitute an alternative theory of the tragic.

This bears strongly on the nature and possibility of modern adaptation, or even of a modern tragedy that is temporarily because heuristically divested of intertextual resonance. If our definitions of tragedy derive exclusively or preponderantly from temporally contingent socio-political context or from analyses of apodictic content—even content that is the laborious product of readings sensitive to the ironies and polyphonies of individual tragedies—than any intertextual exploration of contemporary tragedy and contemporary notions of the tragic depends on diachronic symmetries whose essence and existence will prove enormously difficult to establish. To prove that an event, an idea or a

work of art is tragic would require that we convincingly establish correspondences between a priori categories of emotion or ideation or between socio-political contexts.

Interestingly, it is according to just such correspondences that all but one director and author under discussion in this dissertation argue for the tragic quality of their novels, play and television shows. Roth prefaces *The Human Stain* with an epigraph from Oedipus Tyrannus that will serve as a touchstone for the tragic action to follow.

American Pastoral, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain* all include internal references to Greek or Shakespearean tragedies that establish notional as opposed to formal criteria that define the tragic nature of the novels' protagonists. In other words, the novels define themselves as tragedies insofar as they accord to Aristotelian criteria of fatalism, catharsis, reversal and recognition. David Simon supports his claims that he created a Greek tragedy for the postmodern, postindustrial city by recurring to principles strikingly similar to those proposed by Napoleon and Hegel. Instead of the gods or fate, it is the indifferent and chaotic forces of globalized capitalism that topple the protagonists of twenty-first century Baltimore. On the other hand, Kwahulé does profess a relationship to Greek tragedy rooted primarily in formal concerns. This could be attributed to the generic similarity between Kwahulé's formal concerns and those of his Greek antecedents. Although the context, structural sensibilities and audiences of fifth-century Athens obviously differ profoundly from global theater today, Kwahulé, like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides before him, writes for the stage. Simon, Roth and Coetzee must address the additional translational challenges inherent to adapting ancient material across genres. Perhaps, in the effort to reshape the form and content of ancient Greek tragedy into episodic cable television or prose narrative, Simon, Roth and Coetzee focus

on putatively universal concepts in order to ignore the drastic formal transmutations they have performed. In the following chapters, the works that this dissertation will discuss are neither modern adaptations in the conventional sense of the term, nor “postmodern remakings”.⁷ The novels, television show and play do not refashion constituent strands of Greek tragedies into contemporary contexts that establish correspondences of transhistorical meaning; nor do they use the ancient Greek texts as lenses through which to examine postmodern themes.

Roth and Coetzee formally reproduce the misreadings of *Oedipus Tyrannus* within the structure of their novels, incorporating their readers into a chain of literary *hamartia* that ironizes the relationship of tragic drama with tragic life. Oedipus, who lives his own hermeneutic circle, eventually learns to read multiplicities of meaning in the singularity of his own subjectivity, but only through a gradual process according to which words are collapsed into their referents. When Oedipus finally understands who he is and what he has done, the play’s dramatic ironies exhaust themselves. At this point, the audience recognizes that it no longer stands in knowing, ironic relation to the unknowingness of the protagonist on stage, and thus Oedipus’ belated recognition parallels the spectators’. The final ironic move in the progression of the dramatic action is to end the tragedy while conveying the *anagnorisis* to the spectators.

Roth and Coetzee, in adapting this process of transference to the novel, make tragic drama’s concession to tragic life analogous to fiction’s concessions to reality. Both novelists incorporate a chain of Oedipal misreadings into layers of fiction. A protagonist

⁷ In his recent dissertation, “The Postmodern Remaking of Greek Tragedy,” Peter Andrew Campbell provides a definition of “postmodern tragedy,” according to which, “texts, which are central to the drama and to Western culture, [are used] as material to express the postmodern uncertainties of language and history (Campbell 17).”

misinterprets the tragic ambiguities of language and life; a fictionalized author within the narrative misreads his tragic protagonist; Roth and Coetzee, who, as novelists themselves, must suffer from the same tendencies toward misinterpretation as their fictional surrogates, misread them in turn. Finally, the reader, having finished the novel, forgoes the same dramatic ironies that abandon Sophocles' tragic spectators. Roth and Coetzee's novels succeed in replicating the Oedipal collapse of tragic drama into tragic life; and in doing so, transform their readers into tragic spectators. Throughout the four novels, the authors ironically internalize tragedy by portraying narrators and protagonists whose fluency in reading tragedy does nothing to help them understand the ambiguities of life's tragedies. Each of these novels are filled with allusions to tragic drama that serve as a stark counterpoint to tragic life. The narrators and protagonists alike make tragic mistakes because they, like Oedipus, cannot specifically locate the tragic within themselves. In this sense, each of these novels plays the role of Delphic oracle to their readers, who run the risk of failing to extrapolate the tragic within themselves from the generalized signifiers of tragic art. Yet the layered fictions that allow Roth and Coetzee to internalize the dynamic of tragic spectatorship within their novels assures us that our failure to read tragedy is not assured. Roth and Coetzee provide an aesthetics of tragic pessimism in Camus' sense of a democratized understanding of life's ambiguities, instabilities and dilemmas. As Dienstag writes, "Pessimism is as much an ethic of radical possibility as it is of radically insecurity; indeed the former is grounded in the latter" (Dienstag 117).

Spectators play a necessarily different role in relation to *The Wire*. While the wiretapping investigation that runs through all seasons of the show parallels the electronic voyeurism in which the spectators participate, David Simon and Ed Burns also

take advantage of textual and compositional strategies in order to transfer tragic drama across HBO's "cable" network. The epigraphs with which each episode begins are abstracted from the dialogue to follow, a process that separates an individual utterance from a context that spectators will only later understand. There are also important nearly epigrammatic lines of dialogue that recur throughout all five seasons, allowing the spectators to reconcile multiple characters' perspectives back and forth through time. *The Wire* also stages scenes that structurally replicate the theaters of ancient Greece. All of these modes translate the symbolic reticulations of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* into formal strategies appropriate to episodic television. In the same way that the teleological imagery of *The Oresteia* aligns a number of diverse but related ideas into the vertical axis of a symbol, so that each image contains the future and past within itself, *The Wire's* epigraphs and dialogic echoes compact multiple ideas that resonate back and forth through all five seasons. *The Wire* and *The Oresteia* use these formal strategies to describe gradients of incomprehension and knowledge that eventually implicate spectators in the tragedies on stage or screen.

The Wire's epigraphs create a semiotic gap by abstracting a general meaning from a specific context. At the beginning of each episode, the spectator necessarily misreads this abstracted quotation; but, having encountered the specific source of the epigraph, reconciles its particular contexts and within-the-fiction meanings with the original misinterpretations. In synthesizing these meanings, the spectator is made aware of the blindness she once shared with the character who uttered the line of dialogue. The spectator attains a sharpened awareness of her status as a spectator whose errant attempts at construing meaning parallel those made within the fictional ambit of *The Wire*. The

result is that the spectator, while more acutely aware of the divide between her reality and the fiction on screen, paradoxically sees that the line dividing the two is tenuous at best. She is made complicit with the tragedy conveyed by the artifice of episodic television. The dramatic ironies and temporal plays on meaning are what create the tragic consciousness of the spectator. This dynamic is made more explicit in the final season of *The Wire*, which critiques the role of the media in constructing our perceptions of reality. With its depiction of The Baltimore Sun, *The Wire* gives the spectator ingress into a fictionalized microcosm of spectatorship. If, in the first four seasons of *The Wire*, the spectators were given a “realistic” view into the interconnected world of drug-dealing, labor, politics and education, the fifth turned its lens toward the same artifice mediating reality as the show itself. This retrospective dissolution of putative reality reflects the fiction of tragedy toward the consciousness of the spectator.

From the stage to the screen, there exists a fundamental shift in the presentation and understanding of reality. In Kwahulé’s *Bintou*, the chorus serves as the fundamental channel through which tragic ironies and misreadings interact. If, in the most simplistic sense, Roth and Coetzee communicate these ironies by layering fictions, and *The Wire* by manipulating the relationship between language and time, *Bintou* achieves similar results by representing an entropic universe of words and deeds which eventually find an equilibrium in silence. In this move toward silence, *Bintou* reflects Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Both plays examine the ambiguities and forces that lie between words and deeds, as well as between the chorus and the audience. In its final choral passage, *Bintou* leaves the spectators with a haunted silence that communicates not only an awareness of the tragic, but also of the ancient Greek source material buried within. *Bintou* takes an ironic,

deceptive and agonistic stance toward not only *Antigone*, but its reception history. By inverting and complicating the Hegelian opposition between the competing rights of the public and private spheres, Bintou triangulates its own vision with that of *Antigone*'s philosophical and literary reception history. This awareness and manipulation of *Antigone* and its reception provide *Bintou*'s spectators with multiple, conflicting insights into Kwahulé's tragedy and into the nature of the tragic.

Bintou, like *The Wire*, *The Human Stain* and *Disgrace*, speaks the tragic language Camus prescribed in his Athenian lecture, in that it internalizes the limits of tragic form and content that it eventually defines for the audience. But it is primarily the attention paid the destructive tendencies of language that gradually shifts the relationship of the spectators to the tragedy on stage. In *Bintou*, the protagonists endure and enact violations of language and bodies, which both deteriorate until the stage is devoid of anything but haunted silence. Language, emptied of its ethical content, eventually precipitates the emptying of Bintou's blood, and thus the stage of its most articulate and defiant voice. Throughout the play, language is invested with an embodied force, a comingling of the human, animalistic, biological and linguistic that culminates in a silence that echoes the mute spectatorship in which, therefore, the onstage tragedy is finally endowed.

The Idea of Tragedy After Camus

Though this dissertation seeks to explore, through these works, the theoretical implications of modern tragedy, it is also necessary to review the long history of theoretical discourse in order to understand the terms in which such tragic art forms can be considered. It is in the arena of theory that we have seen the most persistent and

thorough explorations of the forms, possibilities and implications of modern tragedy. Camus' desire to find an aesthetic into which the modern tragic might evolve is itself the offspring of a previous century that was obsessed with the question of the tragic and tragedy. As Vassilios Lambropoulos reminds us, "The currency of the idea of the tragic has made it difficult to remember how modern this usage is. Indeed, before the early German Romantics the tragic pertained to tragic drama alone: from Aristotle to Lessing, tragic figures, events or lessons were realized on the stage" (Lambropoulos 8).

From the nineteenth century onward, philosophers, poets and dramatists have, while negotiating the sometimes exclusive and sometimes overlapping territory between "the tragic" and tragic drama, asked the questions: is modern tragedy possible? and if so, what form might it take? In a book whose thesis became central to the discussion of modern tragedy, *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner argued, along the same lines as Camus, that after Shakespeare, Corneille and Racine, tragic drama died, but paradoxically lived on in the afterlife of Idealist philosophy (*The Death of Tragedy*). Tragedy, claims Steiner, requires the dramatic exposition of "ontological homelessness," the *apolis* of Sophocles' Ode to Man *stasimon*. Tragedy loses its absolute status the moment that possibilities of redemption or amelioration mitigate the sheer power of this ontological estrangement (Steiner "'Tragedy,' Reconsidered" 31-32). Working within this axiomatic framework, Steiner thus attributes the loss of tragedy to positivist hopes concomitant with the rise of democracy and secularization (35).

In 1962, Raymond Williams published *Modern Tragedy*, a theoretical work that clearly, though implicitly, responds to Steiner's thesis. Williams begins by arguing that the contradictions that naturally spring from the revolutionary impulse presuppose new

potentialities for tragedy and tragic form. Contrary to Steiner's vision, Williams believes that the progressivism and positivism of Enlightenment and Marxist philosophy do not negate the possibility of tragedy. In fact, the optimism implied by these conceptual frameworks generates a modern vision of tragedy, a vision that necessarily substitutes human conflict for the divine fatalism required by Steiner's tragic aesthetic. In his penultimate chapter, Williams asserts that Camus', because rooted in revolt, was a deeply tragic vision (Williams 209). Williams quotes a phrase from Camus' journalism—"Today tragedy is collective"—but does not cite its source, merely noting that the Algerian-French writer's political journalism allowed for more understanding of the tragic than that afforded by the "prim specialization" of the English academy (210).

The essay from which Williams quotes is titled "International Democracy and Dictatorship"—published in the newspaper *Combat*—in which Camus argues that the increasingly globalized world needs an international body that will remain independent of American or Russian spheres of power and influence. A viable system of international law must be subject to the checks and balances of a parliamentary democracy and international suffrage. In fact, the nature of the tragedy Camus describes in this essay is not truly collective. He describes a globalization that is tragic to the extent that individuals, workers, businesses and nations fail to find a political or economic voice:

Many Americans would like to continue to live closed within their society, which they believe to be good. Many Russians would like, perhaps, to continue on with the State experiment, isolated from the capitalist world. They cannot do it and will never be able to do it. Likewise, no economic problem, no matter how minor it appears, can regulate itself outside the solidarity of nations. The bread of Europe finds itself in Buenos Aires, and the machine tools of Siberia are made in Detroit. Today tragedy is collective. (Actuelles: Écrits Politiques 132)

While Camus allows for the possibility that an international governing body might operate as a world democracy, he implies that the more expansive and interconnected political context necessarily transforms tragedy without negating its possibility. Camus consistently articulated a pessimism that both defined and disaffirmed nihilism.⁸ If tragedy is collective, and revolution a collective tragedy, then Camus will prescribe a humanistic because necessarily individual revolt. While objecting to his humanistic baulking of history, Williams also believes that Camus—along with Sartre—produced art and ideas that constitute a Freudian, Marxist, existentialist tragedy for the modern era.

In *Sweet Violence*, Eagleton declares his intention to carry on Williams' dissent from Steiner's death-of-tragedy thesis. Eagleton believes that Williams, in arguing that modern tragedy invalidates rather than describes progressive politics and revolution, "translate[s] one of the most ancient of idioms – the idea of sacrifice – into the most pressingly contemporary of terms" (*Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* 59-60). Unfortunately, Eagleton does not discuss in detail the idioms or terms of the ancient tragedies he feels Williams successfully translated. His survey of the tragic—both as practice and theory—spans genres, epochs and definitional boundaries that Steiner believes to be impregnable. By attacking the deductive and inductive weaknesses of previous theories of the tragic, Eagleton explodes conventional definitions, especially Steiner's. He also succeeds in declaring a primary methodological weakness of Steiner's thesis on tragedy. John Gassner, in a review titled "The Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy," noted that:

⁸ Jacques Derrida develops a similar idea, though he does not cite or discuss Camus, in *Cosmopolites de tous les pays* (*Cosmopolites*).

[Critics like Steiner] seem to believe that because tragedy developed out of religious ritual in Greece, the modern theatre, which is not at all pyramided upon any religious rites, is unable to engender tragic art. The error in this kind of reasoning is the familiar 'genetic fallacy,' which assumes that a thing must remain what it was at its inception. (Gassner 5)

Eagleton does not fall prey to such a genetic fallacy. Starting afresh with a theoretical *tabula rasa*, he attempts to rehabilitate tragedy from the clutches of conservative and progressive critics alike. By melding a metaphysics typically abjured by the left and a Hegelian dialectical mode, Eagleton slowly builds a new theory of the tragic according to which, "There is a tragic self-mutilation at the very root of civilization" (Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic 208). To achieve this dialectical synthesis, Eagleton surveys a number of tragic categories inherited not from any particular readings, but rather from the aesthetic theorizing of Aristotle and Hegel: freedom, fate, heroes, pity, suffering, *anagnorisis*, *catharsis* and *peripeteia*. By now, it is a conventional move to set theoretical models against themselves, making concepts the subject and object of the same critique. Neither necessary nor sufficient, this tactic, while providing useful insights into tragedy, also suffers from the arbitrariness of the hermeneutic circle. Aristotle and Hegel inaugurated theoretical modes that Steiner, Williams and Eagleton actively conserve.

Eagleton makes strong claims against the United States' capacity for tragedy, an all-encompassing notion of which closer, less interested analysis would disabuse him. Still, if we extend Eagleton's comments about the generalized American individual to the nation itself, many of his points ring true. The American underclass represents exactly the force and reality of political and social failure to which Eagleton believes the country's culture turns a blind eye (After Theory 186). Eagleton believes America's cult of will-power hobbles its ability to understand, develop and artistically represent a mature sense of the tragic. Of course, America's hubristic faith in self-determinacy, both on a national

and individual level, provides precisely the fodder for tragic art that once fed a similarly imperialistic and individualistic ancient Athens.

And in fact, Williams, Eagleton and many others have provided persuasive and nuanced arguments for the possibility and existence of tragedies in which the structures of democracy, capitalism and secularism provide the surrogates for the inexorable and unanswerable forces of divinity and fate that constitute Steiner's *sine qua non* of tragic drama. Steiner and Eagleton, in laying out their putatively contrastive arguments on tragedy and the tragic, assume that tragic theories relying on or springing from the categorical assumptions of Aristotle's *Poetics* share the ancient philosopher's empirical dependence on *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The classical terms of ancient tragedy—catharsis, recognition, reversal and misunderstanding (*hamartia*)—all derive from a reading of a single play that ignores the distinctive heterogeneity of the ancient tragic corpus. Steiner and Eagleton also share an assumption about tragedy and the tragic, an assumption that this dissertation will argue does not necessarily or even naturally follow from a critical reading of either specific ancient Greek tragedies or specific instances of modern adaptation such as *The Wire* or *Disgrace*. Both Williams and Steiner presume that the possibility or impossibility of modern tragic art rests on the existence or definition of tragedies' explicit or notional content. Although the criteria for "absolute" tragedy change drastically over time, they are rooted in the analysis and theoretical exploration of content rather than form. Yet, as this dissertation argues, it is through form—and specifically through the creation of tragic spectators and tragic rebellion—that makes modern tragedy possible.

Steiner and Williams' emphasis on Aristotelian and Hegelian categories and content is current in recent discussions of tragedy, and can be seen in Rita Felski's recently published collection, *Rethinking Tragedy*. Felski's volume opens with Steiner's affirmation and development of the thesis he first proposed in *Death of Tragedy*. Simon Goldhill follows with a lucid critique of philosophers and theorists' attempts to generalize tragedy into a misleading definition of the tragic. As Goldhill argues, these attempts to define a homogenized concept of "the tragic" against the non-tragic too often strategically exclude the political and social contexts without which we cannot interpret ancient tragedy with confidence (Goldhill). Wai Chee Dimock, discussing Euripides' war plays, reminds us that the chorus did not express the official views of the Athenian *polis*, but instead represented human beings marginalized from the city-state (Dimock). Joshua Foa Dienstag, in making his case that pessimism "describes the fundamental ontology of the human condition" (Dienstag 109) and thus the nature of the tragic, addresses Nietzsche's concept of the spectator without any discussion of particular plays or scenes. The same goes for Page duBois, who suggests that the contemporary turn to tragedy is rooted in our nostalgia for a sovereign individual subject, which did not, as such, exist in ancient Greece, and whom multinational corporate power now renders obsolete. While duBois alludes to Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's contextualizing of tragedy within the gap between legalistic *nomos* and heroic *mythos*, she does adduce specific plays or formal strategies with which to support her claims regarding tragedy past and present (duBois 142). Recurring to theoretical categories outlined by Williams and Eagleton, Stangley Corngold examines the status of modern tragedy through the lens of W.G. Sebald's novels. He finishes with a section titled, "Ten Items Toward a Revised Thesis on Modern

Tragedy,” the seventh of which notes that, “In the end German cities were bombed because the mechanism was in place. For the ‘fate’ in ‘fated violence,’ read: industrialization, modernization. Modern tragedy is the tragedy of the modern” (Corngold 236).

Rita Felski, in her introduction to *Rethinking Tragedy*, describes Nietzsche’s theorization of the tragic: “Here the issue is not a rereading of Greek plays but a concerted effort to rethink the definition of tragedy from the ground up and to expand the corpus of what counts as tragic art” (Felski 6). She finishes her introduction with a call to rethink tragedy as a mode, and to endorse, paradoxically, Steiner’s view that the genre is defined as a dramatic form. This endorsement, however, must also recognize that such a form is, “often realized in forms (film, philosophy) that are not usually associated with tragedy” (14). In some sense, then, the descriptive quality of Steiner’s thesis, while bearing merit, is in and of itself meretriciously tragic in that its emphasis on form dilates the possibilities of modern tragedy rather than offering a postmortem verdict. Felski’s introduction, then, makes it all the more surprising that the volume’s essays largely ignore the formal elements within the expanded range of genres that the contributors discuss.

To surmise on the reasons why Felski’s description of her volume bears less resemblance to its contents than might be expected, it will be necessary to return to the political concerns with the theories under discussion here. Eagleton regrets that theorists of the tragic—notably Steiner—mutated tragedy into a modernism that critiqued enlightenment rationalism from the political right and that subsumed the tragic into a cult of mythology: “In the late modern era, mythical destiny shows its face again in the guise

of vast, anonymous forces—language, Will, power, history, production, desire—which live us far more than we live them” (206). As we have seen this argument merely recapitulates Napoleon’s suggestion that tragedy’s external forces can be historicized. For this reason, it is useful to turn to Kierkegaard, who suggested that we live in a far different world than that which Hegel and Napoleon imagined. According to Kierkegaard, neither the ancient force of Fate nor the power of “Policy” determine the lives of the modern subject, and thus modern tragedy springs from the individual’s deed rather than her suffering. According to Kierkegaard’s conception of the nineteenth century bourgeois era, an inherently entropic and self-reflexive subjectivity is severed from the forces of the State, family, fate, and even from the individual’s memories (Kierkegaard Either/Or 143). Kierkegaard offers an alternative theory of the tragic to those that Eagleton and Steiner describe. It is a theory that might, in today’s post-industrial era, merit further investigation. Giorgio Agamben has recently written that the political terms which sprang from the industrial revolution no longer designate realities in our contemporary sphere. Agamben sees in the decline of the state an anti-political teleology of consumerist comfort in which the pursuit of happiness—now a political end unto itself— paradoxically undermines politics (Agamben 109-10). Maffesoli in his study *The Eternal Instant [L’Instant eternal]* argues that today’s tragic spirit inheres in the cult of the present moment, and in a hedonistic devotion to the slow, that serve as buttresses against the forceful, rationalistic speed of modernity. Post-modern society assumes a quality of the tragic when its tribal embrace of pleasure, fate, necessity and chance triumph over the atomized rationality of modern capitalism. The neo-Bacchae of the contemporary metropolis live through “eternal instances” of ludic tragedy, revolting

against the death-denying, future-embracing myths of progress and free-will that disappoint in their falsity and injustice (Maffesoli). Agamben and Maffesoli's theoretical landscapes prescribe modes of tragic living that, in their pragmatic pessimism, also progress beyond the poles defined by Williams and Steiner's definitions.

Of course, Agamben and Maffesoli are primarily concerned with the tragic as lived praxis—tragedy as art is not their concern. For this reason it is worthwhile to remember that tragic drama has the potential to define tragic living, as we have seen in Camus' lecture and in the works of modern adaptation under discussion here. As Vernant writes: "...although tragedy, more than any other genre of literature, thus appears rooted in social reality, that does not mean that it is a reflection of it. It does not reflect that reality but calls it into question. By depicting it rent and divided against itself, it turns it into a problem" (Vernant 32).

In its critical and mimetic functions, which are only apparently paradoxical, but, in practice, mutually reinforcing, tragedy strikes a balance between the limits of reactionary acquiescence and totalizing refusal. Its relationship to society, then, parallels the relationship between the modern adaptation of tragedy and the ancient tragedies claimed as formal antecedents. As Eagleton notes, "The audience response to [*Oedipus Tyrannus*] thus mirrors its content...Tragedy is the art in which the ambiguities on stage are also the ambiguities between stage and spectators" (Sweet Violence 163). While it is true, as we have seen, that tragic ambiguity is passed from stage to spectator, the mimetic process is of form rather than content. In fact, it is the audience's response to the stage or cinematography or epigraph or novel that finally shapes the content of tragic ambiguity. As Pantelis Michelakis points out, "The translation from one art form to another raises a

number of issues which could be called collectively the sociology of adaptation: issues of genre, spectatorship, intertextuality, heritage and history, and authorship” (201). For this reason, it is the intention of this dissertation to analyze instantiations of adaptation across boundaries of both genre and media. It will look at novels, print, books and readership; at episodic television, premium cable programming, DVDs and TV viewership; and at the contemporary global drama, postmodern dramaturgy and its own spectatorship. This breadth of analysis is vital to any argument that suggests that tragedy’s ancient and modern spectatorship evinces itself as a material practice of rebellion. At the end of *The Rebel*, Camus wrote that:

Lucifer also died with God, and from his ashes arose a petty demon who cannot even see where he is going. In 1950, excess is always a comfort, and sometimes a career. Moderation, on the other hand, is pure tension. (L’homme révolté 375)

This moderation is the tension of tragic spectatorship and tragic practice, just as much as it is the tension of modern adaptation.

Chapter Two

Tragic Misreading in Roth and Coetzee

OEDIPUS: What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?
 CREON: By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood.
 — Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*; epigraph to Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*

He thought the same useless thoughts—useless to a man of no great talent like himself, if not to Sophocles: how accidentally a fate is made...or how accidental it all may seem when it is inescapable. (Roth *The Human Stain* 127)

Philip Roth's novels—*American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000)—all examine particularly American permutations of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, from which corpuses Roth often explicitly names specific plays and characters. The remaining novel under discussion—the South African writer J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*—portrays the political and personal ruination of a weak man negotiating the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa. As Daniel Medin noted in his article “Trials and errors at the turn of the millennium: on *The Human Stain* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,” there are remarkable similarities between these two novels, and to some extent among all four works under discussion in this chapter (Medin). Medin lists these resemblances succinctly:

...their representation of protagonists whose fates are symbolically bound to those of their countries...their scrupulous portrayal of mental torpidity re-enacted at every level of society...their unblinking portrayal of the pernicious effects of social censure; and, finally their justifiably skeptical evaluation of human nature...(Medin 84)

While Medin's analysis is mostly concerned with the two novels' tragic portrayal of a humanism undone by its own aspirations, this chapter will scrutinize the role language plays in its assimilation of tragedy within the genre of the novel. It will prove useful to offer a brief introduction to each of the works, beginning with Roth's American novels, named so, partially, because:

...they highlight the three historical occurrences that fundamentally damaged American society after the Second World War: the Vietnam War and the rebellions of the '60s and '70s, McCarthyism in the '50s, and the Political Correctness frenzy of the '80s and '90s. (Safer 79)

In *American Pastoral*, Roth chronicles the rise and fall of Seymour "Swede" Levov, a hard-working optimist, renowned local athlete and firm believer in the American Dream, who, after World War Two, marries the local beauty queen, achieves quick success in his family's glove business and moves to Old Rimrock, a gentile utopia and the "American pastoral" of the title. In 1968, on a single day, his successes and achieved idyll are quashed when his teenage daughter, protesting the Vietnam War, bombs Old Rimrock's post office, killing a local doctor. From this day forward, the Swede will attempt to reconcile his "Greatest Generation" principles and standards with the chaotic flip-side of the American Dream, represented here by both the prosecution and protest of the Vietnam War.

Roth's next novel in the trilogy, *I Married a Communist*, takes as its protagonist Ira Ringold, a larger-than-life radio personality from the 1940s, who is persecuted and destroyed by the McCarthyite witch hunts. Ira, a member of the Communist Party, hides his affiliation while performing in his hit radio show. His wife, a famous actress innocently abetting HUAC supporters, publishes a memoir outing Ringold as a confirmed communist taking orders from Moscow. Much of the novel dissects the tendency of

reactionary politics to insinuate its duplicities and ruthlessness into private lives, abusing and sometimes destroying them in the process.

The last novel in the trilogy, *The Human Stain*, also describes this nefarious intersection between the public and the individual, the political and the private. Roth mocks and excoriates the excesses of both conservative and liberal pieties, centering the novel's events around the Republican attempts to impeach President Clinton and the media frenzy surrounding the Monica Lewinsky affair. A small liberal arts college serves as the microcosmic analogy to a Washington D.C. infected by hypocrisies and vindictiveness. Coleman Silk, the protagonist of the novel, is a professor of Classics who has been driven into early retirement after having referred to two black students—whom he has never seen—as “spooks.” The secret, divulged to the reader if not Silk's colleagues, is that Silk is black, and has been passing himself as Jewish for the majority of his adult life. Of the three novels in the trilogy, this last approaches the themes and influence of Greek tragedy—especially Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*—most directly. Not only does the novel include an epigraph from *Oedipus Tyrannus*; it also makes continued references to the tragedies themselves and even the contexts in which they were produced.⁹

⁹ In May, 2000, at the time of *The Human Stain*'s publication, David Remnick wrote a profile of Philip Roth for *The New Yorker*. Remnick wrote that, “He is using the novel as a vehicle for middle-class tragedy in which history happens to, rolls over, even destroys, ordinary men and women: a businessman, an actor, a teacher” (Remnick).

In this same interview, Roth remarked, “I read the other day in a newspaper that I occasionally see that Freud was a kind of charlatan or something worse. This great, tragic poet, our Sophocles! The writer is just not of interest to the public as somebody who may have an inroad into consciousness.” David Remnick, “Into the Clear,” *New Yorker* 8 May 2000.

The subject of Coetzee's narration is also a literary professional, in this case a professor of what was once Classics and Modern Languages, but has become, after "the great rationalization," Communications (*Disgrace* 3). Lurie teaches Romantic literature at Cape Technical University in Cape Town, where he has a brief affair with one of his students. Once this affair is discovered, Lurie refuses to defend himself and is dismissed from his teaching position. Fleeing Cape Town, Lurie seeks sanctuary at his daughter Lucy's farm, where he hopes to write a libretto about Byron and regain some sense of equilibrium in his life. Only days after arriving in an Eastern Cape that has changed dramatically in the post-apartheid era, three men assault the farm house, violently injuring Lurie, and raping Lucy. The second half of the novel describes the consequences of this attack, on the Luries' lives, and on the rural community in which they've found themselves. Lucy discovers that she is pregnant with the rapist's child, which she decides to carry to term. In facing these brutal realities, Lurie assumes two central projects: to help at the local animal clinic, and to finally begin writing his libretto. Both projects require that he confront speechless beings—the dogs and the dead—for whom he must supply a wildly approximate language. The futility and detachment implicit in this process alert us to the rift between the inescapably linguistic nature of tragedy and the irreducible wordlessness of the tragic.

Similarities abound among Roth's three "American" novels, the most important of which is the presence of Nathan Zuckerman, a protagonist of Roth's previous works¹⁰ and a novelist who narrates events as both an observer and a participant. Many critics

¹⁰ *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Prague Orgy* (1985) and *The Counterlife* (1986). Since the publication of the trilogy, Nathan Zuckerman has appeared in *Exit Ghost* (2007).

have focused on the apparent resemblance between Roth's life and that of his creation Zuckerman. This chapter will ignore this conjecture. References to "Roth," with a few noted exceptions, will indicate the "meta" narrator who narrates Zuckerman's narration, not the "real life" Philip Roth. In each work from the trilogy, a novelist tells the story of a novelist telling the story of the protagonist: respectively, the Swede, Ira and Silk. Although the trilogy and *Disgrace* reference—implicitly and explicitly—a wide range of ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, it is *Oedipus Tyrannus* whose thematic and formal concerns resonate most consistently and thoroughly with the novels, and thus, it is Sophocles' play that must serve as both the object of and basis for this chapter's critical reading.

Misreading Tragedy

Cr. And if you understand nothing?
 Oe. I must govern still.
 (626-27)¹¹

While neither Oedipus nor Creon understand the full meaning of "nothing" at the beginning of the play, the audience does. It knows that "nothing" signifies Oedipus's provenance, parricide and incestuous marriage. But toward the end of the play, Oedipus shares our knowledge, at which point the dramatic ironies disappear, and the audience understands that it, like the protagonists, misread the language of tragedy. From the very beginning, the audience watches a protagonist who falsely reads the signs of his own tragedy and identity. As his adopted city-state's preeminent citizen-hero, its "first of

¹¹ All translations of *Oedipus Tyrannus*—except for that of the epigraph from *The Human Stain*—are my own. I use the most recent Oxford Classical Text, Sophocles, *Sophoclis Fabulae*, Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).

men,” Oedipus operates as a rogue interpreter, solving riddles and investigating oracles alone. Oedipus rhetorically constrains his future with conditional statements whose ironic content he cannot recognize. Failing to consider the possibility that he will prove a criminal, even after acting on all that the god declares [δηλοῖ], Oedipus creates a condition in which he will necessarily misread the oracles he has pledged to obey. When Creon arrives with the prophecy, Oedipus is primed to confuse the subject and object of the questions he poses and the answers he receives.

Oe. What manner of purification? What sort of misfortune?
 Cr. Banishment, or the restitution of blood for blood,
 since it is blood that drives the city-state into the storm.
 Od. Who is the man whose lot was thus betrayed?
 (99-102)

This particular example of Oedipus’ misreading plays a special role in the context of this chapter in that it serves as the epigraph for *The Human Stain*. Within the context of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus pursues his investigation unaware that he is its object. The audience is similarly unaware that it will become, when the play’s dramatic ironies collapse, the object of the tragedy on the stage. The readers of *The Human Stain* read the epigraph at the beginning of the novel in ignorance of the person to whom “the man” refers, until they discover that it is the classics scholar Coleman Silk, who, having read and taught the play, fails to understand that “the man”—the tragic protagonist—could possibly be himself. And just as at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus discovers that it was he whom he had sought all along, so too does Coleman Silk discover that, in life, he is the tragic protagonist who had been the true object of his research all along. And of course the readers of the novel, will ask themselves: if Coleman Silk can misread the realities contained by the fictional Oedipus, why would they not misread the realities contained by the fictional Coleman Silk. They will remember back to the epigraph from

Oedipus Tyrannus, which they will understand without either the ignorance or dramatic ironies with which they began the novel.

It is for this reason that the act of reading plays such a pivotal role throughout *The Human Stain*. And it is why the narrative is structured such that a novelist, Nathan Zuckerman, both reads and writes the tragic trajectory of his protagonist, Coleman Silk. Within the narrative, the act of reading is enacted in a single moment. One hot Saturday evening in the summer, Zuckerman keeps Silk company as the man remembers his disgrace and exile. In a moment of vanity, the seventy-something Silk takes off his shirt, exposing a small tattoo of the words “U.S. Navy” on the top of his right arm.

Immediately, Zuckerman reads the tattoo as:

A tiny symbol, if one were needed, of all the million circumstances of the other fellow's life, of that blizzard of details that constitute the confusion of a human biography — a tiny symbol to remind me why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong. (The Human Stain 22)

The tattoo only achieves its status as symbol within the context of a lived moment; and it is only a symbol of human opacity to the extent it remains obscured by clothing. This is important in that Zuckerman's interpretation of the tattoo as a symbol reveals the extent to which his fictions depend on lived experience and vice versa. In all three novels of the trilogy, we gradually learn that Zuckerman has fled and renounced “life” at the university to devote himself to the exclusive purities of art. Zuckerman's surprise encounters with all the protagonists of the trilogy—and especially Murray, Coleman and the Swede—serve as inspiration for his novels, which in turn assume the status of symbols themselves. To Zuckerman, the artifice of Silk's tattoo, at first a synecdoche for the text he has written and we are reading, then produces a metaleptic extension, according to

which “the blizzard of details” undermines the significance of its own universalist referents.

This complex process, by which the novelist or reader metaphorically interprets the accrued details of a life observed, typically, in Roth’s trilogy, produces the accumulated errors that lead to misunderstanding, injured pride, recrimination and retribution. For this reason, the characters, major or minor, who populate the trilogy tend to misread in profoundly literary and often tragic ways. This is especially true of the classical scholar Coleman Silk, who repeatedly sees the events of his life in terms of translational fluency. After he has assumed his false identity as a white man, Silk woos his future wife Iris and privately revels in the power of his impersonation. Zuckerman writes that, “[Silk has] got the elixir of the secret, and it’s like being fluent in another language—it’s being somewhere that’s constantly fresh to you” (135-36). Later, as professor, Silk explains that his academic nemesis, the French literary scholar Delphine Roux, is unable to understand the Americans she dates because, “...she is not fluent. With all her pride in her fluency, with all her fluency, she is not fluent” (275)! In the last scene of *The Human Stain*, encountering Les Farley, a Vietnam veteran whose existence he has only imagined until this point, Zuckerman expresses his surprise at the man’s expansive coherence: “His fluency—because it was the last thing I was expecting—fascinated me” (*The Human Stain* 350)...

In all three instances, fluency instantiates or engenders a tragic misunderstanding, and at three different levels of narration. Silk fails to see the disastrously alienating power of his fluency in assuming the identity of a Jewish white man, just as Roux’s inability to read herself spawns an email that will, permanently because posthumously, destroy Silk’s

reputation. Zuckerman, for his part, undermines the reader's conception of Farley, whose entire narrative of inarticulate malice the reader must now mistrust as a "false" fiction. The irony of fluency and language is that they are communicative resources whose treacherous instabilities writers, readers, and characters share alike. Almost as if wary and distrustful of these instabilities, Zuckerman repeatedly formulates his stance towards his past, his motivations and his characters as a series of open-ended rhetorical questions whose implied answers will, as the novels progress, give way to aporetic obscurity. In *American Pastoral*, remembering "the unfiltered way meaning comes to children" (43), Zuckerman asks, from the vantage of fifty turbulent years, "Were we ever again to be such keen recording instruments of the microscopic surface of things close at hand, of the minutest gradations of social position" (30)... He remains amazed at how fluently he interpreted the physical details of existence as a young man, amassing observations of surface phenomena from which he and his friends were once able to "...[dimly grasp] how every family's different set of circumstances set each family a distinctive human problem" (30). Zuckerman is gradually disabused of any confidence he once held in the fluency of human observation.

Toward the end of *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman will ascribe to Swede Levov the same propensity to misread human beings to which the novelist is prone throughout the trilogy. After having suffered endless misfortunes in his adult life, the Swede discovers that his once and former mistress, Sheila, hid his terrorist daughter Merry for days, a fact Sheila never once divulged, even during a short period during which she and he conducted an affair. As Zuckerman explains:

...that was not because [Sheila] had been passing herself off with him as something else or somebody else but because he had understood her no

better than he was able to understand anyone. How to penetrate to the interior of people was some skill or capacity he did not possess. He just did not have the combination to that lock. (409)

And neither does Zuckerman, as the reader discovers at the end of each novel in the trilogy. Of course, the reader, understanding finally the nature and inevitability of this illiteracy is forced to consider its own inability to read Zuckerman, or even Roth himself. If Zuckerman shares in his protagonists' tragedies, so too must the reader in Zuckerman's.

To understand the dynamic according to which the spectator or reader insinuates herself into the tragedy itself, it is necessary to return once again to the model provided by *Oedipus Tyrannus*. As we have seen, Sophocles' play is the dramatic enactment of a subject growing conscious of its status as an object. It is a process that begins the moment Creon declares that Thebes must find Laius' murderers. In response, Oedipus does not ask *who* they are, but *where* they have come from: "...how can the obscure trace of such an ancient crime be found" (108-09)? In choosing the word "trace [ἵχνος]," a hunting term also meaning "track" or "footstep," Oedipus veers from the direct object of his investigation in order to focus on its vestigial signs, subtly deflecting Creon's persistent focus on the unknown culprit. When Oedipus asks why Thebes failed to investigate the murder of its king, Creon explains that the unsolvable enigmas of the Sphinx preempted long-term inquiry: "The Sphinx of the riddling song forced us to neglect the dim past in order to face present dangers" (130-31).

The riddling song of himself forces Oedipus to neglect the actual object of his past. Instead he will focus on the "traces" that exist in the present. But because he can only follow the footsteps back to himself, his pursuit of the criminal will assume the nature of a lived hermeneutic circle. The unceasing dramatic ironies remind us that

Oedipus' most glaring error is a grotesque observational bias whose solipsism inevitably devolves the first person singular to an indeterminate third person. Oedipus' insatiable desire to question and interpret is checked by a solipsistic refusal to acknowledge a subjectivity that become the object of his interlocutor's accusation. This self-blindness is brought to the fore with the arrival of Teiresias. While his own interpretations are incommensurate with Teiresias's explicit indictment, Oedipus evades the uncanny substrata of his self by seeking to impute his hermeneutic deficiency to the blind sage. Since Oedipus must refuse to recognize truth as the motivation for Teiresias's divination, he impetuously assumes that envy spawned the seer's augury:

Why, when the vile rhapsode was here,
 Did you not give the citizens words of deliverance?
 But still the riddle was not brought to light
 By a chance arrival. It required prophecy,
 an art neither the birds nor gods made known to you.
 (391-96)

By telling the story of his murder Oedipus recognizes the tautological nature of his investigation. Here, for the first time, he explicitly nominates himself as the object of a search for which he was formerly the redoubtable subject, declaring, "...and it is I myself who brought upon myself this curse" (819-820).

In employing the reflexive pronoun "myself [ἐμαυτῶ]," Oedipus deploys a new grammatical mode apposite to his unforeseen metaphysical instability. He has just finished telling the story of the murder at the crossroads, a story from which he quickly segues to a frightening conditional statement: if the stranger were Laius, then Oedipus would be a cursed parricide. In recognizing that the subject and object of his story now constitute indeterminate variables, Oedipus becomes both the teller and the interpreter of his own tale. Unfortunately, in his colloquy with Jocasta, Oedipus struggles to reduce

himself back to the singular identity that will exonerate him and his family. And it is this struggle that each of Roth and Coetzee's protagonists and fictional novelists share as they determine their identities as readers and as texts that are read.

This tragic struggle is enacted in each of the novels through the internalization of fiction-making within fictions. If his novels' fictional novelists discover, time and again, the futility of language and meaning, Roth will wage an ironic rebellion against the inscrutability of human beings and texts. He will fictionalize a subject — Zuckerman the novelist — who, in turn, will fictionalize the real history of a fictional person, the Swede. As if to prove that only a fictionalized subjectivity could grasp the unknown layers of a fictionalized objectivity, Roth allots Zuckerman the majority of each novel within a novel in which to imagine the unknowable inner landscape of a cipher. Within these fictional spheres, Zuckerman continually reminds the reader that acts of misreading and misapprehension are inherently tragic. Zuckerman continually sets the “real life” of Silk against “fictional life” of ancient Greek tragedies, and all the while it is Roth's readers who must triangulate these two fictions within the scope of their own readings. A telling example is Silk's abandonment by a white lover who discovers his real racial identity. Atypically despondent, Silk imagines possibilities lost in terms of tragic living and Greek tragedy itself:

...he walked away [from Steena] understanding, as outside his reading in classical Greek drama he'd never had to understand before, how easily life can be one thing rather than another and how accidentally a destiny is made...on the other hand, how accidental fate may seem when things can never turn out other than they do. That is he walked away understanding nothing... (The Human Stain 125)

Silk recognizes, neither for the first nor last time, that he himself can be Greek tragedy's referent as much as its reader. These words he knows so well from the tragic corpus —

tyche, *Moirai*, *peripeteia* — can be translated into his own existence, much as Roth translates an ancient genre into the body of a contemporary novel. Silk's misreading of Greek tragedy is the result, he belatedly discovers, of a blind refusal to implicate his own existence in Sophocles' fictional ambit. *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the tragedy itself, becomes the Sphinx's riddle he believes he has deciphered, until he discovers that he himself should have been the object, not the subject, of his tragic reading. In other words, Silk reproduces Oedipus' tragic misreading by misreading the play in which the Greek hero fell.

We, the readers or spectators, are complicit in this operative mode of tragic misreading, which is why Zuckerman so often employs the second-person singular in the explanatory phases of his narrative. Toward the beginning of *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman declares that:

You might as well have the brain of a tank. You get [people] wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong when you're with them; and then you go home again to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of perception, and astonishing farce of misrepresentation. (*American Pastoral* 35)

And how could it be any different for Zuckerman or Roth or their readers for that matter? Tormented by the inevitable distortions of subjectivity confronting other subjectivities, the “we”—the reader—Roth designates is reminded that Zuckerman gets all his protagonists wrong, offering only his imagination and his reportage, not as a mere supplement, but as a replacement for the lacunae of human perception. But Roth, as we have seen earlier, has primed us to suspect that the novel, by constructing a mimesis of subjectivity, accords us a form of limited omniscience. If actual subjectivity must remain insular, hermeneutically sealed as it were, its fictional analog might provide us with

sufficient penetration to the *qualia* of another consciousness. Realism is only achieved by way of artifice. This common formula is the key to the trilogy's reimagining of tragedy and the tragic.

The Life of Tragic Fiction

Both Roth, the narrator, and Zuckerman, the fictional novelist, imply that, while it is possible to imagine the inner life of a fictional creation, we can at best mistakenly imagine the inner life of a real person. Tragedy is a concession to tragic life in the same sense that fiction is a concession to reality. Roth takes this analogous relationship one step further, assuming, with justification, that living "real" authors cannot convincingly grasp the true inner lives of their characters. For this reason, Roth creates a fictional surrogate, Zuckerman, whom he imbues with a negative capability more finely calibrated to characters that exist in a tale within a tale. Partially, Roth requires an interior fictional presence who can, because fictional, "actually" encounter the protagonist of his novels.

In all three of Roth's American trilogy novels, the protagonist's death serves as the catalyst for the transference of tragedy to Zuckerman, and then, the reader. Silk's premature death, for example, at the hands of Les Farley, the Vietnam veteran, shifts the retired classics professor from the realm of the privately tragic to that of Zuckerman's, and therefore Roth's, tragedy of the modern American era. But there is no consolation in this transposition from living man to tragic protagonist. At Silk's funeral, Roth, perennially wary of facile consolation, recurs to the standard mode by which he triangulates himself, his fictional surrogate Zuckerman and Zuckerman's characters, in order to highlight the incongruity of tragic living and tragic art. As Silk's funeral ends,

his bitter son Mark, whose enmity toward his father has never waned, breaks into a wail of lamentation. The scene, as Zuckerman describes it, could have been lifted, irony intact, from the codas of Euripides' plays:

[Mark] thought Coleman was going to stay here till the whole play could be performed, as though he and Coleman had been set down not in life but on the southern hillside of the Athenian acropolis, in an outdoor theater sacred to Dionysus, where, before the eyes of ten thousand spectators, the dramatic unities were once rigorously observed and the great cathartic cycle was enacted annually. The human desire for a beginning, a middle, and an end—and an end appropriate to that beginning and middle—is realized nowhere so thoroughly as in the plays that Coleman taught at Athena College. But outside the classical tragedy of the fifth century B.C. the expectation of completion, let alone of a just and perfect consummation, is a foolish illusion for an adult to hold. (The Human Stain 314-15)

The layers of misreading in this passage are numerous. According to Zuckerman, Mark has misread his life as a stage drama onto whose evidently Aristotelian formal structure he latches as his arrested development's consolatory rationale. Coleman Silk, though, as we have already seen, erred in reading the Greek tragedies as if they were divorced from the subjectivity of his own experience. Zuckerman, in his attempt to appraise "actual life" over and against the formal dictates of art, misreads the generic traits of the Greek tragic corpus, flattening all distinctions and naively cataloging the prescriptive dictates of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The dramatic unities, after all, were rarely observed, and when observed, rarely with rigor. And many of the Greek tragedies, especially those of Euripides, fail to meet expectations of completion, of "just and perfect consummation."

It is as if Zuckerman, in response to Silk's story, assumes the posture of a pedant, reverencing a simplified, homogenized ideal of ancient art. Roth does not and cannot fall prey to such guileless adulation. Silk's end, in the eyes of Zuckerman and Mark, truncates the narrative prescribed by their blinkered homogenization of Greek tragedies.

The reader recognizes, in reading this passage, that Roth is positing a fictionalized portrayal of life against a fictionalized portrayal of fiction. For this reason, Silk's death does fit limited expectations of tragic completion. Zuckerman presents his story as a partially imagined, partially reported account of his encounter with Silk, who, within the broader context of the novel, remains the tragic protagonist of a generically self-aware novel.

To highlight this novel's ironic internalization of an ancient genre, along with that its history of reception, Zuckerman gives Silk a posthumous existence, a kind of choral coda with which to comment on the internal and external forces that brought him down. After the funeral, Zuckerman visits Silk's mother, Ernestine, from whom, we learn, Zuckerman gleaned most of the bare facts for the narration that forms the bulk of *The Human Stain*. Toward the end of the conversation, Ernestine elucidates a reference to the African-American surgeon famous for his medical research in blood plasma and blood banking (Love). As Ernestine explains it, " 'Dr. Charles Drew...discovered how to prevent blood from clotting so it could be banked. Then he was injured in an automobile accident, and the hospital that was nearest would not take colored, and he died by bleeding to death.' " (*The Human Stain* 333).

Ernestine, closing sixteen pages straight of monologic narration with this compact account of a historical figure's life and death, leaves Zuckerman to assess its highly charged relationship to the protagonist of story:

The torrent of disclosure was over. Ernestine had said all there was to say. With the result that the harshly ironic fate of Dr. Drew took on a significance—a seeming special relevance to Coleman and *his* harshly ironic fate—that was no less disturbing for being imponderable." (333, italics author's).

Art and life, in this passage, do not ironically gloss each other, because the tale of Dr. Drew's ironic fate is not true. On April 1, 1950, Drew did, while driving through the night in North Carolina, suffer an automobile accident from which he died soon after. The legend that Drew was denied care at the hospital circulated immediately and widely, and even appeared on a 1973 broadcast of the television series "M*A*S*H". The three survivors of the accident, among other direct witnesses, repudiated the story that Drew had been denied care. Spencie Love, in *One Blood*, his 1996 study of the accident and its mythological aftermath, begins with an introductory chapter titled, "A Tragedy Compounded by a Myth." Love draws on multiple first-person accounts to validate the facts of Drew's care and death. Admitted into the emergency room of Alrance County Hospital forty minutes after the accident, Drew was immediately given treatment by doctors who recognized the famous surgeon and struggled to save him. The black doctors accompanying Drew confirm this, and yet, beginning in the 1950s, the story that Alrance County Hospital denied him care still spread. As Love writes:

Many have tried to eradicate [the legend]—colleagues of Drew at public meetings, Drew family members and friends, newspaper and magazine writers, even institutions such as the Howard University Medical School and the American Red Cross. Despite repeated public debunkings, the story about Charles Drew's death is still being told. (Love 31)

Why does Ernestine tell this story? Roth published *The Human Stain* in 2000, four years after Love published *One Blood*, and twelve years after Charles E. Wynes published the first scholarly biography of Drew, *Charles Richard Drew: The Man and the Myth* (2). It would be surprising if Roth had not sufficiently researched Drew's story. As Arthur Scherr writes, in his study of mistaken identities in *The Human Stain*, "The harshly ironic fate of Dr. Drew' is doubly ironic: people believe Drew died because he was not

treated, just as they believed that Silk died as a Jew, having lost control of his car during fellatio with Faunia” (Scherr).¹²

In echoing the dangerous credulousness and scandalmongering of Silk’s persecutors, Ernestine transfers her son’s ironic fate to Zuckerman, who guilelessly reports the canard about Drew’s death without confirming its validity. This *mise en abîme* of history and myth serves as a final and definitive reminder that the formal exigencies of writing tragedy necessarily recapitulate the lived experience of tragedy, if only because authorship implies misreading to the same extent that humans skew the observed phenomena of their lives.

The Human Stain, though, is not the only novel of the trilogy in which the death of a protagonist inspires Zuckerman to consider the genre of tragedy within the context of his embedded fictions. Toward the end of *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman reminisces about the power of his former teacher Murray’s tales and of radio stars’ voices to draw listeners into the realm of the tragic:

Murray, the radio: voices from the void controlling everything within, the convolutions of a story floating on air and into the ear so that the drama is perceived well behind the eyes, the cup that is the cranium, a cup transformed into a limitless globe of a stage, containing fellow creatures whole. How deep our hearing goes! Think of all it means to *understand* from something that you simply hear. The godlikeness of having an ear! Is it not at least a *semidivine* phenomenon to be hurled into the innermost wrongness of human existence by virtue of nothing more than sitting in the dark, listening to what is said? (*I Married a Communist* 321)

Here, in this novel’s meditative peroration, Zuckerman calls on a series of metaphors rooted in the genre of tragedy. The passage resonates with an awareness of the formal structures and histories that *Communist* has both subverted and embodied. Beginning

¹² Scherr, in this same article, persuasively argues that Roth has consistently taken pains to incorporate well-researched historical data into his novels (Scherr).

with its specific references to the raconteur-protagonists of the novel, Zuckerman develops a metalepsis in reverse, moving his metaphors of form down through the strata of literary history: from “story” he pulls back to “drama,” then to the “stage,” and then, finally to the originary era of bardic epic. The consciously Shakespearean language — the “limitless globe of a stage” hearkening back to *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *As You Like It*; and the “godlikeness” echoing Hamlet’s belief that man “in apprehension [is] like a god” — underpins the pedigree of genres to which Zuckerman here lays claim. But because these literary traces all lead back to the fundamental notion of *hamartia* — “the innermost wrongness of human existence” — we see that Zuckerman’s implicit genealogy is primarily concerned with tragedy.

The trilogy is full of moments in which Zuckerman stops to consider the fictions that underpin his own. In *American Pastoral*, he describes a series of heroic sports novels for children in which “the kid from Tomkinsville” endures catastrophe after catastrophe before hitting his redemptive home runs. Zuckerman wonders if the Swede had read these books, and wonders what they meant to him:

Did the Swede know? Did he care? Did it occur to him that if disaster could strike down the Kid from Tomkinsville, it could come and strike the great Swede down too? Or was a book about a greatly gifted innocent whose worst fault is a tendency to keep his right shoulder down and swing up but whom the thundering heavens destroy nonetheless—simply a book between those “Thinker” bookends up on his shelf? (*American Pastoral* 9)

In articulating this parallel between the Kid — the Swede’s hero — and the Swede himself, Zuckerman effectively addresses this series of questions to us, his readers, who must, in turn, ask whether we can muster enough empathy to generalize the Swede’s tragedy into our past, current or projected lives; or whether the American novel and ancient Greek tragedy are merely cultural capital with which to gild the financial lily.

Zuckerman, who musters empathy by way of writing rather than reading, only partially answers the questions he poses. He does assure us that the Swede's life is, in fact, applicable to our own: "Who is set up for tragedy and the incomprehensibility of suffering? Nobody. The tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy—that is every man's tragedy" (American Pastoral 86). Importantly, it is the "incomprehension"—a failure easily shared by reader or spectator alike—that is as much the tragedy as the fall of the hero itself. Depicting a "superordinary" man who becomes "history's plaything," Zuckerman clearly sets out his mission, which is to turn his childhood hero-worship into inspiration for the construction of a tragedy:

To embrace your hero in his destruction, however—to let your hero's life occur within you when everything is trying to diminish him, to imagine yourself into his bad luck, to implicate yourself not in his mindless ascendancy, when he is the fixed point of your adulation, but in the bewilderment of his tragic fall—well, that's worth thinking about. (American Pastoral 88)

This is the answer: tragedy, today, is not necessarily contained within the theatrical equivalent of superfluous ornamentation on a bookshelf; but it is possible if we bookend our protagonists between layers of fiction. Zuckerman lifts the Swede "onto [his] stage" so that his protagonist will serve as a touchstone for the possibilities of tragedy at the turn of the millennium. The Swede's "isomorphism to the Wasp world" (89) will self-consciously parallel Zuckerman's isomorphism to the tragic world. Zuckerman is Roth's litmus test of tragedy as much as the Swede is Zuckerman's.

Because Roth and Coetzee are so careful to set tragic drama and tragic life each in relation to the other, their narrators must load their narratives with direct allusions to tragedy on stage. In *I Married a Communist*, there is the "deus ex machina [who] appears with her gold tooth" (I Married a Communist 182); Murray's feeling that he is, "being

asphyxiated inside Shakespeare” (302); and Zuckerman memory of his first high school reading of *Macbeth*, his, “first encounter with a spiritual state that is aesthetic and overrides everything else” (314). In *The Human Stain*, Silk, indulging his nostalgia for 1950s popular music, declares, “Just have [those songs] do that, and then let [the audience] tell me afterwards if they have not understood at last the celebrated doctrine of the catharsis effected by tragedy.” (The Human Stain 15). Later in the narrative, repressing his wrath, Silk calls on all, “He knew from the wrath of Achilles, the rage of Philoctetes, the fulminations of Medea, the madness of Ajax, the despair of Electra, and the suffering of Prometheus” (63)... There is the moment in which Zuckerman informs the reader that Silk, with a brother estranged and father dead, is now, “Free on the big stage. Free to go ahead and be stupendous. Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I” (109). There is the “chorus” of tough-talking men whom Silk overhears discussing Monica Lewinsky and Clinton; and Silk’s desire, “To live in a way that does not bring Philoctetes to mind...[nor] to live like a tragic character in his course” (170). There is the dialogue between Silk and his wife, Iris, who has just told him the story of her friend Claudia, whose husband kept a secret family. Silk responds to the story, “Yes...it’s like something out of the Greeks. Out of *The Bacchae*.” Iris replies, “Worse...because it’s not out of *The Bacchae*. It’s out of Claudia’s life” (The Human Stain 179). There is Zuckerman imagining that Faunia plays Galatea to Silk’s Pygmalion, “saving her from the tragedy of her strangeness” (208); and the e-mail Roux uses—“clytemnestra@houseofatreus.com” (289)—to incriminate Silk.

Coetzee alludes to tragedy throughout *Disgrace* as well. The narrator tells us that, “...[Lurie] has not forgotten the last chorus of Oedipus: Call no man happy until he is

dead” (2). With snobbish irony, Lurie says of a college play that, “Catharsis seems to be the presiding principle: all the coarse old prejudices brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter” (23). On the farm, Lurie’s daughter Lucy jokes that her father has been fired so that his, “...colleagues can breathe easy again, while the scapegoat wanders in the wilderness” (91). With a nod toward Aristotelian terminology, Lurie attempts to mitigate the horror of the attack, framing it as a generalized theory of historical retribution. He tells himself, “...hold to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant” (Coetzee 98).

Lurie, like Zuckerman, the Swede, Ira and Silk, clings to literature and literary awareness more than he does theory. Like Roth’s protagonist’s, Lurie’s is the tragedy of the man who suffers the belatedness of tragic literacy, not as author, but as a living human being. Just as their fictional eyes passively followed the words of Sophocles across the page, their lives passively follow the events that come to them from history. The allusions to tragedy, the awareness of genre, the obsession with the futility of language, the constant wrangling with subjectivity—they are all attempts to break away from the inevitability of misconstruing themselves and others, to author themselves away from the velleity of literacy. The inevitable misreadings are—to borrow from the *Poetics* once more—the essence of the error, the *hamartia*, that forms the bond between tragic literacy and tragic life, and as a result, between the tragic fiction and the tragic spectator.

The Errant Paths of Tragedy

Of course the model for this *hamartia* of tragic literacy can be found in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the play on which Aristotle bases the bulk of his aesthetic theorizing in the *Poetics*. It is a mode of errant reading in which the act is mistaken for the word and vice versa, as we can see immediately upon the arrival of Teiresias to the court. Before Teiresias even makes his appearance, the Chorus informs Oedipus of the “ancient tale [παλαιά ἔπη] (290)” that wayfarers killed Laius. Oedipus responds that he *sees* — not hears — the reports that comes his way [πάντα γὰρ σκοπῶ λόγον] (291). When the Chorus suggests that the suspected killer will fear Oedipus’ severe curse too much to show himself, Oedipus makes an immediate judgment on the nature of the murderer: “He who is not frightened by an act does not fear a word [ὣ μὴ ἴσθι δρῶντι τάρβος, οὐδ’ ἔπος φοβεῖ]” (296).

Within this brief exchange, the multiple references to sight [ὄρῶντ’ ἐπίσταμαι, σκοπῶ, ἰδόντ’] and language [ἔπη, λόγον, ἔπος] prepare the semantic groundwork for the arrival of Teiresias, who pragmatically understands that the gap between words and deeds is all that remains to save Oedipus from catastrophe. Concerned for his safety, Teiresias prevails on Oedipus to drop his investigation and willingly ignore the “terrible wisdom [φρονεῖν ὡς δεινὸν]” that comes with prophecy. Teiresias tells Oedipus, “Your speech misses the mark [ὄρῶ γὰρ οὐδὲ σοὶ τὸ σὸν φώωημ’ ἰδὼν / πρὸς καιρόν]” (324-25), an accusation that might very well be false. Oedipus, though he reveals a necessary ignorance of his own history and identity, accurately infers that Teiresias’s reticence will “bring the city-state to ruin [καταφθεῖραι πόλιν]” (331). At this juncture in the encounter between the king and seer, Oedipus maintains faith in the power of language to direct action and events, especially within the sphere of the city-state. When Teiresias

focuses on the personal rather than the political, Oedipus asks, rhetorically, “Who would not anger at hearing these words with which you dishonor the city-state [τίς γὰρ τοιαῦτ ἄν ὀργίζοιτ’ ἔπη / κλύων, ἃ νῦν σὺ τήνδ’ ἀτιμάζεις πόλιν]” (339-40)? Teiresias, as seer, plays the same role in this scene that the layered fictions do in Roth and Coetzee’s novels: they communicate a sense of error—a sense of the gap between word and deed—that plagues the protagonists of the drama, and by extension, the audience in the *theatron*.

In Roth’s novels, this sense of error is neatly captured by a phrase Zuckerman uses to represent the Swede’s thoughts, referring to the “tragic detour [the] lives [of his friends and family] had taken” (American Pastoral 410). By this point in the novel, the reader is well aware that the phrase “tragic detour” is merely an oxymoron. Throughout Zuckerman’s narrative of the Swede’s life, we have been presented with an axiom of tragic living: once chance or necessity leads one off the imagined path of rational choice, there is no going back. The veering is always the path itself, never a detour or sidetrack. In the final pages of the novel, Zuckerman takes stock of his childhood hero and the thwarted life of misfortune that loomed on the other side of the Swede’s charmed adolescence:

You think you can protect your family and you cannot protect even yourself. There seemed to be nothing left of the man who could not be diverted from his task, who neglected no one in his crusade against disorder, against the abiding problem of human error and insufficiency... (421)

The Swede’s error was that he did not make errors and therefore could not understand their normative incarnations. In other words, his inability to read life constitutes his ingrained deficiency of character, a deficiency imagined and defined by a narrator who confesses to a similar deficiency.

This is how Roth's tragedies operate. Unflaggingly aware of the shortcomings to which readers, authors and human beings remain prone and oblivious, Roth insinuates himself into his novels as a *tertium quid* with the power to triangulate his created creators and creations. As Zuckerman declares outright in *I Married a Communist*, " 'It's all error...There's only error. *There's* the heart of the world. Nobody finds his life. That *is* life" (319). If everything is error, the act of spectatorship is as tragic as living itself, which is another axiom of which the reader grows aware toward the end of each novel. Zuckerman constantly reminds us that seeing is nearly understanding's antonym. He frames the bulk of *American Pastoral's* narrative within the superstructure of his mythologizing reminiscence and contorted inferences, misconstruing the Swede's presentation as its reality. Harkening back to his childhood worship of the Swede, when the future novelist would gaze in admiration at his hero's noble heroics on the football field, Zuckerman asks himself and his readers, "Why clutch at him? What's the matter with you? There's nothing here but what you're looking at. He's all about being looked at. Always was...You're craving depths that don't exist" (*American Pastoral* 39).

Zuckerman's challenge, or, rather, Roth's, is to acknowledge the unavoidable *hamartia* of the interpreting spectator so thoroughly that we, the readers, will not inherit it. The gambit is that the genre of the novel, which incorporated the stage monologue into a more self-conscious approximation of subjectivity and thought, and which, in recent decades, embraced increasingly more nuanced layers of formal self-awareness and irony, can avoid the perceptual pitfalls to which theater's writers and audience supposedly remain vulnerable.

For this reason, Zuckerman is careful to state outright the futility of an author's pursuit of truth. Discussing the past with the Swede's brother Jerry, a self-confessedly imperious surgeon, Zuckerman asks if the medical profession makes error more enduring. Jerry responds, "Don't have to worry about it. The operating room turns you into somebody who's never wrong. Much like writing" (63).

Zuckerman quickly corrects this error: "Writing turns you into somebody who's always wrong. The illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on" (63).

His frankness about the unavoidable wrongness of literary creation attains a certain level of generic self-awareness, which is why, reflecting on Jerry's cocksure objectivity, Zuckerman ironically contrasts his authorial deficiency in the genre of tragedy itself: "...unlike most people whose dear one winds up as a model for the life-drawing class, Jerry Levov would probably be amused rather than outraged by my failure to grasp the Swede's tragedy the way he did" (75).

In a novel whose driving theme revolves around shifting definitions of error—the *hamartia* of the writer, reader, actor, maker and father—the artist's tragic flaw is to overlook the tragic story, to fail to mine the depths of imagined subjectivity and self-revelation for the tragedy within.¹³ Eventually, though, after an entire narrative devoted to recounting the Job-like sufferings of its hero-protagonist, Zuckerman asks a particularly Job-like question. In fact, this question forms the last paragraph of *American Pastoral*:

¹³ Even in apparently tangential scenes related to the glove industry in which the Levovs earn their fortune, error looms large. When the Swede and his father visit the Italian family that stitches their gloves, we learn that, "While his mother worked she taught the boy about all the mistakes that can occur in the making of a glove, mistakes she had been taught to recognize as her husband's wife" (222).

“And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs” (423)?

For the preceding 423 pages, the reader has been taught the unassailable answer to this now rhetorical question: nothing is wrong with their life. *American Pastoral*, with its repeated plaudits for the Greatest Generation, is a threnody for foundational values weakly devolved by a society and government to a more corrupt, mendacious and sensationalist age. The question of what error Zuckerman’s protagonists might or might not have committed matters because these characters serve as analogues to the writer. He describes his failures as a novelist in the same terms — the same tragic terms — as those with which he chronicles his characters recognitions and downfalls. Sitting on his porch, listening to Murray—now in his nineties—tell the story of Ira and Eve, Zuckerman remembers that his former high school teacher is in his small Berkshires outpost in order to continue his studies of Shakespeare. This thought vexes Zuckerman:

Yet that a man so close to oblivion should be preparing homework for the next day, educating himself for a life that had all but run out—that the puzzle continued to puzzle him, that clarification remained a vital need—more than surprised me: a sense of *error* settled over me, bordering on shame, for living to myself and keeping everything at such a distance. But then the sense of *error* vanished. (*I Married a Communist* 151 italics mine)

This admission gives us insight into Zuckerman’s conception of error. Zuckerman often details the circumstances and objectives of his withdrawal from the commotion of “life,” which is to say, from other existences besides those that haunt his novels. His sense of “error,” then, springs from a suspicion that he has erred in the etymological sense of the verb *errare*, wandering off the path, led astray from what is right. Zuckerman might feel that his self-imposed exile from the rumble tumble of emotion and desire would provide the ideal “distance” from which to create characters whose subjectivities and errors he

can envision, control and therefore understand. But at what point do these fictionalized existences themselves lose the touchstone of lived experience such that they transmute into a spurious solipsism? In the sense that he is both character and novelist, Zuckerman can never know the answer to this question. But in all three novels of the trilogy, we learn that Zuckerman, failing to mine the depths of his characters' subjectivities, is forced to get the ulterior stories from other people or from his own imagination. Leveraging these methods, he is still unable to discern the causes of his characters' behaviors, which inevitably eluded his preliminary investigations.

The only "answer" Zuckerman allows himself to his own ceaseless questioning is that it is the lack of an answer, the incomprehensibility of life's provocations, that at least partially prompts the Swede, Ira and Silk to pursue through error their allotted ends. The mysteriousness of the Sphinx does not lie in the riddle she poses her challengers, but in the aporia engendered by its answer. Oedipus can respond to the philosopher's generalized question, but not to the particularized novelistic truth of his own identity. While he knows that "man" crawls in infancy, walks as an adult and shuffles with a walking stick in age, Oedipus does not recognize himself as the specific object of his search. In this same sense, Coleman Silk, teaching and reading Sophocles, recognizes the applicability of *Oedipus Tyrannus* to "man," but not himself. People make tragic mistakes because there is no specific self-directed answer to the generalized question.

Each of Roth's protagonists isolates himself with the riddle of his own tragedy. Silk will not reveal that he is black, even when his university recklessly accuses him of racism. Ira cannot see that the murder he once committed and now hides feeds the anger and self-righteousness that fuel his ideological fervor. After his daughter bombs the post

office and then disappears, the Swede is left to puzzle out the whys and wherefores of her disaster. Rita, the young woman who arrives at his factory to torment the Swede, embodies the enigma of imperceptible causation: "...if [the Swede] could get her to stay and not go, if he could keep on talking about gloves to her, about gloves, about skins, about his horrible riddle, implore her, beg her, *Don't leave me alone with this horrible riddle*" (American Pastoral 131).

Throughout his trilogy, Roth focuses on error's power to reconcile word and deed. Human error, because constituent to both fiction and reality, serves as a hypostatizing bridge between the two. Zuckerman reflects on this power at the very beginning of the trilogy, in *American Pastoral*. He asks if, considering the abject unknowability of human beings, we should all sequester ourselves as monkish authors, "...summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with out ignorance very day" (35)? He answers his own question, asserting that "living" never involves getting people right, that mistaken appraisals of others is the necessary condition of our existence: "That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong" (35).

Zuckerman continually opts for the third-person plural in describing the human and artistic propensity to delusion and arrogance. At his reunion, Zuckerman meets a man, Ira Posner (not to be confused with Ira Ringold of *I Married a Communist*), whose childhood memories in no way tally with Zuckerman's. Addressing his readers, Zuckerman declares, "So you don't have to look much further than Ira and me to see why we go through life with a generalized sense that everybody is wrong except us" (55). The

novelist Zuckerman, complicit with his characters' tendency to falsely gauge others, delineates the role that memory plays in shaping our narratives and thus ourselves

...each of us remembers and forgets in a pattern whose labyrinthine windings are an identification mark no less distinctive than a fingerprint—it's no wonder that the shards of reality one person will cherish as a biography can seem to seem to someone else...to be a willful excursion into mythomania. (55)

And just as Zuckerman's protagonists trace the fingerprint of oblivion and memory back to an imaginary original moment, so too does Zuckerman himself, even if he is aware of such a journey's inherent impossibility. The reader is always aware that Zuckerman takes each protagonist's putative "shards of reality" and imagines them into an existence that might resemble truth. His ironic awareness of his task then becomes the reader's ironic awareness, just as, with *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the dramatic ironies enjoyed by the play's spectators must eventually collapse into the black hole of Oedipus' own self-knowledge. The dramatic ironies of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in the culminating moment of Oedipus' *anagnorisis*, redirect themselves to the audience, which now must recognize the role it has played all along in the developing interrelation of tragic action and tragic utterance. Throughout the play, the language used to describe itself primarily centers on *logos* and *epos*, whereas, at the end of Oedipus' search for himself, he uses a word rooted in the human voice [αὐδῆ], reminding the audience that it has, all along, listened to the utterance [αὐδᾶν] of the unspeakable. But unlike Oedipus, we have known the deeds to which he gave ignorant utterance all along. The dramatic ironies that were supposed to distance us from Oedipus linked the audience to his benighted tragedy, making his moment of recognition its own.

The Subject and Object of Tragic Language

It is important to remember that it is only after Oedipus accuses Teiresias of having committed the murder of Laius that the blind seer discloses the truth of the Oedipus' crime and identity. In claiming that, "[Oedipus is] the profane polluter of this land" (Sophocles 353), Teiresias narrows the parallax gap between language and fact to a mere chink. Up until this point, the dramatic irony of the play has hinged on the gap between word and deed, which is why Oedipus, in resisting this collapse of the subject and object of his search, hews to a vocabulary centered on language and words. To delay the moment in which Oedipus becomes the deed to which the accusations of murder refer, he will cling to language. Accused of murder, Oedipus confesses that he did not understand the meaning of these word, and orders Teiresias to, "...say it again [ἀλλ' αὖθις φράσον]" (361). The moment of tragedy, in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, is the moment of linguistic, spectatorial and ironic convergence, when words and deeds are finally reconciled, and the protagonists, chorus and spectators all share the same consciousness of the past and present. The moment that Oedipus integrates the traces of his past into his present, he becomes, simply, the "doer of terrors [δεινὰ δρᾶσας]" (1327).

His tragedy, he realizes, has always been a tragedy of duality. Toward the end of the play, in his final speech to the Chorus before Creon arrives, Oedipus laments the doubling of "the deeds he has done [ἔργα δρᾶσας]" (1402). He calls out in the vocative, "O marriage, marriage [ὦ γάμοι γάμοι]" (1403), as if the reiteration were needed to designate his mother's double matrimony. After lamenting his double marriage for having exposed to "men the most disgraceful *deeds* [ἔργα]" (1408, italics mine), Oedipus embodies what are now mutually apposite words and deeds, and fulminates against the

genre he inhabits. To censure the utterance [αὐδῶν] that transmits the horrors of lived experience, the doing [δοῶν] of appalling deeds, is to censure tragedy and therefore implicate the audience listening in on the literal enactment of language.

Roth and Coetzee's novels are both obsessed with language, and both trace the eventual collapse of word into deed. Their protagonists are novelists, classicists and literature professors, and even their minor characters serve as a barometer for the interconnection of words and deeds. It comes as no surprise, for example, that Silk's fate is ultimately determined by a fellow literature professor, Delphine Roux, whose facility with language trumps his own. During his extended professional conflicts with Delphine Roux, Silk will lament that the language of criticism has divorced itself from the realms of story and lived experience. In mocking the academic's belief that theory should not remain subservient to fictional narrative, Silk references Herodotus:

The critics voice is as legitimate as the voice of Herodotus. Narratology. The diegetic. The difference between diegesis and mimesis. The bracketed experience. The proleptic quality of the text. Coleman doesn't have to ask what all this means. He knows, in the original Greek meaning, what all the Yale words mean, and what all the École Normale Supérieure words mean. (The Human Stain 190)

If so, he would also understand the instabilities and ambiguities of Herodotean inquiry [ιστορίης] that inheres both diegetic and mimetic modes. Silk is consumed by the disparity between words and the "life" to which he believes they can and should refer. As a classical scholar, he also believes that origins — etymology as etiology — can close the gap between words and their referents. His dismissal of specialized theoretical language is rooted in his belief that words matter in so far as they remain cognate to reality. There is a special irony in Silk censuring Roux for her camouflaging use of jargon. After all, his identity as a white Jewish professor of Ancient Greek literature is fundamentally bound

to the foundational moment of his father's funeral, a moment in which he flees the felt power of oratory for a life of lies and of a language whose generalized origins he embraces as vigorously as he repudiates his own.

But it is Coetzee's *Disgrace* that most consistently and directly explores the tragic ironies inherent to language itself. David Lurie, the protagonist of *Disgrace*, is, like Silk, a professor driven from his university by scandal, his wife by divorce and much of his identity by a horrific event in South Africa's Eastern Cape, where he has sought refuge with his daughter Lucy. Coetzee's selectively omniscient narration, all in the present tense, lights upon Lurie's consciousness intermittently, providing only occasional ingress into his linguistic universe. It is, like that of Roth's protagonists, a universe obsessed with the clefts dividing words and things. After arriving at his daughter's farm, he accompanies her to the market, where he is amazed at how far removed he is from his former life:

Two weeks ago, he was in a classroom explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between drink and drink up, burned and burnt. The perfective, signifying an action through to its conclusion. How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I lived. (Coetzee 71)

At this point, before the catastrophe on which the novel hinges, Lurie deploys the perfective wryly, contrasting the object of his past pedantry to the present subject of his disgrace. In the first sentence from this passage, the narrator refers to the past Lurie, the Lurie two weeks before the present action, in the third-person. The next sentence mimics the structure of the pedant's overweening precision of language. In the final two sentences, the narrator infiltrates Lurie's thoughts, representing his astonishment that not just the words in Romantic poetry, but his "life" can have been brought to its conclusion.

Because the novel's narration is in the present tense, any instance of the past tense will be charged with Lurie's solipsistic preoccupation.

Perpetually conscious of how language operates in the post-apartheid society in which he now lives, Lurie worries that English itself can no longer produce a syntax and vocabulary commensurate with the linguistic realities of South Africa. Lucy's black neighbor and occasional assistant, Petrus, embodies, for Lurie, this linguistic fissure:

More and more [Lurie] is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. (117)

Here, the narrator exposes Lurie's faith that words can betoken truth, if only spoken in a European mother tongue. It is of course a blind faith, in that Lurie cannot recognize that he is his language's dinosaur, having settled (the perfective again) into the fossilized residuum of anthologized English literature. Lurie's mistake is to think that the present realities of South Africa are no longer commensurate with the "articulatedness" of the Romantic poetry he taught at university, rather than the reverse. It is why, within the trebled rephrasing of the word "articulate," Lurie proceeds from the more to less specific, from multiple instances of a single "articulation," to the abstract substantive "articulateness," to, finally, the always already achieved form of articulation, the awkward "articulatedness."

Despite Lurie's awareness that, in literature, the particular should be given preference over the abstract, his taste runs to the latter. It is to the abstract that Lurie clings when faced with the new realities and moralities of existence on the Eastern Cape where poverty, aging, rape, aggression and death obtrude on his consciousness. After his daughter's rape, and his subsequent anomie and disgrace, Lurie ponders a realm of ethics

that has so far eluded his attention: animal rights. Lost to his former life, Lurie surprises himself by volunteering at the local Animal Welfare clinic, where Lucy's friend Bev Shaw cares for the stray dogs roaming the Eastern Cape. Bev also assumes the responsibility for putting the unclaimed, unwanted, sick or superannuated dogs to sleep. Lurie reflects on what it means to kill a dog as an act of ethical probity, wondering, once again, how language corroborates and mitigates the disgrace and despondency:

When people bring a dog to kill they do not say straight out, 'I have brought you this dog to kill,' but that is what is expected: that they will dispose of it, make it disappear, dispatch it to oblivion. What is being asked for is, in fact, *Lösung* (German always at hand with an appropriately blank abstraction): sublimation, as alcohol is sublimed from water, leaving no residue, no aftertaste. (142)

The German word both means and exemplifies the abstraction that Lurie oddly hypostatizes into actuality. The narrator, and to a certain extent, Lurie, imply that the “people” who arrive at the clinic do not have German at hand to represent what is, “in fact,” the case. They do not know what they are asking for, but Lurie does, which is why he repeats the third-person “to be” verb twice, first to form the progressive aspect, and then to establish a neat equivalence. The unknown object of “people’s” requests is not *like Lösung*; it is *Lösung*. Of course, Lurie would also know that *Lösung* is critical to the formation of the Nazi word *Endlösung*, the Final Solution. In a novel that questions the morality of treating animals as if they were superfluous, as if their deaths merely constituted a “solution” in the chemical sense — in which a “minor component” disappears — Lurie’s use of *Lösung* would hardly be naïve.¹⁴ Would he be aware, though,

¹⁴In this sense, *Disgrace* is similar to W.G. Sebald’s novels, in which the notion of tragedy encompasses animals as much as human beings. As Stanley Corngold has written, “The modern sense of tragedy does not turn on the distinction between the ‘great’ man and any other man and woman. Animals—the dog, the Chinese quail—are driven insane through incarceration. Like his frère semblable, Sebald enlarges our

that the word he has slighted as a “blank abstraction” elicits the tangible image of alcohol and water? Is he carefully manipulating interior ironies in abstracting the concrete from the professedly abstract? If so, Lurie would partially redeem *logos*, allowing it, through ironic inversion, to substantiate experience.¹⁵

Both the narrator and Lurie are conscious not just of how words correspond to reality, but how tragic language in particular resonates with experience. After the tribulations and horrors of his stay on Lucy’s farm, Lurie decides to visit the father of the student with whom he had had an affair. Invited into the family’s intensely middle-class household. Mr. Isaacs, the father, remarks, staring intensely at Lurie: “ ‘So...how are the mighty fallen!’ (167)’ In response, the narrator muses: “Fallen? Yes, there has been a fall, no doubt about that. But *mighty*? Does *mighty* describe him? He thinks of himself as obscure and growing obscurer. A figure from the margins of history” (167, italics author’s).

In Lurie’s post-lapsarian phase of life, he recognizes his own insignificance while maintaining his fascination with the denotative capacity of language. He refuses the conjunctive perfect, “fallen,” that describes his state of being, and instead puts forward an alternative construction, passive and disinterested, in which he himself is only circumstantially complicit. He concedes the existence of an event, but not that event’s existence in his memory. And just as the narration doggedly proceeds in the present tense, so does Lurie’s conception of his life. But the cliché, “how the mighty have

consciousness of the scope of creaturely suffering.” Stanley Corngold, "Sebald's Tragedy," *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008) 234.

¹⁵ My colleague Alan Itkin helped me greatly in understanding the ulterior meanings of the word *Lösung*.

fallen,” suggests that, once fallen, the mighty are no longer mighty. Lurie does not care about the degradation implicit in his self-acknowledged fall. He instead protests the incongruity of the word “mighty,” in the present, to his current conception of himself. The word mighty — twice italicized — is not congruous with the way he “thinks of himself.”

Just as the novels explore the tragedy that erupts within the fissures between language and life, and between words and referents, so do they also explore the vital encounters of words and subjectivities. These novels’ narrators, as much as their protagonists, struggle to calibrate their subjective frames of mind with those they encounter, and the impossibility of this effort underpins both their falls and recognitions. Lurie, for example, experiences a sequence of burbling epiphanies in his attempt, post-disaster, to write an opera about Lord Byron’s life. On the farm, before he and his daughter are assaulted, Lurie could not muster the inspiration to begin his project. Only alone in the animal welfare clinic, largely bereft of hope and sex, does Lurie imagine the opening phrase of his opera. He imagines Byron:

...alone on the stage, [drawing] a breath to sing. He is on the point of setting off for Greece. At the age of thirty-five he has begun to understand that life is precious.

Sunt lacrimae rerum, at mentem mortalia tangunt: those will be Byron’s words, he is sure of it. (162, italics author’s)

These words—foreign and italicized, as always in *Disgrace*—hold special importance to Lurie. This phrase, which neither the narrator nor Lurie gloss, is Aeneas’ famous exclamation before the murals of the Carthaginian temple depicting the horrific aftermath of the Trojan War: “These are the tears of things, and our mortality touches the soul”

(*Aeneid* 1.462).¹⁶ This Virgilian moment of *ekphrasis*, a referential tautology in which art describes art, ironically contrasts and supplements the preciousness that Byron belatedly sees in life. Whereas the Carthaginian murals attest to life's precariousness and futile anguish, to the Byron bubbling in Lurie's imagination—a Byron who sings Virgil's words abstracted (a kind of literary *Lösung*) from the Latin poet's epic—the tears fall only for a melancholia within the mind, no longer prompted by the power of visual representation. For Lurie himself though, even in this moment of burgeoning literary creation, Virgil's phrase redounds back to its source. Lurie the librettist gazes in his *mentem* at a passage from *The Aeneid*, a passage in which the protagonist gazes at pictures of the Trojan War. It is as if the doubled *ekphrases* operate as a mirror in which artistic creation reflects back upon itself. This is not a Borgesian game, though, but an important step in Lurie's increasing awareness of the tragic life that has always loomed beyond the language of literature. Virgil's words “touch [Lurie's] mind” right after he has explained to Bev the nature of his former work. He was a scholar not a teacher, he explains, devoted more to “dead people” than his living students. Throughout the novel, these revenants include Virgil, Dante, William Blake, Byron, Wordsworth and Dickens. On the heels of Lurie's joyless disclosure, the first of these dead people finally speaks through him rather than to him.

Lurie's gives his next abstracted line, from Leopardi's poem, “Night Song of a Wandering Sheppard in Asia [*Canto Notturmo di un Pastore Errante dell'Asia*]” to Teresa, the lover in Italy whom Byron abandoned when he left to fight for Greece's

¹⁶ All translations from Virgil's *Aeneid* are my own. I use the most recent Oxford Classical Text, Virgil, *Opera; Recognovit Breuique Adnotatione Critica Instruxit R. A. B. Mynors*, Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis (Oxford: Oxonii, 1969).

independence from the Ottoman Empire. The line, which Coetzee leaves untranslated, and which he writes for Teresa to sing in a “voice barely above a whisper,” is, “*Che vuol dir...Che vuol dir questa solitudine immense. Ed io...che sono?*” [“What does it mean...What does it mean, this immense solitude? And who am I?”] (Leopardi 213)¹⁷

Although he does not translate the line, the narrator does subtly incorporate the Italian into the opera’s narrative, just as he had integrated the word “*Lösung*” into Lurie’s story. In “Night Song,” the poet apostrophizes the moon, comparing its life to that of a shepherd. In the opening stanza, the poet asks, “Tell me, o moon, what is the shepherd’s life worth to him, and what is yours to you [*Dimmi, o luna: a che vale / Al pastor la sua vita, / La vostra vita a voi?*]” (Leopardi). An old and broken man subject to painful wandering, the shepherd can find respite only in the “horrible, immense abyss [*Abisso orrido, immense*]” that serves as the poem’s metaphor for death. The third stanza describes the plights of the universalized man the shepherd represents, noting that, after a painful birth, often resulting in an early death, the man’s parents attempt to assuage his torments, “With acts and with words [*Con atti e con parole*].” But the poet—like Sophocles—wonders why we are born at all, when life is full of such tragedy. He offers no answer, but turns, in the fourth stanza, to question the moon, which understands man’s lot in a way man never can:

But you, you lonely eternal pilgrim,
Who, thoughtful as you are, maybe understand
This earthly life, what
Its pains, its sufferings mean,
what this death means.
(59-65)

¹⁷ All translations from Leopardi are mine.

It is in this same stanza that the poet — and in Lurie’s libretto, Teresa — inquires into the meaning of our immense solitude and of ourselves. Lurie does not include the line that immediately follows, but he surely knows it: “In this way, I converse with myself [*Così meco ragiono*]” (90)... The poet, in employing the verb *ragionare* (to reason, philosophize, argue, converse, discuss, etc), a verb that spans a similar connotative range as that of *logos*, dismisses the worth of his language and thoughts, which cannot help him mine the depths of his existence and mortality.

Leopardi’s is the poem that provides the context for the words that Teresa sings, that Lurie writes in his libretto and that the narrator writes into Lurie’s mind. To quote a line of poetry is to condemn the rest of the poem from which it came to silence. In this particular case, Lurie has silenced a poet’s lamentation that meaning remains impervious to language and thought. The silence and “immense solitude” facing Teresa and Lurie now refer as much to Leopardi’s poem as it does to the moon or sky. And thus it refers as well to the futility of language, both for Leopardi’s poet, and for Lurie, who has written, “...a long, halting cantilena hurled by Teresa into the empty air” (Coetzee 214). This passage comes near the end of *Disgrace*, and indicates the degree to which Lurie fails to frame his tragedy outside the barren confines of his inherited tragic language. The narrator cannot escape the palimpsest of canonical tragedies that underlie the tragic novel. It is this artistic self-consciousness with which both Roth and Coetzee grapple. Lurie’s mind wanders recklessly back through his past relationships. Each vision arrives, according to the narrator, “Like leaves blown on the wind, pell-mell” (192)... The language comes to Lurie passively, from Dante’s *Inferno* (“As the leaves fall in autumn, one after the other [*Come d’autunno si levan le foglie / l’una appresso de l’altra*]”

(III.112-13) and from *The Aeneid* (“thick as the forest’s leaves which drop with autumn’s first frost [*quam multa in silvis autumnni frigore primo lapsa cadunt folia*]” (Virgil 6.309-10).¹⁸ Lurie, “holds his breath, willing the visions to continue” (*Disgrace* 192). His need for volition cannot make them real, since he does not know the source of the visions. He asks, “Where do moments like this come from? Hypnagogic, no doubt; but what does that explain? If he is being led, then what is doing the leading” (192)? In the same sense that he does not recognize the literary sources of his own thoughts — he mentions neither Virgil nor Dante — Lurie cannot locate the source of his visions, and therefore leaves his questions unanswered. But his question, in and of itself, provides answers. The passive form of the conditional clause echoes Lurie’s passivity in the face of his visions.

The passive construction of Lurie’s visions and adaptations of literary material provides a key to understanding the relationship between tragic action and tragic reading in all of the novels under discussion in this chapter. Kenneth Burke, in *A Grammar of Motives*, discusses what is inherently paradoxical—concurrently active and passive—in the expression, “the motivation of an act:”

Strictly speaking, the act of an agent would be the movement not of one moved but a mover (a mover of the self or of something else by the self). For an act is by definition active, whereas to be moved (or motivated) is by definition passive. Thus, if we quizzically scrutinize the expression, the motivation of an act,” we note that it implicitly contains the paradox of substance...the concept of activation implies a kind of passive-behind-the-passive; for an agent who is “motivated by his passions” would be “moved-by-his-movedness,” or “acted upon by his state of being acted upon.” (40)

In his study of the passive and active in Greek tragedy, Burke focuses primarily on the forces of acting, suffering and learning that hypostatize motivation into fact (42). But Burke does not address one central motivational source that contains within itself the

¹⁸ These translations from Dante’s *Inferno* are my own.

same “paradox of substance” underlying the grammar (in Burke’s sense) of tragedy: the force of language itself. Tragic language expresses the kinetic involutions of passivity that Burke outlines, but in a different sense. On stage, speech is always subject to the distortions and disassociations of dramatic irony. The protagonist reads omens, stories and reports against the grain of the audience’s putatively superior knowledge. In effect, the protagonist’s interpretive errors constitute misreadings in so far as they deviate from the accuracy of the audience’s interpretations. But as the gap narrows between the protagonists’ misreadings and the audience’s passive omniscience, error is transferred to the *theatron*. Dramatic irony necessarily inheres this paradoxical tendency to establish both distance and bonds between the audience and the fiction enacted on stage. The question becomes, how does the nature of this nexus translate into other genres of literature? In other words, how do the dramatic ironies at work in ancient Greek tragedy operate in literary modes that communicate, in whatever unavoidably debatable sense, elements of tragedy?

It has been the purpose of this chapter to explore this line of inquiry. In the same sense that *Oedipus Tyrannus* provides a model for the misreadings, dramatic ironies and linguistic obsessions that dominate the American trilogy and *Disgrace*, so too do these novels provide a model for the enactment of modern adaptation. Both Roth and Coetzee echo the misreadings of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, creating tragic readers whose own errant readings eventually fold their literary experience into tragic living. Just as Oedipus’ long delayed moment of recognition will obliterate the dramatic ironies that had cushioned the spectators’ lives from the tragedy on stage, Roth and Coetzee fictionalized tragic dramas make the process of modern adaptation explicit and thus abrogate the distance between

the reader and the novel's embedded tragedies. In all of these novels, the reader inherits a series of misreadings that originate with the protagonists, but are transmitted by way of the interior novelists and then the "real" novelists, Roth and Coetzee. This chain of literary error links the reader to the reader and then the tragic spectator, who both have lost the benefit of dramatic irony that provided detachment from the tragedy on the page or stage.

Chapter Three

Greek Gods in Baltimore

“The gods will not save you.” – Police Commissioner Ervin H. Burrell,
The Wire

“...it's the Postmodern institutions that are the gods. And they are gods.
And no one is bigger.” – David Simon, creator, producer and head writer,
The Wire

Although a television series about drug dealers and police investigators in Baltimore might seem an unlikely candidate for a modern adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy, David Simon has made repeated claims for just such a literary pedigree. Simon has often and publically stated that he intended his show as a “Greek” tragedy for our contemporary era. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Simon outlined his ambition:

[We've] ripped off the Greeks: Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides. Not funny boy—not Aristophanes. We've basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy, and applied it to the modern city-state...What we were trying to do was take the notion of Greek tragedy, of fated and doomed people, and instead of these Olympian gods, indifferent, venal, selfish, hurling lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no good reason—instead of those guys whipping it on Oedipus or Achilles, it's the postmodern institutions...those are the indifferent gods. (Talbot 4)

During the entire filming of *The Wire*'s first two seasons, and as he wrote the remaining three, Simon read through the entire canon of ancient Greek tragedy, starting with Aeschylus and continuing on through Sophocles and Euripides (Simon). Simon's notion of a “rigged game” echoes the articulated concerns and observations of the show's

characters, who comprehend the fact if not the implication of its deistic fatalism. But their understanding of this “game” is demonstrably complicated by their own “angst and machinations,” their own desires, emotions, quirks and choices. In another interview, Simon made another claim, not only for his show’s ancient Greek pedigree, but for a pedigree that more accurately reflects modern political and social conditions than tragic drama influenced by either Shakespeare or Chekhov:

The drama that I reread before I started *The Wire* was not Shakespeare, it wasn’t Chekhov and it wasn’t O’Neill, it wasn’t all the stuff that is rooted in the struggle of the individual against himself. The stuff that spoke to me is the Greek drama in which fated and doomed protagonists are confronted by a system that is indifferent to their heroism, to their individuality, to their morality. But instead of Olympian gods that are throwing lightning [sic] bolts and fucking people up for the fun of it, we have post-modern institutions. The police department is the god, the drug trade is the god, the school system is the god, city hall is the god, the election is the god. Capitalism is the ultimate god in *The Wire*. Capitalism is Zeus. (Ducker)

Moving through the five seasons of *The Wire*, the audience bears witness to an all-powerful, all-pervasive free market that enervates and corrupts governmental and media institutions. Political aspirants receive cash contributions from drug organizations. Excluded from the mainstream marketplace, adolescents join these drug organizations. Crushed by Reaganite anti-labor policies, the stevedore’s union is forced to support itself with illicit drug money. Sabotaged by the No Child Left Behind Act—an ideological product of free-market evangelicals—the middle schools fail the children in their charge. Barraged by corporate buy-outs and media consolidation, the fourth estate can no longer provide its mandated, salutary check on abuses of power. David Simon, in analogizing these pernicious market forces with the Olympian deities, makes a number of subsidiary claims. While claiming outright that capitalism enjoys a power similar to that of Zeus (Ducker), he also asserts that *The Wire*’s protagonists are as tethered to their fate as those

of *Antigone* and *Medea* (Barton); that postmodern institutions such as the police department or school bureaucracy constitute contemporary iterations of the Olympian pantheon (Hornby); that these gods and institutions are equally powerful and equally indifferent to the mortals whose lives they sway (Talbot); that *The Wire* represents the ancient Greek as opposed to the Shakespearean tradition of tragedy, which, like previous HBO shows such as *The Sopranos* or *Deadwood*, is driven less by fatalism than by its characters' force of personality (Sepinwall) (Poniewozik) (O'Rourke); that the "fundamentals of Greek tragedy" are replicated in capitalism's triumph over labor (Littleton); that the modern subject is unaccustomed or even opposed to tragic fatalism (Hornby 71); and that *The Wire* also shares structural similarities with tragic novels such as *Moby-Dick* (1:1 [Commentary](#)).¹⁹ Of all these many claims, it is interesting that Simon only draws structural or formal comparison when he discusses the nineteenth century novel.²⁰ When he likens his show to Greek tragedy, Simon alludes almost exclusively to fate, gods and characters, as if his purpose were to cleave out such "content" from "ancient drama" and inject it into the genre of the novel.

¹⁹ For all references to episodes from *The Wire*, please refer to the Episode Listing at the end of this chapter, rather than to the dissertation's Bibliography.

²⁰ Eagleton has argued that the novel, as a genre, can be seen as a bridge between antiquated and postmodern modes. In comparing Stendhal's portrayal of society's "superstructure" and Balzac's of its "base," Eagleton asserts that:

If everyday life can be heroic in the latter case but not the former, its because Stendhal's bailiwick is the institutions of the court, church and state, of political machinations in high places, all of which in post-revolutionary society are now incorrigibly squalid and self-interested; whereas Balzac writes not just of bourgeois society but of capitalist society... ([Sweet Violence](#) 185)

The Wire, in effect combines the Balzacian and Stendhalian modes. In portraying the cannibalistic relationship between capitalist society and the "superstructure" institutions, *The Wire* is able to shift its focus up and down the societal strata of Baltimore.

As a genre and medium, episodic television represents a violent shift in the means according to which tragic spectatorship is created. In form and practice, the television audience engages the screen in similar ways as both the novel's reader and the play's spectators might. Sitting at home alone or with a few friends, the television spectator watches her drama as a partially atomized and private experience, and yet shares the experience with thousands if not millions of other viewers. Nicole Loraux, describing theater in fifth-century Athens, describes, "the specifically theatrical experience of being a spectator, understanding the singular definite article 'a' not as the designation of a singularity but as the expression of a neutral identity" (Loraux 89-90). Cable television combines the plural "a" of ancient Greek tragedy with the singular "the" of bourgeois reading. Although *The Wire* struggled to find an audience, it produced episodes that were seen by nearly two million viewers (Zurawik), many of whom comment on blogs and other online forums for discussion (Edgerton). Episodic television combines the serialized structure of the nineteenth century novel, while drawing formal elements from cinema. And yet, critics of *The Wire* have remarked on the show's structural similarities to the novel, describing it as the "visual equivalent of literature" (Raphael), which, "pursues the form of the modern, multi-POV novel" (Hornby) and as, "the closest that moving pictures have come so far to the depth and nuance of the novel" (Kulish). The majority of these comments, by the show's critics and creators alike, assert that *The Wire* requires of its audience more sustained attention and interpretation than is normally exacted by a television series.

The Wire establishes itself in relation to its tragic spectatorship through formal means that are simultaneously literary and cinematographic. The prominent echoing of

epigraphs and identical lines of dialogue within episodes and throughout the five seasons is, along with the complex interplay of characters, a profoundly literary mode of manipulating time and multiplying perspectives. And yet, the cinematographical staging of layered spectation allows the audience to voyeuristically set its gaze on wiretap investigations that, themselves, set their gaze on the lives of others. *The Wire*'s portmanteau composition of literary and cinematographical modes conveys its particular vision of the tragic through a literal and metaphorical "cable." Like *Disgrace* and Roth's novels, *The Wire* embeds the form and practice of spectatorship within its fiction, and thus make its audience conscious of its roles in both the onscreen tragedy and within the scope of the tragic reality to which the show points.

Neither of *The Wire*'s creators have specified a particular ancient Greek play or playwright as a primary influence. David Simon alludes to a generalized "ancient Greek tragedy," whose common attribute he defines as the irrevocability of fate. It would not be difficult to apply Aristotelian criteria to *The Wire*, either to corroborate or contradict the show's claims to tragic pedigree. For this reason, there is no one play whose thematic content would suffice as a point of comparison or contrast. Each of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides' plays contain elements of plot, character or theme that might have some bearing on *The Wire*. But this chapter—like those that precede and follow—argues that *The Wire* assumes the nature of the tragic by virtue of homologous formal structures, and it is in consideration of these structures that *The Wire* finds its most useful tragic antecedent in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

The primary structural elements that define the tragic correspondence between *The Wire* and its audience—the epigraphs drawn from a character's utterance later on in

the show; the repeated lines of dialogue; the shifting, multiplied perspectives on single events—all require spectators to assimilate and syncretize heterogeneous but interrelated interpretations back and forth across its internal representation of time. In the *Oresteia*, the powerful reticulation of symbols works to produce a similar result. Clustered symbols—light, darkness, eagles, nets, snakes—reconcile varying and even apparently antithetical concepts, linking them across three plays. In the beginning of *Agamemnon*, a watchman spies light within a darkness whose meaning the spectators will eventually understand even if he does not. Only at the end of *The Eumenides* does *The Oresteia*'s audience grasp the meaning of scenes throughout *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*. By reconciling the proleptic readings of individual symbols with a retrospective understanding of the plays' reticulated meanings, the spectator is able to grasp the nature of the tragedy. Because each symbol contains past and future significance, the apparent progression of light toward dark—and of the Furies progressing from agents of vengeance to kindly protectors of the city—is thrown into question.

It is this structural ouroboros that defines *The Wire* and its resonances with ancient Greek tragedy. *The Wire*'s audience reads the epigraphs that open each episode with a partial and contingent understanding, that the contextual information provided by its dialogic source will either supplement or alter. Regardless, the spectator will remember back to her partial understanding of the epigraph and share in the blindness of *The Wire*'s protagonist who, in uttering the line, remains unaware of its generalized, abstracted meaning. Just as the Watchman describes and shares the spectators' bemusement, the epigraphs in *The Wire* communicate a state that vacillates between incomprehension and knowledge, turning dramatic irony on its head.

These instabilities of knowledge and meaning are what finally blur the perceived divide between fact and fiction, and therefore, between tragedy and the tragic. As the spectator of *The Wire* grows more aware of herself as spectator, she can no longer assume the distance provided by the omniscience of dramatic irony or the neat segregation of fiction and reality. Only when finally conscious of tragedy's artifices does the spectator grow aware of the realities of the tragic. Before delving more deeply into the mechanics of this final transference, it will be useful to take a closer look at what it is the *Oresteia* portrays.

Reading Backwards Through the Oresteia

In the last utterance of the *Oresteia*, the custodians of the Athenian temple offer a hymn that also stands as a command, calling on the chorus and audience to, "Cry out now on our song" (*Eumenides* 1047).²¹ The *Oresteia* is traditionally read as a paean to the advance of history, a celebration of civilization emerging from darkness, of deliberative justice from *lex talionis*, and peace from conflict. Hegel famously interpreted the *Eumenides* as an affirmation of eternal justice reconciling contradictory ethical claims (74). The third play in the sequence, the *Eumenides*, describes the establishment of a new social order.²² And yet, "to cry out [ὄλολύξατε]," also connotes the propitiatory ululation

²¹ All translations of *The Oresteia* are my own. I use the most recent Oxford Classical Text, Aeschylus, *Aeschyli Septem Quae Supersunt Tragoedias*, Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis, ed. Denys Page ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972).

²² The play culminates at the Areopagus, where a jury is split evenly between the condemnation and acquittal of Orestes. Athena casts the deciding vote, in favor of Orestes' advocate, Apollo. The Furies, who sought vengeance against Orestes, are outraged by the decision. To allay their wrath, Athena promises the Furies permanent worship, transforming the black wraiths into the Kindly Ones [Ἐμμένειδες], who will protect their people against the retributive elements of nature.

that accompanies the slaughter of sacrificial animals (Heath 46). It is possible to read the *Eumenides* as a eulogy for the establishment of the Argos League, which would later inspire Spartan retaliation, and therefore, eventually, the decline and fall of imperial Athens.

We know, as Aeschylus could only have suspected, that the prosperity [πανευτυχῆς] promised Athenians would be denied in the end.²³ Although Aeschylus wrote the *Oresteia* after the reform of the Areopagus, the alliance with Argos and the establishment of Periclean democracy (463-458 BCE), only a quarter century after the playwright's death, Athens would enter the first phase of the Peloponnesian War, the outcome of which would lead to the city-state's decline as an imperial power.

But within the text itself, we see that that the foundation of Athens' judicial institution required the sacrifice of the individual. A substrata of murdered human beings undergirds the Areopagus. Between the watchman's speech and the final choral hymn, Agamemnon, Cassandra, Clytaemestra and Aegisthus are all murdered. In this sense, it is as important to read the *Oresteia* backwards as forwards, and thus unearth each individual sacrificed for the sake of the institutionalization of judicial courts. In so doing, we can see how the three plays produce ironies similar to those that inform *The Wire*, a show that consistently and repetitively abrogates the kind of teleological vindication that critics have perhaps misleadingly imputed to the *Oresteia*.

The Dialogue Speaks Back: Epigraphs and Repetitions

²³ viz. *The Eumenides*, ln. 1044

Each episode of *The Wire* begins the same way. After an often thematically evocative scene, the opening sequence rolls, accompanied each season by a different version of Tom Wait’s “Way Down in the Whole.” Immediately after this opening sequence, the screen fades to black, revealing an isolated, unattributed epigraph, nearly always extracted from a piece of upcoming dialogue. Divested of a context with which it will soon be supplied, each epigraph serves as an elliptical but suggestive commentary on incidents, developing themes, episodes, seasons, and even the entire series.²⁴ The epigraph to the ninth episode of Season One—“Maybe we won” (1:9)—is illustrative of the ways in which *The Wire* makes general and specific meanings congruent and mutually reflective. This line is spoken by Herc, a low-level police officer who shows up at a project courtyard that normally serves as a hub for drug-sales. Herc turns to his partner, Carver and comments, “Maybe the whole thing's over and nobody bothered to tell us. Maybe we won” (1:9). The drug-dealers have all taken a day off to watch a yearly basketball game pitting East against West Baltimore, a game of which the audience but not Herc is already aware. Within the greater context of the episode and the series,

²⁴ The epigraphs often pertain to themes threaded throughout the entire series, such as the inevitability of fate. For example, see the following:

- “When it's not your turn.” -- McNulty (1:1)
- “The king stay the king.” -- D’Angelo (1:3)
- “all in the game...” -- Traditional West Baltimore (1:13)
- “Ain’t never gonna be what it was.” -- Little Big Roy (2:1)
- “It don’t matter that some fool say he different.” -- D’Angelo (2:6)
- “How come they don’t fly away?” -- Ziggy (2:8)
- “Don’t matter how many times you get burnt, you just keep doin’ the same.” -- Bodie (3:1)
- “Why you got to go and fuck with the program?” -- Fruit (3:4)
- “Lambs to the slaughter here.” -- Marcia Donnelly (4:1)
- “No one wins. One side just loses more slowly.” -- Prez (4:4)
- “The world goin’ one way, people another.” -- Poot (4:10)

though, his misinterpretation operates on as many levels. The irony of Herc's misunderstanding will resound throughout the entirety of *The Wire*. Herc's relationship to the meaning of what he has just uttered parallels ours to the epigraph for which it serves as a source. The lag separating any utterance from our reception of its occluded meaning produces its own independent significance. Once given the contextual framework for an episode's epigraph, the audience is forced to consider the gap that separates generalized, generalizable meaning from the specificity of a dramatic moment. Stripped of specificity and context, an episode's epigraph necessarily elicits a misreading that will, in turn, skew the audience's reading of the epigraph's source. Once it hears the epigraph uttered in the course of the episode, the audience reconciles the accrued, time-lapsed misreadings into an interpretation that establishes both spectatorial distance and familiarity.

This reconciliation of misreadings finds a parallel function and structure in the prologue [πρόλογος] to the *Agamemnon*. A watchman stands alone, on the roof of King Agamemnon's palace, speaking to no one but the audience. In his monologue, the watchman obliquely conveys information pertaining to the dramatic context of the play. Rare in ancient Greek theater, he is a lower-class character who speaks in the idiom of Aeschylus' lyric tragedy, in which the meaning and dramatic action are suffused into an interconnected reticulation of symbolic reference. Like the characters in *The Wire* who pronounce but fail to understand their lines of epigraphic dialogue, the watchman's speech is full of symbols whose thwarted meanings drive the thematic movement of the play. The watchman finishes his prelude with a gnomic line that itself serves as a Delphic gloss on *The Oresteia* as a whole:

...willingly I

speak to those who understand; if they do not understand, I forget
 everything.

 (*Agamemnon* 38-39)

The epigraphs of *The Wire* imply these same two categories, of knowledge and incomprehension, into which its protagonists and audience must necessarily fall. In a sense, they both—the watchman’s speech and *The Wire*’s epigraphs—call attention to meaning, and to our interpretive responsibility as meaning-makers.

Throughout *The Wire*, there are signal moments in which the audience both participates in and monitors the misreadings, false interpretations and ironic pronouncements that undermine the show’s protagonists. According to Eagleton, the Greek tragedians understood that we do not construe meaning subjectively, but within the confines of the symbolic order, which necessarily produces a “...dislocation between impact and intention which the Greeks know as *peripeteia*, suggesting not simply a reversal but a kind of irony, double-effect or boomeranging, aiming for one thing but accomplishing another” (108). Although Eagleton defines these three manifestations of *peripeteia* as exclusive to each other, in *The Wire*, they work in concert, rendering dramatic irony, echoic doubling and reversals mutually constitutive.

Most often this “triple-effect” occurs when the audience hears the epigraph in the show’s dialogue. Of *The Wire*’s central protagonists, it is Jimmy McNulty, the alcoholic, philandering and recalcitrant police officer with brilliant investigative instincts who often functions as a link within and among episodes. A telling example of this function occurs in the end of season two, in an episode titled “Collateral Danger.” When his partners, “Bunk” Moreland and Lester Freamon, force him to quaff fourteen shots of Jameson

whisky as punishment for foisting them with additional murder cases, McNulty, downing his final shot, slurs his way through the episode's epigraph: "Fuck it. They can chew you up, but they gotta spit you back out" (2:2).

This is a partial truth, whose ultimate meaning (or non-meaning) the audience will not understand until the series has run its course. The "they" to which McNulty refers is the Baltimore police hierarchy, whose central function, as portrayed in *The Wire*, is to stymie investigative creativity and success. This hierarchy's most representative figure is the Deputy Commissioner for Operations, Major Rawls, who has pledged to end McNulty's career as soon as possible. Throughout the course of the series, McNulty habitually achieves brilliant but Pyrrhic victories against the stultifying hegemony of the police department. Due to his wayward hubris and fragmentary self-awareness, McNulty's triumphs often undermine the lives of family, friends and even the investigations to which he had contributed his talents. His successes provoke disaster, and his disasters success, culminating in an illegal investigation in which McNulty falsifies crime in order to reroute public funds toward an illegal wiretap case. An unlikely candidate for tragic grandeur, McNulty suffers and benefits from the pressing desire to know, from the same instincts for relentless investigative efforts that propel Oedipus to his *agnorisis*, fall and blindness. Of all characters in *The Wire*, it is McNulty whose ingrained pertinacity most consistently and disastrously challenges the *force majeure* of institutional fate. It is his machinations beyond official channels that prompt the investigations that drive every season except the fourth. And it is he, with faults as flagrant as his curiosity and investigative aptitude, whom the institution's agents target most often for gratuitous retaliation.

McNulty's nemesis and equal, Stringer Bell, the lieutenant of West Baltimore's most powerful drug organization, serves as McNulty's tragic antithesis through the series. For the majority of the first three seasons, McNulty sacrifices everything but his life in order to investigate Bell, who continually avoids prosecution and capture. At the moment that McNulty is finally on the verge of tracing the city's drug money to Bell, the drug lieutenant is undone by fractures within his own organization. Sold out to independent agents seeking revenge, Bell is shot down in the same condo development that was to serve as his springboard to legitimacy. For McNulty, Bell's death forestalled the moment of triumph when the brilliant investigator would catch his brilliant quarry, and when the world would recognize this brilliance. Although he has been chewed up and spit out by the police department, his efforts are checked by an antagonist who was eventually consumed by the drug organization. This is a representative instance in which an epigraph only assumes its full meaning after the audience understands contextual information to which McNulty is not privy.

If there is one phrase that encapsulates the underlying assumptions of *The Wire* most accurately, it is the assertion that "the game is rigged," a single declarative sentence that serves as an axis around which the show's various hierarchies, epigraphs and themes revolve. To see this dynamic at work, it will be useful to examine one particular scene in which a single phrase unifies multiple perspectives as much as it does multiple forms of blindness. The scene takes place in the atypical tranquility of a Baltimore arboretum where McNulty eats lunch with a mid-level drug-dealer named Bodie. Throughout the four previous seasons, the audience has watched McNulty and Bodie suffer the ignominies and disappointments of their respective organizations. McNulty has watched

two wiretap investigations on the verge of remarkable success fail due to corruption and bureaucratic impediments. Bodie has watched the drug organization, for which he has sacrificed his youth, friends and nearly his life, implode, leaving him to fend for himself on a street corner where he will eventually die. Having been detained on drug charges, Bodie is released early as a result of McNulty's intervention. As the two of them exit central booking together, they are unfortunately seen by a henchman for Marlo, the former rival and now reigning drug lord for whom Bodie now must work. Unaware of this disaster, the police officer and mid-level drug dealer enjoy their lunch in the arboretum. Bodie, who can no longer brook Marlo's excessive violence, subtly and reluctantly volunteers to serve as a witness for the police. As the two gradually overcome their mutual distrust and warm to each other's charisma and shared experiences, their dialogue reverberates back and forth through the entire series. After Bodie reveals the extent to which the loyalties he devoted to drug organizations were never returned in kind, he concedes, "This game is rigged man. Be like the little bitches on the chessboard" (4:12).

McNulty reminds him, "Pawns."

At the beginning of the next season, McNulty will utter the same phrase—"the game is rigged"—in frustration with a police organization that values him as little as Marlo did Bodie. The "bitches on the chessboard" also allude to a central scene from season one in which Bodie is given a chess lesson that serves as a metaphor for the immutability of hierarchies, and the insuperability of fate. Back in the arboretum, though, McNulty, who admires Bodie's fortitude and integrity, declares, "You're a soldier, Bodie," a line that hearkens back to this same chess lesson in which D'Angelo, the de

facto chess master and “middle manager” of the Barksdale organization, taught Bodie that, “the pawns...They like the soldiers” (1:3). This line, furthermore, resonates forward to a later point in that same first season when Bell, having coerced Bodie into killing his best friend, dismisses the young man with the words, “Alright soldier” (1:12).

McNulty will, in the beginning of season five, echo Bodie, subsuming the drug dealer’s hard won wisdom into the confines of the Baltimore police department. McNulty complains that the investigating detail has been taken off the Marlo case, and that gun charges against Marlo’s lieutenants have been floating around the courts. The Assistant State Attorney Pearlman responds that this is “pro forma.” McNulty, laughing bitterly, retorts, “Pro forma. From the Latin, meaning lawyers jacking each other off.” When Pearlman reminds McNulty that the “rules” are incontrovertible, McNulty offers the cynical riposte the audience has almost come to expect: “There are no fuckin’ rules. Fuckin’ game is rigged” (5:1).

These dialogic repetitions reinforce the sense that the series’ protagonists, despite their charisma and vivacity, are, in relation to the institutional universe in which they operate, undifferentiated, even nugatory. These recurring phrases perform in isolation a function that expands when repeated by different characters and in heterogeneous contexts. More importantly, each repeated phrase glosses its previous iteration with accrued history and context, revealing two key modes of blindness, the first experienced by the characters, and the second by the audience. McNulty does not acknowledge or recognize the full significance of Bodie’s observation until Marlo’s underlings have murdered Bodie. Not until he “rereads” Bodie’s line by repeating it does McNulty apply the epigraphic nugget to his own personal context, which is to say, the hierarchy in which

he finds himself mired. The audience undergoes a similar process of retrospective enlightenment, a process similar to Freud's notion of the uncanny (*Unheimlich*), in which a person experiences, "an unintended recurrence of the same situation" which in turn makes her feel, "something fateful and inescapable when otherwise [she] should have spoken only of 'chance' " (Freud 237). Each repeated utterance—as unintended by the characters as it is necessarily intended by the show's writers—provides the audience with an uncanny brand of dramatic irony. The audience reads the show's concatenated fragments of repeated dialogue against the characters' understanding of their own words. The unfamiliar contexts and familiar content of these fragments force on the audience a temporally retrograde mode of understanding similar to that produced by the symbolic network of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In stating outright that, "We live forward tragically, but think back comically" (Holy Terror 42), Eagleton ignores the process by which the spectator of tragedy lives forward through the drama onstage, and having reached the point where the dramatic ironies invert to herself, can only think back—which is to say, "live back"—tragically.

One example of such an uncanny dramatic irony occurs in the final season. When McNulty, for no apparent reason, grabs a slip requiring him to respond to a murder case, his once friend and partner Moreland mutters, almost to himself, "There you go again. Givin' a fuck when it ain't your turn to give a fuck" (5:2). This is a near direct quotation of an ironic quip that McNulty directed at Moreland during the first episode of the entire series. In this case, it is Moreland who reluctantly accepts responsibility for a murder he did not need to investigate, and McNulty retorts, "That will teach you to give a fuck when it ain't your turn to give a fuck" (1:1).

There is no indication that either detective remembers McNulty's original remark; and that is the point. McNulty's form of *anamnesis* stands in contrast to the knowledge with which the audience belatedly understands Moreland's "original" rendering of "when it's not your turn," which also serves as the epigraph for the first episode of the first season.

McNulty's unintentional echoes of earlier lines of dialogue often highlight disparities between idealistic naïveté and lucidly observed realism that drive the show as a whole. When McNulty, after his severe disappointment at the failures of his department to protect Bodie or investigate Marlo, grouches, "Marlo's an asshole. He doesn't get to win. We get to win" (5:3), the audience is well aware that victory belongs exclusively to the just and lawful. The drug-runners and drug-lords will mostly elude the grasp of "good police" and the law. In apostrophizing a principle of fairness, of *dike*, the protagonists appeal to a *deus otiosus*, indulging an irony borne as much of frustration as of earnest expectation.

The temporal dynamics that drive the functioning of *The Wire*'s epigraphs help us understand how the three terms of this metaphoric process work. First, after the opening sequence, we read the epigraph, stripped of its particular context—of character, setting and story—which we encounter at some later point in the episode. The "original" version of this quotation could either be the preliminary epigraph or the subsequent quotation from which it was drawn. We carry an abstract interpretation of the epigraph forward into the narrative of the show, and then, the moment we come across the epigraph's now fully contextualized source, we reconcile two readings, operating in different temporal modes. We amalgamate the epigraph's abstracted, remembered

“message” with the dialogic version’s particular contextual information, and this process, in turn, alters both source-points of the “original” utterance, the epigraph and the dialogue. This composite understanding reminds us that the fictional elements of the show—be they dialogic, cinematographical or dramatic—translate readily to broader scopes of meaning, which in turn redound to future and past elements of the show. In short, the process by which we recollect forward and backward performs a metonymic function, broadening our perspectives and layering our readings of *The Wire*. The individual instances of dialogue, characterization and action redound to Baltimore, implicating the city itself in the tragedies suffered by its citizens and “non-citizens” alike.

The Wire also communicates these correlations by way of epigraphic wisecracks and offhand remarks. In season two, for example, Bunk, disgruntled about a Jane Doe with which McNulty stuck homicide, informs his partner that the department assigned the impossible case to another detective, Cole. McNulty quips, “That’s collateral damage” (2:2). The phrase, which also serves as the title of the episode, centripetally draws attention to a wider range of meaning. The infamous military euphemism applies, first, to the thirteen trafficked women whose murder serves as the focal point of season two’s homicide investigation, and secondly to the unintended and therefore tragic consequences that plague the protagonists of *The Wire*. In a similar scene, FBI special agent Terrance Fitzhugh informs McNulty that the Department of Homeland Security has requested that the FBI shift its resources and focus to “terrorism.” Grimacing, McNulty responds, “What, we don’t have love enough for two wars? I guess the joke’s on us” (1:1)²⁵. This

²⁵ Simon offered the following commentary on this scene:

This is predictive on our part. We’re filming this pilot two months after 9/11, and although the FBI hadn’t announced it yet, it was apparent from

aesthetic mode, in which dramatic irony and epigraphic ambiguity conspire to yoke local and global significance, as with *The Oresteia*'s symbolic network, reveals how *The Wire* employs formal strategies to thread its tragic vision through the lives of individuals and the fate of a nation-state alike. Although the episode's title, "collateral damage," surely disparages American domestic and foreign policy, it also points to a deeper, more pervasive ideological dereliction: neoliberal capitalism. The money and other federal resources rerouted to fight enemies abroad also contributes to domestic conditions that create enemies within. These enemies constitute yet another undesired and unintended repercussion of the actions and ideologies portrayed in *The Wire*. The characters and situations of *The Wire*, by both suffering and epitomizing modernity's gap between advertised intention and unavoidable consequence, collapse dramatic irony into the tragic irony that is the show's ultimate object of mimesis. As Eagleton writes:

Modernity is both political democracy and global warfare, the possibility of feminism and the reality of women's degradation, the fact of imperialism and the value of human commerce across frontiers. In a move scandalous to the *ancien régimes*, it claims that freedom and respect are rights from which no one should be excluded; it also forces its own definitions of these values on humanity at large. Everything in such a state, as Marx comments, seems pregnant with its opposite, so that irony, oxymoron, chiasmus, ambivalence, aporia, seem the only suitable figures for capturing its logic. (Holy Terror 242)

This is the precisely the logic that *The Wire* captures by mimetically reflecting the tragic ironies of postmodern America back to the audience. It is precisely in the spirit of this reconciliation of intentional and unintentional ironies, and of dramatic and tragic ironies, that *The Oresteia* and *The Wire* are confederate. The watchmen will remain oblivious

the manpower we knew they had and the priorities they that they'd be giving short shrift to any anti-drug mission they had, and any priority they had in the drug war was going right out the window." (1:1, Commentary)

[λήθομαι] to his own meanings until his audience—Aeschylus’ audience—“remembers back” to the source of the three plays’ linguistic ambiguities and contradictions; which is to say, until the audience understands that the headwaters to the watchman’s Lethe are formed by a too ready belief in the forward progress of meaning.

The Wire is full of these moments that triangulate the perspectives of two protagonists with that of the audience in order to communicate the shifting temporal contexts within which all tragic meaning must be construed. These instances of triangulation, often culminating moments in the series, look back both to past episodes and to distantly past events in the lives of the protagonists. A representative moment takes place as the two leaders of the Barksdale drug organization, Avon Barksdale and Bell, enjoy a final meeting before their climactic betrayals. Barksdale and Bell, enjoying a drink on a terrace overlooking the Baltimore skyline, reminisce about their childhood, rise to power and current success. Neither is aware of the other’s deceit.²⁶ These protagonists are required, as they so often are, to read into their past a meaning already lost to the future, and thus, to their own understanding. While legitimately enjoying these

²⁶ Pelecanos and director Joe Chappelle offered the following comments on this scene:

PELECANOS. I think this was, of all my work on *The Wire*, the one I’m most proud of, this scene right here...Of course the viewer knows that they’ve betrayed each other and it just lends a lot of weight to the scene. But again, the rift is still there because they both have different perspectives on this.

CHAPPELLE. And they’re both right, which is the other thing too.

PELECANOS. It’s two halves of one man.

(3:11, Commentary).

memories, Bell and Barksdale recount their triumphs and aspirations in an elliptical code we suspect the pair might have already deciphered:

BELL. Can you imagine then if I had the money I have now. I could'a bought half this waterfront property, god damn it.

AVON. Yeah, forget about that for a while man. Just dream with me.

STRINGER. We ain't gotta dream no more, man. We got real shit. Real estate we can touch. (3:11)

The atmosphere immediately tenses between the two, and after a suspicious inquiry into each other's plans, they hug and part. The next time the audience sees Stringer Bell, it is in one of his real estate properties, where he is soon murdered. Trapped upstairs by his killers, Stringer reveals how insufficiently he recognized the inescapability of history, be it his city's or his own: "Look man, I ain't involved. I ain't involved in that gangster bullshit no more" (3:11). His stunted *anagnorisis* contributes to his death, and to the ongoing history of violence in Baltimore. Recognizing too late that ambition alone is not enough to extricate himself from the mire of inner city violence, Stringer succumbs to the same force from which he had struggled so hard to flee. There is a similar moment when Barksdale discovers that Bell had sold him out to the police. After living a code of ethics that prescribed only loyalty to blood and to his own organization, he betrays and is betrayed by his childhood friend and longtime business accomplice. The audience, in bearing witness to the moments before Bell's death and Barksdale's capture, experiences a similar *agnorisis*. As the audience remembers back on the previous episodes, reflecting on the decisions, misinterpretations and dilemmas that led to the fall of Barksdale and his lieutenant, it grows increasingly conscious that dramatic irony exists only as a function of

drama. Once the television set is turned off, the spectator once again becomes an actor with no audience and no privileged access to dramatic irony, and is therefore susceptible to tragic phenomena that hover outside the realm of tragic drama.

But for the audience to gain such awareness of its tragic status, it must continually be reminded of the past that haunts each protagonist in *The Wire*. Without such mnemonic aids, the audience cannot share in the characters' *anagnorises*. For this reason, *The Wire* continually incorporates internal reminders of episodes past, signaling the historical forces that farcically and tragically converge on the show's protagonists. It is in season three, devoted to the theme of politics and reform that *The Wire* offers a signal example of these mnemonic visual aids. Season three introduces the character Dennis "Cutty" Wise, a recently released convict who attempts to sever ties with the Barksdale organization to which he owes his allegiance and livelihood. Though Cutty successfully breaks from the violence and moral degradation of his past, he still funds his boxing gym with money from the Barksdale organization. In our first glimpse of Cutty's gym, at the beginning of season four, the camera slowly sweeps past an enlarged photo of a much younger Golden Glove winning Avon Barksdale (4:1). The audience remembers that in the first season Freamon discovered this same photo, which provided the investigation with its first substantial lead (1:3). As season four progresses, and the audience watches retaliatory killings ruin the middle school children and then, finally, Cutty himself, the photograph of Avon serves as a reminder of the provenance, history and inevitability of violence. This history also reminds the audience of the irony that pervades Cutty's efforts to provide the neighborhood's children with a sanctuary and an alternative source of pride. Drug money finances a gym intended as a redoubt against the corruption of drug

money (3:11). In all of these cases, the audience must read the protagonists' attempts to author their own futures against the histories that we have accrued in our memories and that the show signals through mnemonic images, such as that of the Avon Barksdale poster. We also see that that these same protagonists' inability to comprehend the shaping force of the past condemns them, à la Santayana, to repeat the histories of their *hamartia*.

The first scene of the entire series adumbrates a principle of tragic exclusion that will inform nearly every moment of the series as it unfolds. Only a few yards away from a corpse, McNulty and a young man discuss how and why the murder victim earned his sobriquet. Snotboogie, it turns out, earned his living by playing crap games and then running away with the pot once it grew large enough. McNulty, listening to the young man explain Snotboogie's repeated thefts, asks the obvious question: if you knew he was going to steal the pot, why did you keep letting him play. The young man responds matter-of-factly, "Got to. It's America man" (1:1).²⁷

Raphael Alvarez, a former Baltimore Sun reporter and writer for *The Wire*, asserted that this opening scene served as a premise for the series as a whole:

This is America. And to the extent that its institutions manage to exclude or diminish people, they will nonetheless find a way to play. In the Baltimore ghetto, and ultimately, in those working-class neighborhoods of the city where hope and opportunity are dying, there are souls who will not be denied a turn—even if it proves brutal or foolish or self-destructive. And whatever is excluded from the mainstream will eventually surface as

²⁷ David Simon, in his commentary on this scene, remarked that:

This is a true story. The parable of Snotboogie...I thought this was a wonderful metaphor for what's going on in the American city. That, those who are excluded from the legitimate economy make their own world. And we're trying to depict the world that they've created, on being excluded from the rest of America. (1:1)

a society—an economy, in fact—entirely apart. The Snotboogies of the world are *comical and tragic and doomed*; but they are also eternal, and at some point you must let them play. (Alvarez 64)

From the very first scene, we are introduced to a character whose life represents a marginalized faction within the economic system. The audience sees its onscreen surrogate, McNulty, attain a new level of literacy. Above all, the spectator is supplied with a key reference point to which it will return throughout the course of the series. McNulty understands the motivations underlying Snotboogie's life and death as well as the watchman does the motivations underlying the royal leadership of his house. The spectators looking down upon the House of Atreus or the streets of Baltimore will recollect forwards as a process of accreted remembrance.

These internal acts of remembrance also mirror *The Wire's* stated attempt to look back on ancient Greek tragedy itself, to which generalized conception the show and its creators establish a link, in most cases, by analogizing gods and institutions. Throughout its five seasons, *The Wire* occasionally allows its characters to draw this analogy directly. Some of these moments are fleeting, offhand and comical, such as when the silver-tongued state senator Clay Davis arrives at court brandishing a copy of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (5:7). Often, though, the series establishes the analogy between postmodern power structures and ancient gods through the character of "Bunny" Colvin, a Baltimore Police Major who conspicuously rebels against the dictates of his institution. Finally fed up with indulging dishonest bureaucratic tactics, Colvin decides to present his district's crime statistics honestly, refusing to "massage the numbers." Having divulged unembellished murder and drug offense statistics at a COMSTAT meeting, Colvin finds himself denounced by Rawls, who asks why felonies have risen two percent in the

Major's Western District. Colvin responds calmly, "Sometimes the gods are uncooperative" (3:3).

This, of course, fails to please the police hierarchy. Rawls' superior, Police Commissioner Ervin Burrell, offers an explanatory epigraph of his own: "The gods are fucking you, you find a way to fuck them back. It's Baltimore gentleman. The gods will not save you" (3:3).

Burrell speaks with the authority of experience. A Baltimore demigod himself, the Police Commissioner understands his own superiors' Olympian indifference toward Baltimore and its citizens. After heaving himself up the police department's chain of command, Burrell ends up serving the grasping self-interest of one mayor after another. However, the gods whom Burrell references in this passage are not precisely consonant with the conception of the gods as we view them from the more kaleidoscopic perspective of *The Wire* as a whole. On the most obvious level, Burrell is merely informing Colvin that when murders, robberies and assaults escalate in Baltimore, a politically savvy officer responds in one of two ways, either making more arrests, or manipulating statistics until they conform not to reality, but to political interests.

One crucial irony of Burrell's apophthegmatic censure is that, for this consummate bureaucrat, the verb "to fuck," as he uses it here, must be interpreted in the language of his own bureaucratic experience. In essence, he is saying, "If the reality of urban crime [the gods] does not tally with your need to conform with your institution [fucking you], you must alter the numerical representation of this reality [you fuck them back]. The reality of Baltimore's drug trade and consequent murders will never change

[it's Baltimore gentlemen]. Therefore do not expect rewards for any attempt at reform [the gods will not save you]."²⁸

This construal of Burrell's COMSTAT directive contains another irony. The man to whom Burrell addresses these words—Colvin—will eventually interpret and apply them in a starkly different sense. Over the course of ensuing episodes, Colvin will covertly legalize drugs in restricted areas, thus endangering not only Burrell's career, but the mayor's as well. From Colvin's jaded perspective, the "gods" can only signify Burrell and Rawls. "Fucked" by these particular gods, Colvin certainly, if only temporarily, "fucks" them back. And yet, following the third dictate of Burrell's reproof, it is just as true that the gods do not save Colvin. After the drug legalization scheme is uncovered, Burrell forces Colvin into early retirement, and personally intervenes to stymie Colvin's alternative job prospects. Once again, reading meaning by reconciling multiple characters' perspectives back and forth through time, the audience is made aware of the fictional strategies that separate multiple truths, and thus insinuates itself into the schemata of causation described by *The Wire*.

²⁸ In *The Wire*, the verb "fuck", especially when used in the passive voice, often signifies the individual's recognition of the institution's power over her life and future. We see this, for example, when Ziggy Sobotka, in prison on charges of murder, explains that his circumstances now trump the value of his familial identity:

FRANK. That ain't you Zig.

ZIGGY. It ain't? Cause the same blood don't flow for us, pop. I mean I wish it did, but it don't.

FRANK. You're more like me than you know. You're a Sobotka.

ZIGGY. I'm fucked is what I am. (2:8)

The Tragic Staging in and of The Wire

The audience is reminded of itself and of *The Wire*'s layered fictions not only through the concordance of epigraphs and dialogue, but through the show's repeated gestures toward the genre and medium through which it articulates its tragic vision. Although *The Wire* clearly subverts the purpose and clichés of the televised police procedural, it also exploits the genre. Through the detectives' wiretap, viewers of the show traverse physical, cultural, political and institutional barriers that the show's protagonists rarely breach. To view the detectives operating the wiretap investigation as they listen in on the targets of their investigation is to participate in a similar form of sanctioned voyeurism. After all, it is a kind of wire through which each premium cable viewer gains ingress into David Simon's fictional Baltimore. As the drug-dealers, murderers, money-launderers, stick-up artists, sex-workers and corrupt politicians of Baltimore remain the targets of the police department's investigation, so too do the various fictional constructions of *The Wire* remain the objects of our own spectatorial scrutiny. This is why the institutional dynamics of the Baltimore police department hold such special—which is not to say superior—significance to us in the audience. Just as the police investigators operate invisibly behind the camera-lens or wiretap, so do we, HBO's voyeurs, linger behind the veil of the screen.

It is also through the characters themselves that the audience vicariously scrutinizes the institutional forces arrayed against them. Although Simon, Burns and other scriptwriters for *The Wire* have declared their intent to subsume the trajectory of their characters' lives to the dictates of plot and realism, there are characters such as Wallace, Bodie and D'Angelo—low- or middle lever members of the drug

organizations—who taper the audience’s perspective such that it vicariously fails to see past the horizon of dilapidated, violent projects in which they have lived their entire lives. Although the detectives have, through their wiretap, a limited view of the drug dealers’ world, their inability to interpret the forces at work among the higher echelons of the police department allows the spectators to see how the putative clarity with which one character views another social group replicates the presumptiveness of assumed spectatorial omniscience.

There are also instances in which a character in *The Wire* provides the audience special vantage on the realities that lie behind the show’s fictional ambit, mostly by both articulating and representing more global, comprehensive concepts. The police department’s Detective Lester Freamon, McNulty’s sometime accomplice, sometime rival, assumes such a role throughout the series. Although he is not the only character through whom the audience gains broader perspectives on *The Wire* and the reality to which it points, Freamon most consistently and prominently performs this function. Freamon so intensely evinces wisdom that the audience might forget his shrewd negotiations of police department politics were partially gleaned from a chastening thirteen years in punitive limbo. Although the audience never learns the precise details of the transgression for which he was demoted, the series, over the entirety of its run, provides perspectives on his character that allow us to surmise just how great a danger his investigative acumen posed the corrupt institutions of yesteryear. In the beginning of the first season, on his first case since his release from the pawnshop, Freamon remains reticent and distant, only gradually revealing his capabilities. Unlike McNulty, he clearly understands the full extent of his hierarchy’s power to punish enterprising detective work

that contravenes political realities. This is why Freamon shares the audience's partially omniscient vantage on McNulty's obtuse and often frustrated attempts to supersede institutional impediments.

But it is not until the final season that the audience understands the extent to which Freamon's words and viewpoints function much as the show's epigraphs do, communicating the particular and the general all at once. Finally subpoenaing Davis, the State Senator Freamon's mission to follow the drug money to the top of the city and state's political hierarchy is nearly realized. When his partner, Detective Sydnor, expresses frustration with the bureaucratic complexities of the Davis case, Freamon admonishes him: "A case like this, where you show who gets paid *behind all the tragedy* and the fraud, where you show how all the money routs itself, how all of us are vested, all of us complicit" (5:2 italics mine)...

Notwithstanding the explicit reference to "tragedy," and the zeal with which he will scrutinize the fundamental causal forces, Freamon's gentle reproach also points to a transition in the portrayal of Baltimore. Until season five, *The Wire* typically characterized the power structures of Baltimore and the federal government in spatial terms. Characters and forces fell along some point in a vertical gradation of power, always moving "up" or "down" parallel chains of command. In the final season, however, *The Wire* implicates its audience, taking it to task for failing to pay sufficient attention and for failing to locate its own complicity in America's network of power relations. The imagined audience does not fall along the vertical axis described and disparaged in the previous four seasons. Instead, the audience—an imagined collective—exists within and beyond this axis, enmeshed in a system of exchange in which its choices as consumers,

producers and voters impacts lives in inner-city Baltimore as much as in the factories of Shenyang. Although Freamon, using the third-person plural, inculcates himself as a progenitor of the tragedy which the protagonists of *The Wire* suffer, the ultimate “we”—the we in the audience—is well aware that Freamon must be counted among these protagonists, and thus the audience understands that it is the “all of us” “vested” and “complicit” in real tragedy that *The Wire* merely stages and represents. Through the rest of the fifth season, Freamon will serve as a constant reminder that the show presents itself as a descriptive surrogate for reality. The show’s purported realism does not derive from mimetic accuracy but from embedded reminders of *The Wire*’s representational strategies. The more the audience grows aware of itself as a reality in relation to the show, the more the audience perceives the actual tragic lives behind the veil of fiction. In Wallace Stevens’ words, the audience sees the “As it is, in the intricate evasions of the as...” It understands, belatedly, why Freamon pairs “tragedy” with “fraud” in describing the forces behind the veil which separates the powerful from the powerless.

In light of this pairing, the audience is surprised, one season later, to discover Freamon’s complicity in McNulty’s fraudulent scheme to falsify homeless deaths as murder cases. Until this point in the series, Freamon serves as the moral conscience of his cohorts, explicitly framing and rearticulating their choices, and often shepherding the benighted through the labyrinth of political and bureaucratic intrigues. Once complicit in McNulty’s prodigious deception, though, Freamon implicitly impugns the audience’s dereliction, ethical credulity and indifference. The audience sees that *The Wire* has, all along, described two modes of fiction with divergent relations to reality. One fiction—within *The Wire*—serves as a surrogate for a reality too long ignored or misrepresented

by the media, while the other fiction, at the top strata of America's institutional hierarchies, assumes the nature of fraud, deceitfully manipulating truth in the service of power. Once Freamon crosses the line separating fictional truth from fraud, the audience understands its complicity not merely as members of American society, but as spectators comfortable with their remove from the realities represented by *The Wire*. But the spectators do not arrive at this realization until the final season, and so necessarily review (re-view) previous episodes, actively retracing its collusion in events from which it had once blindly distanced itself. Only with the retrospective dissolution of dramatic irony do we understand the dynamic pairing of "fraudulent reality" and "true fiction" that drives *The Wire*.

While Freamon plays an exceptional role within *The Wire*, catalyzing the audience's ironic collusion with the tragedies that would normally remain safely boxed within the confines of cable television, it is important to note that *The Wire* also implicates its spectators through the careful exposition and structuring of individual scenes. Although these tragic "set pieces" are scattered throughout the five seasons, there are four scenes that merit special attention. An off-hand comment on a football game; a sociopathic drug lord's knife-wound; and a union leader's corpse discovered in a harbor; as diverse in tone and substance as these three scenes might be, they all perform "literary" functions that contribute to the audience's ultimate transformation into tragic spectators.

In the first scene, Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski, the newly hired math teacher at Tilghman Middle School, sits at home crafting a speech he feels he must give his class in response to an incident in which one student switchblade-slashed the face of a fellow

student. Prez's wife comes into the room and sees that a football game is playing on television, a game to which her husband is clearly indifferent. She glances at the set, and asks her husband who is winning. Prez looks up and answers, "No one wins. One side just loses more slowly" (4:4).

With this quick, nearly unthinking reply, Prez articulates one of *The Wire's* central tragic conflicts, between the value of human aspiration and its near certain dissolution in the face of political, economic and institutional nemeses. His offhand gloss on the sport, serving, not incidentally, as the episode's epigraph, reminds the audience that the motive for profit will almost always trump individual commitment to non-utilitarian values. The audience is also reminded that we often do not understand the sports we watch due to an inability to share the first-person perspective of the athlete, which is to say, we fail to empathize with their inability to see the action "from above." In this sense, Prez's dialogue-as-epigraph is apt commentary on the fate of the fourth season's central protagonists, the four middle-school-age children whose lives, with one exception, will be devastated by the corruption, incompetence and indifference of educational, police and national institutions. From the parallax view provided by the spectatorship of tragedy, isolated moments of intention and consequence are collapsed into a form of limited tragic omniscience.

It is a long way—in multiples senses—from Pryzbylewski's living room to the stark moral vacuum of Marlo Stanfield's universe. Stanfield, a young gangster who ruthlessly overtakes the entire West Baltimore drug trade, eventually cedes his nearly absolute power when Freamon discovers the drug lord's many victims nailed shut in abandoned row houses throughout the city. In the final episode of *The Wire*, the audience

is given a final view of the ruthless drug leader whom it has watched over the past three seasons. Escaping murder charges after a plea bargain, Marlo is forced into a world of legitimate business that stifles his street instincts and bores him immediately. In one of the final scenes of the series as a whole, Levy, a lawyer representing Baltimore's most dangerous drug lords, gives Marlo an introduction to the city's top real estate developers. One of the more ethically compromised developers outlines a number of "investment opportunities" in the downtown real estate market. Levy, immediately spotting a threat, removes Marlo from the circle of downtown tycoons, warning the murderous drug pin, "Guys like that will bleed you" (5:10).

On the heels of this tip-off, Marlo, suffocating amid the posh interior design and clubby innuendo of downtown pseudo-legitimate business society, leaves the building, whereon he immediately challenges and then fights two knife-wielding corner drug dealers. Although Marlo debilitates both, the dealers manage to inflict a flesh wound. The audience last sees Marlo as he licks the blood from his gash and gazes about his street surroundings, content at last. Marlo's wound literalizes Levi's metaphor, drawing a direct connection between the remorseless predation of capitalism and the drug trade. It is not merely that the two worlds operate according to similar principles and ethical modes, but that the drug trade—the natural consequence of a failed drug war and of exclusion from legal markets—attests explicitly to the economic system's moral vacuity. Marlo serves both as a synecdoche for unchecked capitalism and as a corollary of the system's failings. The audience belatedly sees that Marlo *represents* the source, but *is* the consequence of a failed drug war, a corrupt judicial system and an insufficiently regulated free market economy. It also sees, belatedly, that central characters such as McNulty, Freamon and

Bell all served similar portmanteau identities within *The Wire*. Each performs a mistake, a *hamartia*, that microcosmically reproduces the failings of large scale institutions. In this sense, these characters, through their metaphoric function, inhabit history, while, through their mimetic function—i.e., their dramatic existence as “real” people—collectively evoke a story.

It is the last of these three scenes that most precisely enacts and thus inverts the staging of tragic spectatorship. In the second season of *The Wire*, the series’ focus shifts from the underworld drug economy to the plight of Baltimore’s International Brotherhood of Stevedores (I.B.S.). To keep the I.B.S. alive, in an epoch of expansive port-side development projects and diminishing jobs, Frank Sobotka, the union’s secretary treasurer, decides to bank his union’s future on a scheme to lobby lawmakers for a canal-dredging project. To support workers for whom he cannot provide sufficient daily work, and to pay his lobbyist’s fees, Sobotka secretly leverages his leadership status to allow The Greek, the intentionally nameless leader of an international smuggling network, to traffic drugs, sex workers, chemicals and other illegal “goods” into the Baltimore ports undetected. After thirteen dead women are discovered in one of The Greek’s shipping containers, and after engaging in a petty feud with a police district commander, Sobotka begins to lose control of his illegal operation. Having made severe compromises for an undeniably good cause, Sobotka sees that he has unwittingly drawn his son, Ziggy, and nephew, Nick, into The Greek’s circle. Ziggy, a disastrously reckless personality, murders an associate of The Greek, and finds himself in jail for homicide. Having already turned himself into the police, Frank is told that The Greek can arrange to

have Ziggy's charge dropped. As the season draws to a close, Sobotka's ethical scope narrows to the point that he is forced to risk death at the hands of The Greek.

The final episode of season two opens with a long, mostly dialogue-free sequence in which Nick and the union members, gathered together on the dock, watch as Frank's water-bloated corpse is lowered onto the ground (2:12).²⁹ The camera pulls back behind the corpse, from which vantage we see that Nick and the dockworkers have formed a semi-circle around Sobotka's corpse. The physical formation neatly parallels the structure of the ancient Greek performing space, but from the viewpoint of a spectator looking down on the structure from a nearby hillside. The stretcher bearing Sobotka's body takes the position of the *skene* (σκηνή), the section of the wooden stage on which the actors performed. The union members fan out from Sobotka's body, as the Greek spectators in the *theatron* (θέατρον) would from the circular *orchestra* (ὄρχήστρα) and *skene*.

That this scene evoked, in its thematic and visual scope, ancient Greek theatrical dynamics would not surprise the episode's director, Joe Chappelle, who remarked:

...it's an interesting dynamic, an interesting tension that comes out in terms of how the scenes come together, so it's not totally raw, but it shouldn't be slick. Which is true about the writing too, because in some ways, it's very street, very real, but at other times, *it's operatic...it's just fascinating to watch and listen to. You know it's a street drama but also has the elements of a Greek tragedy.* (3:11, Commentary, italics mine)

In focusing on the building blocks of tragic spectatorship, Chappelle describes the porosity of borders that purportedly separate tragedy from genres other than theater. He

²⁹ On this scene, *The Wire*'s producer, Karen Thorson, commented: "This is an interesting scene, because *it's a tragic unveiling of their leader* and Nick's uncle and Bob asked them to restrain the kind of melodramatic action that you think somebody's going to have, the weeping and the mayhem. They're in shock of understanding what's really come down here on this relatively placid day, in their life. (2:12, Commentary, italics mine)"

also suggests, though, that *The Wire*'s visual templates find roots in the stage. *The Wire* accesses the "real" through the formal structures of "Greek tragedy," "drama," and the "operatic."

These formal concerns are highly evident in the conscious "staging" of Sobotka's corpse. The audience, assuming its dual role as spectator and fellow bystander, gazes down on the stevedores, who serve as spectatorial surrogates. The audience is forced, therefore, to regard the stevedores as "players" and victims, both at once. They are players both in their roles as actors in a fictional televised drama, and as actors—human beings with agency—who live and operate *within* the universe of the fictionalized Baltimore created for them. They are also victims, to whose suffering and struggles we have borne witness throughout the entirety of season two. Yet their status as victims is also complicated by the fact that Sobotka sacrificed his life and family for their sake. Shifting back one observational level, the audience realizes that, to some extent, the stevedores themselves—as labor in Marxist terms—have sacrificed *their* lives for the sake of the spectators. The self-conscious theatricality of the scene evokes the tragic realities in which the spectators thus find themselves implicated.³⁰ And this self-conscious theatricality—this staging of the stage, so to speak—performs forward to reality and backward to the ancient Greek tragedy behind the curtain of cable television. The staging

³⁰ Simon explained in the commentary accompanying the first episode of the first season that the metaphor of the wiretap and surveillance cameras was intended to implicate the audience's indifference toward the social problems the show portrayed: "We tried to layer in these sort of innocuous shots of surveillance, throughout the first season to give you a sense of a world that is increasingly watched, even watched with a certain indifference. And we trying to create a world not where there is little nuggets of information...we trying to create a world where there was almost too much information being thrown at the detectives and it was their job to sift" (1:1, Commentary).

of Sobotka's impromptu requiem speaks to the realities of postindustrial capitalism as much as it does to the artifice of ancient theater. In this sense, the theatricality of these scenes constitutes the syllogistic common term between form and content, the juncture of which generates the process of modern adaptation that this dissertation has sought to explore.

Episode Listing for *The Wire*

(2002 - 2008)

Season 1 (2002)

- Episode 1 (1:1) "The Target.." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Clark Johnson. HBO. 2 June 2002.
- Episode 2 (1:2) "The Detail." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Clark Johnson. HBO. 9 June 2002.
- Episode 3 (1:3) "The Buys." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Peter Medak. HBO. 16 June 2002.
- Episode 4 (1:4) "Old Cases." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Clement Virgo. HBO. 23 June 2002.
- Episode 5 (1:5) "The Pager." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Peter Medak. HBO. 30 June 2002.
- Episode 6 (1:6) "The Wire." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Ed Bianchi. HBO. 7 July 2002.
- Episode 7 (1:7) "One Arrest." Teleplay: Rafael Alvarez. Dir.: Joe Chappelle. HBO. 21 July 2002.
- Episode 8 (1:8) "Lessons." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Gloria Muzio. HBO. 28 July 2002.
- Episode 9 (1:9) "Game Day." Teleplay: David H. Melnick, Shamit Choksey. Dir.: Milčo Mančevski. HBO. 4 August 2002.
- Episode 10 (1:10) "The Cost." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Brad Anderson. HBO. 11 August 2002.
- Episode 11 (1:11) "The Hunt." Teleplay: Joy Lusco. Dir.: Steve Shill. HBO. 18 August 2002.
- Episode 12 (1:12) "Cleaning Up." Teleplay: George Pelecanos. Dir.: Clement Virgo. HBO. 1 September 2002.
- Episode 13 (1:13) "Sentencing." Teleplay: David Simon, Ed Burns. Dir.: Tim Van Patten. HBO. 8 September 2002.

Season 2 (2003)

- Episode 14 (2:1) "Ebb Tide." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Ed Bianchi. HBO. 1 June 2003.
- Episode 15 (2:2) "Collateral Damage." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Ed Bianchi. HBO. 8 June 2003.
- Episode 16 (2:3) "Hot Shots." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Elodie Keene. HBO. 15 June 2003.
- Episode 17 (2:4) "Hard Cases." Teleplay: Joy Lusco. Dir.: Elodie Keene. HBO. 22 June 2003.

- Episode 18 (2:5) "Undertow." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Steve Shill. HBO. 29 June 2003.
- Episode 19 (2:6) "All Prologue." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Steve Shill. HBO. 6 July 2003.
- Episode 20 (2:7) "Backwash." Teleplay: Rafael Alvarez. Dir.: Thomas J. Wright. HBO. 13 July 2003.
- Episode 21 (2:8) "Duck and Cover." Teleplay: George Pelecanos. Dir.: Daniel Attias. HBO. 27 July 2003.
- Episode 22 (2:9) "Stray Rounds." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Tim Van Patten. HBO. 3 August 2003.
- Episode 23 (2:10) "Storm Warnings." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Rob Bailey. HBO. 10 August 2003.
- Episode 24 (2:11) "Bad Dreams." Teleplay: George Pelecanos. Dir.: Ernest Dickerson. HBO. 17 August 2003.
- Episode 25 (2:12) "Port in a Storm." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Robert F. Colesberry. HBO. 24 August 2003.

Season 3 (2004)

- Episode 26 (3:1) "Time after Time." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Ed Bianchi. HBO. 19 September 2004.
- Episode 27 (3:2) "All Due Respect." Teleplay: Richard Price. Dir.: Steve Shill. HBO. 26 September 2004.
- Episode 28 (3:3) "Dead Soldiers." Teleplay: Dennis Lehane. Dir.: Rob Bailey. HBO. 3 October 2004.
- Episode 29 (3:4) "Hamsterdam." Teleplay: George Pelecanos. Dir.: Ernest Dickerson. HBO. 10 October 2004.
- Episode 30 (3:5) "Straight and True." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Daniel Attias. HBO. 17 October 2004.
- Episode 31 (3:6) "Homecoming." Teleplay: Rafael Alvarez. Dir.: Leslie Libman. HBO. 31 October 2004.
- Episode 32 (3:7) "Back Burners." Teleplay: Joy Lusco. Dir.: Tim Van Patten. HBO. 7 November 2004.
- Episode 33 (3:8) "Moral Midgetry." Teleplay: Richard Price. Dir.: Agnieszka Holland. HBO. 14 November 2004.
- Episode 34 (3:9) "Slapstick." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Alex Zakrzewski. HBO. 21 November 2004.
- Episode 35 (3:10) "Reformation." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Christine Moore. HBO. 28 November 2004.
- Episode 36 (3:11) "Middle Ground." Teleplay: George Pelecanos. Dir.: Joe Chappelle. HBO. 12 December 2004.
- Episode 37 (3:12) "Mission Accomplished." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Ernest Dickerson. HBO. 19 December 2004.

Season 4 (2006)

- Episode 38 (4:1) "Boys of Summer." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Joe Chappelle. HBO. 10 September 2006.
- Episode 39 (4:2) "Soft Eyes." Teleplay: David Mills. Dir.: Christine Moore. HBO. 17 September 2006.
- Episode 40 (4:3) "Home Rooms." Teleplay: Richard Price. Dir.: Seith Mann. HBO. 24 September 2006.
- Episode 41 (4:4) "Refugees." Teleplay: Dennis Lehane. Dir.: Jim McKay. HBO. October 1 October 2006.
- Episode 42 (4:5) "Alliances." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: David Platt. HBO. 8 October 2006.
- Episode 43 (4:6) "Margin of Error." Teleplay: Eric Overmyer. Dir.: Dan Attias. HBO. 15 October 2006.
- Episode 44 (4:7) "Unto Others." Teleplay: William F. Zorzi. Dir.: Anthony Hemingway. HBO. 29 October 2006.
- Episode 45 (4:8) "Corner Boys." Teleplay: Richard Price. Dir.: Agnieszka Holland. HBO. 5 November 2006.
- Episode 46 (4: 9) "Know Your Place." Teleplay: Kia Corthron. Dir.: Alex Zakrzewski. HBO. 12 November 2006.
- Episode 47 (4:10) "Misgivings." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Ernest R. Dickerson. HBO. 19 November 2006.
- Episode 48 (4:11) "A New Day." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Brad Anderson. HBO. 26 November 2006.
- Episode 49 (4:12) "That's Got His Own." Teleplay: George Pelecanos. Dir.: Joe Chappelle. HBO. 3 December 2006.
- Episode 50 (4:13) "Final Grades." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Ernest R. Dickerson. HBO. 10 December 2006.

Season 5 (2008)

- Episode 51 (5:1) "More with Less." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Joe Chappelle. HBO. 6 January 2008.
- Episode 52 (5:2) "Unconfirmed Reports." Teleplay: William F. Zorzi. Dir.: Ernest Dickerson. HBO. 13 January 2008.
- Episode 53 (5:3) "Not for Attribution." Teleplay: Chris Collins. Dir.: Scott and Joy Kecken. HBO. 20 January 2008.
- Episode 54 (5:4) "Transitions." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Dan Attias. HBO. 27 January 2008.
- Episode 55 (5:5) "React Quotes." Teleplay: David Mills. Dir.: Agnieszka Holland. HBO. 3 February 2008.
- Episode 56 (5:6) "The Dickensian Aspect." Teleplay: Ed Burns. Dir.: Seith Mann. HBO. 10 February 2008.
- Episode 57 (5:7) "Took." Teleplay: Richard Price. Dir.: Dominic West. HBO. 17 February 2008.
- Episode 58 (5:8) "Clarifications." Teleplay: Dennis Lehane. Dir.: Anthony Hemingway. HBO. 24 February 2008.

Episode 59 (5:9) "Late Editions." Teleplay: George Pelecanos. Dir.: Joe Chappelle. HBO.
2 March 2008.

Episode 60 (5:10) "-30-." Teleplay: David Simon. Dir.: Clark Johnson. HBO. 9 March
2008.

Chapter Four

Silence in *Bintou's Antigone*

“When the hero, a prey to esthetic illusion, thinks to save another person by his silence, then esthetics demands silence and rewards it.”
 – Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Like Roth's American tragedies, *Disgrace* and *The Wire*, Koffi Kwahulé's *Bintou* leverages generic and formal strategies in order to both exploit and criticize intertextual relations to ancient Greek antecedents. While Roth and Coetzee layer fictions within fictions to create internal dynamics of spectatorship, and while *The Wire* employs decontextualized epigraphs and visual echoes of the *theatron* in order to formally recapitulate more explicit translational strategies, *Bintou* restructures the dynamics of silence and choral commentary of Sophocles' *Antigone*, toward which Kwahulé adopts a stance that is both echoic and critical. *Bintou* is much noted for its correlative relationship to ancient tragedy and for the adaptive strategies by which it refashions and thus assimilates its antecedent material into twenty-first-century formal and contextual modes. Éditions Lansman, in its advertising copy for *Bintou*, declares that, “The [play] makes for a Greek tragedy - a tragedy that, in the heart of modernity, wants to get to the heart of the

archaic, dragging us unto a whirlwind of emotions.” (“Bintou by Koffi Kwahulé, Éditions Lansman, 1997”).

Critics have noted that Kwahulé adapts Sophoclean material as a way to both register and critique contemporary identities and phenomena. Sylvie Chalaye, a drama critic and specialist on Francophone African writing, asked Kwahulé in an interview:

“Your plays often draw on Greek theater, especially as regards the ancient chorus. Why?”

Kwahulé responded:

That’s truly my European side. What interests me in ancient Greek theater is its affinities with my own Baoulé tradition. I find myself in that theater. I also feel that I’m a trustee of that theater. As a human being, I’m the inheritor of everything men made before me, the good as much as the evil. When one lives in the West, in Europe, in France, one has the impression that the theater is a sort of race--knock the wall down first, write without punctuation first, do a play without an actor first... One enters this race, in fact, as part of a gadget-obsession in the theater. What happens is that one doesn’t have the time to really question ancient forms. The chorus is now an obsession in my work.” (Chalaye Afrique Noire Et Dramaturgies Contemporaines 39-40)³¹

Kwahulé, importantly, specifies, first that it is the forms (*formes*), not the themes, plots or characters of ancient tragedy, and second, that his stated purpose is to “question,” not borrow, shape or simply adapt these forms. As opposed to the post-modern tradition according to which the dramaturge deconstructs inherited forms in order to critique foundationalist assumptions, Kwahulé incorporates ancient Greek formal elements as both a critic and an intermediary (*dépositaire*, a “trustee,” agent, or dealer). He sees himself as a cultural arbiter, negotiating among Baoulé, African, French, European, localized and universalist constructions. Kwahulé has often stated his hope that his

³¹ The Baoulé are among the 65 different ethnic groups living in central Côte d’Ivoire, constituting roughly 23% of the population. Baoulé is also a language spoken among these ethnic groups.

audience might interpret and question his own plays in much the same critically universalist spirit with which he read and adapted ancient Greek tragedy:

I'm happy when my plays are produced in Côte d'Ivoire and also in front of a white audience in Germany or, why not, tomorrow, in front of Chinese who could appreciate them despite knowing nothing about Africa. (Bedarida)

Critics have noted this mediating function within *Bintou* itself. Laurence Barbalosi has written that, “The Antigone myth can also be read into the background of...*Bintou*, and undoubtedly, because, ‘history is confiscated and we don’t have heroes, we borrow from others in order to question them ourselves’”.³² In his use of the passive voice, Barbalosi suggests, helpfully, that the spectator or reader is as responsible for integrating the “Antigone myth” into *Bintou* as Kwahulé is for making the Sophoclean heroine a presence within the play’s intertextual palimpsest. If borrowed material is to serve as fodder for critique—if that is its designated purpose, as Kwahulé claims here—then the spectator must somehow triangulate the interpretive dynamics of *Antigone*, *Bintou* and the choral commentary (*Pour Une Critique Du Théâtre Ivoirien Contemporain*).

Any director of *Bintou* must remain aware of Kwahulé’s concern with ancient forms and with the intertextual and cultural cross-currents that drive the play. Since its publication in 1997, *Bintou* has benefited from a number of productions in Europe and America. In November, 1997, Gabriel Garran directed the first production of *Bintou* at the Théâtre International de Langue Française in Paris. Since Garran’s production, *Bintou* has been staged by Daniela Giordano in Rome (2000), off-Broadway in New York

³² From a study titled “Contemporary African history and ancient Greek myths at a crossroads [*Du croisement de l’histoire de l’Afrique contemporaine avec les mythes antiques grecs*]” in which Barbalosi quotes Kwahulé. (Barbalosi 117; Kwahulé *Pour une Critique du Théâtre Ivoirien Contemporain* 273).

(2001), in Berlin at the Deutsches Theater, and in London at the Arcola Theatre (2002) (Chalaye "Africultures: No. 50: Bintou De Koffi Kwahulé"). Garran's performance was noted for his decision to elide the rap music, and much of the violence that Kwahulé had written into the choral passages (Unknown). Despite this musical bowdlerization, Garran was clearly interested in the function and pedigree of the chorus. Garran discusses the ways that *Bintou*'s chorus both authors tragedies interior to the play and echoes ancient Greek tragic structures:

We carved up Koffi's play in twenty parts, all of which are small films within the large film. I was intrigued by this kind of compound aspect, the nearly Trinitarian aspect of Koffi's dramatic art. You have, for example, the family tribunal, the triplet of Lycaons, the triad of adolescents, a kind of Furies, each taking a turn as tragedian, as 'TV hosts' and as Gorgons, as if they were Bintou's emanations. ("À Propos De Bintou De Koffi Kwahulé: Entretien De Sylvie Chalaye Avec Gabriel Garran")

The Lycaons unite to perform their choral odes in such a way that reflects the placement and function of the *parados*, *stasimon* and *exodos* of the Greek stage. In the culminating scenes of *Bintou*, the rap music that serves as a background to the Lycaon's choral commentaries takes on an increasingly integral role in the development of the drama. The young gang members also evolve, throughout the play, from individual participants in the unfolding action to a unified collective whose speech constitutes the tragic development itself.

While recent commentary among directors, critics and theorists have focused on the ways in which *Bintou*'s characters and plot resonate with those of *Antigone* or *Choephorei*, this chapter will discuss a different mode of intertextual reverberation, addressing itself to concerns central to both Kwahulé and Sophocles' tragedies. Moving beyond the explicit reworking of content, *Bintou* echoes the preoccupation with language and the slow spiral down to silence that inhere to *Antigone*. The choruses of both

tragedies serve as conduits through which ironies, stunted understandings and silence maintain commerce. *Bintou* refracts a long tradition of Hegelian readings of Antigone. By inverting the antitheses of *polis* and private, Kwahulé dramatizes a critical stance toward this tradition and thus critiques the slavish adherence to neat correspondence in post-colonial adaptations of European source texts, and reflects the forces of power, impoverishment and violence that bind such extraordinary figures as Antigone and Bintou.

The Counter-Antigones of Kierkegaard and Kwahulé

Kwahulé establishes obvious parallels between the familial dynamics of *Antigone* and *Bintou*. In both plays, a father's recent absence haunts a daughter whose principles and conscience will require her to contest the patriarchal authority of an uncle. In both plays, the uncle, threatened and blinded by this young woman's subversive protest, adverts to a set of established laws in order to assert his increasingly tenuous sovereignty. And in both plays, the young woman dies as a result of the uncle's blinkered power and authoritarian rigidity. In *Bintou*, however, the parallels tend most often to invert or distort the Sophoclean and Hegelian sources.

Antigone's vast reception history, much of it mediated in response to Hegel's famous reading of the play, constitutes a secondary substratum within *Bintou's* intertextual layering.³³ Recently, in a chapter titled "From Hegel to Beckett," Terry Eagleton has scrutinized the influence of Hegel's philosophical interpretations of

³³ Three notable surveys of this reception history are Simone Fraisse's *Le Mythe d'Antigone* (1974), Cesare Molinari's *Storia di Antigone da Sofocle al Living Theatre: Un mito nel teatro occidentale* (1977), and George Steiner's *Antigones*.

Antigone on tragic theorizing. Eagleton notes that Hegel's theory of the tragic is skewed to the degree it remains dependent on the exclusive analysis of *Antigone*, much as Aristotle's *Poetics* is by its exclusive analysis of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. While Eagleton is more concerned in his study with theoretical attempts to define tragedy than with *Antigone* itself, he is careful to note that Hegel viewed his dialectic as inherently tragic (Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic 41-44).

Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* advances a dialectic rooted in the conflicting demands of the nation-state (the 'state-being' [*staatlich*], with its analogue in the *polis*) and the family (the 'private-right' [*Privatrecht*] (41-43). As Hegel phrased in *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, the dialectical mode explores the conflict, "between ethical life in its social universality and the family as the natural ground of moral relations".

Philosophers and theorists' commentaries on the Hegelian interpretation of Antigone (and commentary on this commentary) have grown to colossal proportions. Often, these theoretical interventions have constituted a dialectic unto themselves, variously opposing and reconciling ostensibly contrastive philosophical strands. This is important to this discussion of *Bintou*, in that Kwahulé's play incorporates an anti-Hegelian rendering of Antigone that springs from Kierkegaard's simultaneously supplementary and oppositional reading of Sophocles' heroine. Both Kierkegaard and Kwahulé create Antigone-figures that critique and elucidate their Hegelian and Sophoclean antecedents. But Kwahulé also writes after a number of theorists who have continued the polemical counter-imaginings that Kierkegaard inaugurated, and it will be helpful to review some of the seminal moments in this critical lineage.

Kierkegaard argues against Hegel's dialectic by recasting it as one between hereditary guilt and individual suffering. Kierkegaard's counter-dialectic does not represent a logical progression, but instead describes the regeneration of an individual who bears the yoke of his inherited guilt and sorrow. Kierkegaard attempts to theorize an Antigone who will exist in a fragmented and anxious modern world. In this nineteenth century Danish iteration of the ancient heroine's plight, the tragic collision is between Antigone's love for Haemon and her devotion to her family's guilt. These two forces are so equally powerful that they nullify any possibility for action (Kierkegaard *Either/Or*). Kierkegaard formulates a new *Antigone*, in which the heroine is driven by fate to bury Polyneices and maintain the secret of her father's incest until her death.

In the century and a half since the publication of *Either/Or*, philosophers and theorists have centered their interpretations of Antigone as much on the choral odes as on Sophocles' heroine.³⁴ Heidegger, in *Hölderlin's Hymne "the Ister,"* and in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, argues that the strange (*deinon*) clash between *techné* [τέχνη] and *dike* [δίκη], between violent man and *Wessen*, might pitch us into an abyss of irreconcilable warring forces (Heidegger). Man, however, exists at the edge of a precipice overlooking this abyss. As Cecilia Sjöholm explains in *The Antigone Complex*, Heidegger posits a pre-political Antigone who exists within the *Dasein* of the German philosopher's imagined Greece (Sjöholm 78). Valerie Reed has argued that Heidegger, to the detriment of our understanding of Sophocles' play, neglected Antigone's relationship to her home [οἶκος] in describing her "homeless [*unheimlich*]" state (Reed 317-18). In

³⁴ This review of Antigone's Hegelian and post-Hegelian reception history is heavily indebted to Vassilios Lambropoulos' course "Introduction to Interpretation through Readings of Antigone," which I took in Fall 2002.

these Heideggerian senses that Sjöholm explains and Reed refutes, we can find resonances with Kwahulé's Bintou, who, doubly exiled, lives outside the familial or political spheres.

After Heidegger, it is Derrida and Lacan who resume the expressly dialectical analysis of *Antigone*, while balking at the Hegelian mode that serves as the foundation for their own criticisms. In *Glas*, Derrida juxtaposes--literally, in two columns--his glossing of Hegel's dialectic and Jean Genet's writings. Derrida outlines a vision in which the death of Antigone represents the absolute end of history. In this eschatology of "the speculative dialectic [*la dialectique spéculative*]," death is enfolded into the system. The opposition of the sexes (man's "diaphanous law of the conscience [*loi diaphane de la conscience*]" against the female "dark law of the unconscious [*loi obscure de l'inconscient*]"), which has its parallel in (or outgrowth from) the opposition of Hegel's dialectical laws, passes into another state. Of the antinomies outlined in Derrida's Hegelian reading of *Antigone*, there is finally a union, "a syllogistic copulation [*une copulation syllogistique*]," which in turn produces an ethical reign without any reconciliation; and therein lies the tragedy (Derrida). Lacan argues that Antigone's is a choice that transcends the traditional binary opposition that structures our ethical concerns, moving beyond either rationality or collective affiliation (Lacan 281). Lacan also argues that Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone* fails to define the "conciliation" toward which the dialectical forces of the play are driving.

Costas Douzinas and Ronnie Warrington argue in "Antigone's law: A genealogy of jurisprudence," that *Antigone* represents law's dawn, the mainspring of a legal agon in which natural and positivist laws vie for supremacy. Citing Steiner and Heidegger,

Douzinias and Warrington suggest that laws today are mere epigones of Creon and Antigone, of one character who represents laws founded on transitory, statutory, human constructs; and of another who represents laws founded on local, active, familial concerns (Costas Douzinias 189-90).

Judith Butler, in *Antigone's Claim*, argues that Antigone is a political (as opposed to pre-political) figure, who, as Hegel and his exegetical descendents have neglected to mention, registers her discourse in the public sphere of the *polis*. Antigone, according to Butler, is a marginal figure in two senses: first, she stands at the threshold between political and chthonic realms, and secondly, as the inheritor of the Oedipal curse, she represents the non-normative family (Butler). Slavoj Žižek, in his essay, "From Antigone to Joan of Arc," supplements Butler's argument by suggesting that Antigone occupies a socio-ontologically "undead" space while engaging in the public sphere. She thus "radically rearticulates" the ethics of the *polis* (Žižek 51-62).

According to Castoriadis, Sophocles describes an unbegotten self-begetting that serves to account for man's anthropogeny, hubris, *techné*, his occasional, unavoidable turn to evil, and finally, for man's exile (*apolis* [ἄπολις]) from the heights of civic being. In fact, this version of hubris constitutes the tragic marrow of *Antigone*. Antigone and Creon stand equally guilty of this hubris, which drives the two agonists to a state of *apolis*. Because they cannot perceive the interdependence of the city and chthonic customs, Antigone and Creon single-mindedly pursue a path that leads out from the democratic limitations of the political community (Castoriadis 3-12). Nussbaum argues that Creon twists the meanings of a worthy ethical vocabulary so as to make civic duty the end of and not the means to ethical virtue and justice. In doing so, he linguistically

and (at first) effectively excludes the pressing claims of familial ethical action (Nussbaum 53-62). Neither Creon nor Antigone, in Nussbaum, appear capable of love, despite the chorus' insistence that *erōs* stands as an irrefutable force of ancient law; and neither veer from their over-simplified principles (65-66). According to this reading of the confrontation between Creon and Antigone, Nussbaum is able to assert that, "Hegel's famous and frequently abused reading is correct" (Nussbaum 67). But it is the chorus, especially in its Ode to Man *stasimon*, whose poetic and theatrical articulation of the tragic that counters our attempts at Hegelian dialectic.

Nowhere in her chapter on *Antigone* does Nussbaum mention Kierkegaard, yet it is the Danish philosopher's counter-Antigone, in her silent recognition of the tragic and in her honoring of the Oedipal curse, who achieves a successful synthesis of the Sophoclean choral and Hegelian philosophical strands. For this reason, Kierkegaard's Antigone also serves as useful model with which to understand the refracted allusiveness inherent to Kwahulé's text. In both tragedies, there is a gradual deterioration of language, whereby the centrifugal force of words unhinged from their meanings surrenders to a final state of silence. *Bintou*, however, adds another intertextual layer, subsuming itself within itself the inhumed presence of an Antigone as much conceived by Kierkegaard as by Sophocles.

In *Bintou*, there is a central scene in which we see how the interment of language suggests the buried presence of antecedent texts. Bintou, for the first time in her life we presume, accuses her uncle of having sexually assaulted her in the past. Bintou's Aunt Rokia wonders how much truth there is to this accusation that her husband had sexually assaulted her niece. The conversation that follows is congested with ellipses which

indicate the interruptions, unfinished thoughts, menace, reticence, and silence that dominate the play as a whole.

Unable to answer Rokia's questions, Uncle Drissa erupts, "That's enough! We're done with the Bintou affair" (13)! The aunt responds to this defensive churlishness by drawing a distinction between the burial of a corpse and the silencing of a human being, as if she felt the presiding assumption was that the two were analogous: "You bury a body Drissa, you don't bury an affair (13)?" Of all the actions that could represent the consummation of an "affair," in both its sexual and platonic senses, Rokia chooses entombment. Drissa's sexual assault, disinterred from the mausoleum of family secrecy, is left exposed until the second burial of the play, when the chorus carries Bintou's corpse off the stage.

The French word "*affaire*" has many meanings, but it primarily connotes, "An action in course or in its planning stages to which one or many people (agents) are directly or indirectly interested," as well as, "An action or collection of actions enjoying a certain publicity or notoriety" ("Affaire"). Rokia, in correcting her husband's use of the word, knows that an "*affaire*" describes living, public language, and this awareness provokes her indignation. She also knows that only one action can end the "Bintou affair," and that is Bintou's death. At the end of the play, we will discover that Rokia is wrong. She can, after all, bury an affair.

In the same sense that Kierkegaard argues, in positing his speculative counter-Antigone, that posthumous writing forms the perfect ambit for "the interred," (Either/Or 151), the burial of an "affaire," also represents the ghosting of a text within a text. Kwahulé's text buries and exhumes Sophocles' *Antigone*, Sophocles' *Antigone* and

Kierkegaard's Antigone all alike. The interment of Drissa's sexual assault within his lies and his patriarchal authority structurally parallels the Sophoclean burials that haunt Creon, just as the text of Antigone itself becomes a spectral presence—a voicing in silence—throughout Kwahulé's tragedy.

Kierkegaard advances the hypothesis of a counter-Antigone whose primary power lies in the silence with which she honors Oedipus the father rather than, primarily, Polyneices (Either/Or). In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard argues that truth demands the kind of ironic silence that Socrates brandished against the Sophists:

If the Sophists had an answer for everything, then he could pose questions; if the Sophists knew everything, then he knew nothing at all; if the Sophists could talk without stopping, then he could be silent—that is, he could converse” (The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates 210).

Applying this paradox according to which wordlessness implies speech, Kierkegaard offers his hypothetical Antigone as an avatar of ironic silence and as an aestheticized *virgo mater*: “[Antigone] bears her secret under her heart, out of sight and undetected. She is silence precisely because she is secretive, but this self-withdrawal, implicit in silence, makes her larger than life” (Either/Or 155).

Kierkegaard counts himself and his version of Antigone among the “*Sympanekromenoi*” (Either/Or 151), the fellowship of the dead, whose thanatotic drives are as much a function of their buried secrets as of their buried lives to come. Antigone, both as play and performance, forms an analogous fellowship within the text of Bintou, a presence that remains “larger than life” within Kwahulé's text, which, by echoing Sophocles' treatment of silence and discourse, constitutes a Kierkegaardian *Sympanekromenoi* of form.

In both plays, embodied language implies a wordlessness that will, in the end, stand as the only remaining testament to the tragedies on stage. In exploring the gradient between word and deed, utterance and silence, animal and human, and, eventually, chorus and audience, *Bintou* creates its own tragic spectators. In the final choral passages of *Bintou*, the quietude and silence transfer not only the tragic awareness, but the consciousness of palimpsest inherent to the process of modern adaptation, inspiring a simultaneously sympathetic and critical stance toward source material that is only deceptively ordinary. *Bintou* stands as both instantiation and ironic counterpoint to *Antigone*.

Then a Silence Suffuses the Story...

In the universes of Sophocles' Thebes and Kwahulé's *banlieue*, silence hovers proleptically at the edge of a discourse that, in its superfluity and aggressive physicality, and in its synesthetic power, "blinds" both the protagonists and spectators to the impending deaths on stage. In both plays, word becomes flesh, compounding the violent transgression of both language and bodies until finally the theater is left with a haunting residuum of quietude. As the dramatic ironies of the plays empty speech of ethical content, silence lingers as the only viable protagonist.

Olga Taxidou has noted the importance of the body within tragic discourse: "Tragedy's power to distort and arouse, influence us, make us think, feel at home or feel strange, relies on the basic principles of embodiment" (Felski 243). In *Antigone*, it is often the "tongue," in both its literal and metonymic senses, which serves as the embodiment of the tragic. Creon and Antigone's tragedy rises and falls as a function of

the embodied tongue that we can trace throughout the entirety of *Antigone*. The chorus is the first to mention the tongue that serves as the hinge on which tragedy revolves. In describing the divine intervention in the battle between Eteocles and Polyneices, the chorus refers to Zeus as he who, “intensely hates the boast of a great tongue [μεγάλης γλώσσης]” (127).³⁵ The tactile presence of this “great tongue” wags proleptically and ironically to the silenced tongues that speak in the play's denouement, and to the Chorus' final apothegmatic condemnation of “great words [μεγάλοι δὲ λόγοι]” (1350).

Creon, in one of the play's more heavy-handed ironies, declares that the worst ruler of all is he who refuses counsel because he has, “...out of fear fenced in his tongue [ἐκ φόβου του γλῶσσαν ἐγκλήσας]” (180). He will later hear these same words from a son who has taken it upon himself to represent a citizenry whose tongues have also, “been fenced in by fear”. Of course, Creon here applies his standard of forthrightness to himself, not to his subjects. He claims only that a wise leader should not be reticent to ask questions, and that he should “not remain silent [οὔτ' ἄν σιωπήσῃμι]” (185) were he to see ruin rather than salvation looming on the *polis*' horizon.

Unsurprisingly, it is Antigone who shifts the meaning of this “tongue,” from Creon, who figures it in solipsistically metonymic terms, to the discourse of the *polis* itself. In her confrontation with Creon, Antigone asserts that the citizens of Thebes remain silent out of fear, not sympathy with his decree. They would, she says, protest just as vigorously, “if fear did not cage their tongues [εἰ μὴ γλῶσσαν ἐγκλήοι φόβος]” (505). This repeats, nearly verbatim, Creon's earlier denunciation of the commander who fails to seek counsel because he has, “...out of fear fenced in his tongue [ἐκ φόβου του

³⁵ All translations of *Antigone* are my own. I use the most recent Oxford Classical Text, Sophocles, *Sophoclis Fabulae*.

γλῶσσαν ἐγκλήσας]” (180). Antigone was not present for this earlier speech, yet she is uncannily perceptive in pillorying Creon's autocratic political mode. Having shifted the terms of her rebuke from the private and familial to the public and political, Antigone can now ironize Creon's absolute authority: “Many are a king's [τυραννίς] blessings, not the least that he can do [δοῦν] and say [λέγειν] what he wills [βούλεται]” (506-507).

In a single sentence, Antigone has declared her fearlessness before Creon's sovereignty while also questioning its legitimacy.

It is important to note, at this point, that Antigone's gender alone would have constituted an affront to the traditional political sphere that she controverts. As Mark Griffith reminds us, in his essay “Antigone and her Sister(s): Embodying Women in Greek Tragedy,” the Athenian spectators would have associated silence with women. He believes Antigone is representative of public speech that is “masculine” because it defies silence. Griffith notes, especially, that in her famous argument with Creon, Antigone claims that she is not ashamed to speak. (A. P. M. H. Lardinois 123) It is for this reason that Creon, at the beginning of the play, does not suspect in the least that the culprit for the burial of Polyneices would be either a woman or a member of his family. In a sense, it is to the silence expected of the “feminine,” private sphere that Creon wishes to return Antigone. A salient irony of this desire is that Antigone successfully converts her ultimate silencing into a form of “masculine” and public speech. In a convergence that Kierkegaard does not notice, but that is surely present, his counter-Antigone joins Sophocles’ in transfiguring silence into a political remonstrance that is truly “larger than life”.

Haemon, in his confrontation with Creon, similarly demonstrates the terror and wrongness of his father's words, as well as of the political consequences they inspire. Having monitored the people's speech [λέγει], deeds [πράσσει] and accusations [ψέγειν], Haemon is able to assert that Creon has silenced the polity: “The common [δημότη] man is terrified [δεινὸν] to see your frown, or to offer words [λόγους] you are not happy to hear [κλύων]” (690-691).

Echoing Antigone's accusation, Haemon demonstrates that Creon has achieved the same political result that he counseled against in his opening speech. Inspiring terror with his very look, Creon has “caged” the words of the people, isolating himself from the wise guidance he established as the necessary condition for effective stewardship of the state. He now embodies in his frown the terror [δεινὸς] and force behind the words and wordlessness that precipitate horrors. Haemon impugns the vacuity that sustains hubris, noting that: “He who thinks that he alone has intelligence [φρονεῖν], / a tongue [γλώσσαν], a soul [ψυχὴν], and no one else...he is, when opened up, / found to be empty [κενοί]” (708-709). Haemon ratifies Antigone's charge, claiming as he does that the “tongue” to which Creon once laid exclusive claim is common [κοινός] to family and citizenry alike. It is as if this tongue were the defining generator of Creon's fall. But before the suicides and the *anagorisis* that serve as the fulcrum of his tragedy, the chorus recounts the tale of Lycurgus, who, having been inspired to frenzy by Dionysus, “...came to know the god he madly [μανίαις] touched [ψαύων] with mocking tongue [κερτομίους γλώσσαίς]” (960-961). Alluding to the Bacchan mythos that serves as the palimpsest to Creon's own tragedy, the chorus once again indicts the tongue [γλώσσαίς].

Teiresias, once he has borne witness to Creon's benighted obstinacy, issues a similar indictment, praying that the near-fallen king, “bear a quieter tongue [γλῶσσαν ἡσυχαιτέρων] in his head” (1089)... Having established that silence is the paramount criterion for wisdom, Teiresias says nothing more himself and leaves the stage.

This is the moment of Creon's reversal and recognition. Despite the terror [δεινόν] (1096) of yielding, he capitulates before the terror [δεινὰ] (1091) of Teiresias' prophecy, and in doing so, relinquishes the power of his word in order to listen, submit and act. Having capitulated, Creon asks the Chorus, “What should I do [δοῶν]? Tell me. I will be persuaded” (1099). Creon's obsession with the word will now yield [παραικαθεῖν] to the deed (1103). Having finally assumed the “quiet tongue” and ready ear he advocated before understanding the terrors of necessity, Creon spends precious time articulating the price of his capitulation: “Oh it is hard thing to do [δοῶν], to change my heart. It is ill to struggle against [δυσμαχητέον] necessity [ἀνάγκη]” (1105-1106).

This lamentation serves as a transition between the phases before and after his *peripeteia*, describing rather than commanding the necessary deed. When he leaves the palace, ordering his servants to follow him, axes in hand, his words and actions, converging at last, embody an *anagnorisis* whose belatedness itself precipitates the remaining events of the play. The culminating deaths of Creon's wife and son violently cage the “great tongue,” whose curtailment, we now know, constitutes the essence of wisdom.

Words in Kwahulé's universe convey a similarly physical menace. But in *Bintou*, the power of the tangible—consistently represented by the knife that will eventually take the young girl's life—returns to threaten the world of language. At the end of the play, as

Moussoba the “Knife-Lady” performs the fatal act of Female Genital Mutilation, the steel austerity of her knife cuts through the physical, sexual and linguistic ambiguities of Bintou’s displaced status, and her homelessness [ἄπολις] in the Sophoclean sense. Her blade will slice through the equivocatory morass of international and French law proscribing FGM, and through a post-modernity in which women assume the power and rights of men. Completion will imply mutilation and loss, and, as we will discover, death.

The connection between the rupturing violence of words and deeds is established earlier in the play when Uncle Drissa responds to Bintou’s contumacy with the force of bald command: “Today, you will not leave. I have decided” (8). In declaring that he has “decided,” Drissa uses the past participle of the verb *trancher*, which, used intransitively, can mean alternatively: to cut off, to cut away; to possess sexually; to speak directly; to cut someone off; to resolve a difficulty by making a difficult choice; or, to come to a decision. In issuing his command, Uncle Drissa encompasses a range of connotation that, unbeknownst to the protagonists present at the moment, or to the spectators for that matter, presages the play’s impending tragedies. In the course of the ensuing “acts,” Uncle Drissa will sexually assault Bintou. He will also, horrifyingly, decide to perform FGM on Bintou, whose life is claimed by the “cutting”. The polysemy of his command serves to proleptically articulate Bintou’s fate while at the same time subsuming itself to the silence of mutual incomprehension.

Bintou responds to her uncle by repeating the word, bestowing it with near prophetic force: “I’ve decided...I’ve decided [*J’ai tranché, j’ai tranché*]...But you haven’t always been this uncompromising, Uncle Drissa. Like, for example, the last time you came into my room as I was getting ready...” If past is prologue, the reverse is often true

in tragedy. The ellipse ushers in the chorus—the Lycaons—who join Bintou in a spotlight that has just “circumscribed [*ciroscript*]” her previously solitary figure. The word *tranché* operates in a middle zone between the literal and metaphoric, between the past and present and between utterance and silence. It signifies the severing of both flesh and deliberation, and thus prefigures Bintou’s emptied voice and life that results from Moussoba’s knife.

In an interview with Chalaye about the FGM that ends Bintou’s life, Kwahulé explains that Knife-Lady’s cutting itself represents a fissure between word and deed:

It’s precisely what I call the perverted tradition, which is to say, that [Moussoba] committed an act outside its context and inappropriate for the occasion. Besides, she says in the play, “I’ve got two other operations waiting.” It’s a mechanical thing, something she does one right after the other. In that sense, you’re no longer part of the tradition. And yet, when she speaks, she justifies her act with a discourse she learned long ago, but that she no longer lives. This gap also describes a schizophrenia of power, because it’s always about power, a power whose acts contradict the discourse. (Zabus)

Creon and Drissa alike have the power to speak above and beyond the acts they intend or commit. Creon’s tongue and Moussoba’s knife both embody the gap produced by this “schizophrenia of power” in which we see the disjuncture between declaration and act. Kwahulé notion of a “perverted tradition” implies not only acts committed outside their intended context, but also acts excised from the discourse to which they should serve as proper referents. Creon, Drissa and Moussoba all advert to some form of tradition which they in turn pervert by fracturing bonds of language and context. Creon advocates a responsive political authority whose suppleness he betrays repeatedly until his belated moment of recognition. Drissa calls upon the traditions of his homeland to construct an ideology of the family he undermines by first sexually assaulting and then killing Bintou. And as Kwahulé points out, Moussoba perverts the tradition of FGM by excising it from

its local context and purpose, and thus desecrating the act. It would be easy to extend Kwahulé notion of “perverted tradition” to the act of translation or modern adaptation; but *Bintou* deflects the possibility of this perversion by incorporating the violent perversions of *Antigone*. These are both plays in which language rests upon a substructure of potential violence.

The Violent Metamorphosis of Language

Both *Bintou* and *Antigone* explore the zoomorphic potentialities of language and human understanding in order to reveal a violence underlying both word and deed that, in the end, leaves the stage empty and the voice hushed. These tragedies explore a number of no man’s lands between words and deeds, often figured as a gradient between humans and animals, conflating the processes of biological metamorphosis with those of translation.

We first see this process according to which tragic protagonists zoomorphize language itself when Teiresias, who has just arrived to warn that the king is on the brink of personal and political ruination, Teiresias describes the birds’ “...screeching [κλάζοντας], gadfly-stinging [οἴστω] and meaningless babble [βεβαροβαρομένω]” (1002) that form the basis of his prophecy. The conflation of human and animal utterance (the verb *klaggeó* [κλαγγέω] describes the sounds dogs make) produces a bestialized anti-*logos* that the blind prophet reads in order to determine both the actions of the birds, and the meanings those actions denote.

In *Bintou*, the perversion of words is often assumed to have the power to pervert the human form. Aunt Rokia, drawing on the Abrahamic tradition of the mendacious serpent, undermines her niece by declaring that:

Every word that crosses your lips inevitably turns into a lie. What truth are you capable of, snake [Quelle vérité, petite dépravée ? Toute parole qui franchit le seuil de tes lèvres se transforme irrémédiablement en mensonge. De quelle vérité es-tu capable, serpent]?” (*Bintou* 11)

In *Bintou*, as in *Antigone*, the gradient between humans and animals conflates the processes of biological metamorphosis with those of translation. These plays describe protagonists who blindly grope along another gradient, between truth and fabrication. In Aunt Rokia’s invective, we see how the two gradients are intertwined, anthropomorphizing truth-tellers while zoomorphizing liars. Bintou understands her aunt’s rhetorical strategy and returns the favor. When her mother asks her daughter to remain silent: “Don’t respond, Bintou. I beg you, don’t respond to your uncle’s wife” (11), Bintou spurns her mother’s expedient attempt at appeasement: “Mom, don’t mix your voice with the hissing of serpents. Let me settle up these reptile tales with them [*Maman, ne mêle pas ta voix aux sifflements des serpents. Laisse-moi régler avec eux ces histoires de reptile*]” (11)...

Although Bintou implicitly sanctions her aunt’s identification of beasts with lies, she has also deprecated the connection as a mere story [*histoire*] and therefore an untruth unto itself. Having both endorsed and disparaged “these snake tales,” she mires herself in the middle ground between fact and fiction. Yet it was Aunt Rokia who christened her gang the Lycaons, a name suggesting the lycanthropic middle state that Bintou both ironizes and accepts. In partially assenting to Aunt Rokia’s reductive defamation, Bintou also accepts a linguistic lycanthropy, marooned between human articulateness and

animalistic silence. If she assents to Aunt Rokia's nomenclature, Bintou can estrange herself in the wordlessness of the animal kingdom. Rokia believes in the power of words not only to denote human beings, but to zoomorphize them into submission.

In *Antigone*, it is the words themselves that undergo this process of metamorphosis. Even public discourse is transformed into a bestialized call. When Eurydice at first informs the chorus that she has overheard its "words [λόγων]," she also describes this hearsay as an animal cry—a "*phthogos* [φθόγγος]," and it is this cry that informs her of her family's ruination. Confronted with the terror of this *phthogos*, Eurydice demands a humanized rendering of its bestial collectivity into narrative form ("*muthos* [μῦθος] 1190"). But the Chorus's translation of the animal cries back into the form of a supposedly civilized *logos* turns out to be the true horror. And it is before this horror that Eurydice recoils, subsuming herself into the silence of her suicide.

Soon, the bestial nature of these words will devolve to the meaning-making mind. Creon witnesses not the report of the event, but the event itself. We learn of his actual presence at the death of his son through the report of the messenger. The story the messenger relates—of Antigone and Haemon's deaths—embeds an interior dialogue in which Creon, on discovering his son holding Antigone's body, cries out, "What have you done [ἔργον εἰργασαι]" (1228)?

In a report (*logos*) detailing the actions (*ergon*) of Eurydice's family, we learn that Creon cries out (*logos*) against his son's deed (*ergon*). To Creon's question, Haemon responds in silence, merely spitting in his father's face, before drawing a sword and taking his own life. This linguistic *mise en abyme*, in which language both multiplies and negates itself, represents an encapsulated moment of crisis in which Eurydice discovers

that the messenger's speech, emanating from the world of "human unwisdom [ἀνθρώποισι τὴν ἀβουλίαν]" (1243), is more savage than the animal cries which had horrified her only moments earlier.

In *Bintou*, language often erupts out of and then back into a near primordial silence. During Bintou's encounter with P'tit Jean, the rival gang leader, the tensions between multiple binaries—human and animal; nature and culture; language and silence—amplify and transform. The leader of "*Les Pitbulls*" arrives alone to ask if he can join the Lycaons. Bintou informs P'tit Jean that you "wake up" a Lycaon, you do not become one. You only discover yourself a member of her gang once you have felt, "the shame of being a human being" (23). Bintou points her gun at P'tit Jean, who, according to the stage directions, "realizes the gravity of his situation and remains paralyzed [tétanisé], unable to pronounce even a word [*incapable de prononcer le moindre mot*]" (23). His response to the nearness of death provokes the "weighted silence [ἄγαν σιγὴ βαρὺ]" with which Eurydice and Creon confronted the horrors of error, recognition and death. When the Lycaons retaliate against P'tit Jean's silence with a burst of violence and words, assailing the rival leaders as a "devastating rap explodes [*qu'explose un rap ravageur*]" (25). *alogos* must be accompanied by a severe *logos*, which here, taking the form of rap, serves as contrapuntal choral ode. P'tit Jean, pummeled by the Chorus, calls out for Bintou to intercede, knowing that her word alone will save him. Instead, the three Lycaon members speak as a unified chorus, exchanging bursts of verse with Bintou. Both exhort P'tit Jean to deal drugs:

You got a problem P'tit Jean
How could you
make the world kill itself
if you blow yourself up before

Deal P'tit Jean deal...
 Deal like they deal
 their dignity like their depraved
 the truth like the lie [*la vérité comme le mensonge*]
 (24-25)

The gang's posed nihilism emerges as a response to a Thucydidean world in which words, unhinged from their referents, engender a menacing universe of ambiguity and silence. And although the Lycaons spare P'tit Jean's life, they bequeath him with a partial awareness of this destabilized world of words.

These processes of linguistic sabotage, like the horrendous metamorphoses of language and deed, culminate in violent ruptures that end in death or devastation. Moussoba will cut and kill Bintou, just as Antigone, Haemon and Eurydice will take their own lives, dispossessing the stage and protagonists of the discourse that explained and fomented the tragedies they suffered. It is to these wordless denouements that the silent spectator finally bears witness.

The Silent Spectator

Hegel, who believed the chorus represented "onlooking consciousness," in its attempt to negotiate the content and nature of Spirit, also claimed that the, "spectators...find in the chorus their image and counterpoint, or rather their own thought giving itself expression" (Hegel, Paolucci and Paolucci 293). Unlike Aristotle, who merely noted that the superior spectator [θεᾶτής] of tragedy does not require performers who exaggerate their gestures (Aristotle 137), Hegel believed that the audience plays a role in the ethical and philosophical movements enacted on stage. Nietzsche, however, did not assign the audience such a universally special role in tragic art. He claimed that it was, "Euripides [who] brought the spectator to the stage [*der Zuschauer von Euripides*

auf die Bühne gebracht worden ist] (The Birth of Tragedy 55) (Die Geburt Der Tragödie, Der Griechische Staat 103)” by fashioning his tragic subjects in the form of “actuality.” Nietzsche believed that Euripides, unlike Aeschylus and Sophocles, had turned a mirror to the “everyday life [*alltaeglichen Lebens*]” rather than the “great and bold [*grossen und kuehnen*]” (The Birth of Tragedy 55). Scholarship has recognized ancient Greek tragedy’s role in alerting spectators to the gaps, instabilities and mechanisms of control inherent to discourse. Recent scholarship on ancient Greek audiences centers on tragedy’s ability to foster an awareness of the political and philosophical precariousness inherent to language itself. As Simon Goldhill says, “Staging the agon, dramatising the corruption and failures of communication, displaying the conflicts of meaning within the public language of the city, provoke the audience towards a recognition of language’s powers and dangers, fissures and obligations” (Easterling 149). And it is from these violent “fissures” of language that a mediating silence arises in Sophocles and Kwahulé’s tragic productions. Against the Euripides of Nietzsche’s philosophical imagination—the Euripides who held a mirror up to the spectators—*Bintou* and *Antigone* allow their choruses to gradually subsume the spectators into the silences on stage.

Hegel declared that:

Just as the theatre itself possesses its external ground, its scene and environment, so, too, the chorus, that is the general community, is the spiritual scene, and we may compare it to the architectural temple which surrounds the image of the god, which resembles the heroes in the action. (Hegel, Paolucci and Paolucci 66)

In extending Hegel’s series of analogies in such a way that the spectators imagine themselves into resembling the chorus on stage, Kwahulé and Sophocles move beyond traditional Aristotelian dynamics of empathy, operating instead on principles of formal syllogism.

blahblahblah [*blablablabla...blablablabla*]... nothing but grownup words [*que des paroles de grandes personnes*].” (16)

The Lycaons repeatedly describe and admire Bintou’s thanatotic and erotic drives. Blackout tells a story in which Bintou encourages him to drive against the flow of freeway traffic. When Blackout expresses his concern that the other drivers will collide with him, Bintou assures him that, “...they hold on to their shit lives too much to take that kind of risk” (17), and asks, rhetorically, “You think there’s a more exciting way to die” (17)?

Kelkhal insists that, “[Bintou] doesn’t do anything out of hate [*haine*]; everything she does, she does for love [*amour*]” (18). She is only happy, he continues, with others’ “bang-up job [*bonne action*]” (18), never with her own. From the Lycaons’ anecdotes and descriptions of Bintou, we see that her character echoes forcefully with that of Antigone. Bintou’s defiance of patriarchal authority, infatuation with death, selective loves and passionate followers all find such unmistakable correspondences with Antigone. But in this scene, the three young adolescents have not yet coalesced into a definitive chorus. It is only when Moussoba the Knife-Lady, after mutilating Bintou, signals the play’s strong intertextual self-awareness that the Lycaons metamorphose into a silent collective.

After Bintou dies, the Lycaons carry her body away as an “oriental dirge” plays in the background (45). As the family scatters, unable or unwilling to look upon the damage they have done, Moussoba offers her interpretation of Bintou’s mutilation:

You’re daughter wasn’t brave. Bintou agreed to share death’s bed. Your daughter wasn’t made for this world; she returned to her source. So the night alone is the witness to this drama [*Que la nuit seule soit témoin de ce drame*]. (46)

In echoing Antigone’s thanatotic impulse, her chthonic remove from the *polis*, Moussoba’s peroration reveals a consciousness of genre that leverages irony and allusion

in order to generate our own identity as tragic spectators. The dramatic irony implicates the audience, to which the night necessarily stands in metonymic relation. We “alone” bear witness to Bintou’s FGM, just as we “alone” remain alert to the play’s ancient pedigree. And at the very end of the play, we “alone” listen to silence the tragic death leaves in its wake.

But before the spectators are allowed to fully comprehend the nature of this transference, the chorus returns to embody a silence of a very different sort. The penultimate stage direction reads, “[Moussoba] leaves. The family members, each in his or her corner, stare each other down. Silence” (47). The final scene of the play depicts the mourning and burgeoning retribution that follows on the heels of Bintou’s death. Just as the discourse in *Antigone* has been abstracted from the sphere of the *polis*, the mutilation of Bintou reduces the rich language of the chorus to hushed witness. Nicole Loraux, in her work *The Mourning Voice*, argues that Greek tragedy is an anti-political genre, and that neither the spectators in the Athenian theater of Dionysus—a space sequestered from the *polis*—nor the choruses, should be viewed as analogous to the citizenry. The discourse of tragedy constitutes that which has been excluded from the public sphere, especially the sounds of mourning (Loraux). As we have seen, however, neither Bintou nor Antigone have excluded themselves from the public sphere. Bintou’s triumph is that her voice rings powerfully throughout the *cit * in which she rules supreme, while Antigone voices a public protest that contradicts the private silence to which women had been consigned. Yet death eliminates Bintou and Antigone’s voices from the public sphere, and so the chorus is left to utter the sounds of mourning.

Due to the shame, deaths and departures, silence remains the only sound possible. Death—the ultimate *ergon*—has overwhelmed *logos*. The vengeful Lycaons, refusing to speak, surround Drissa who cannot bear the silence. Having divested itself permanently of individual identities or even first-person transference, the chorus, as if they were the Erinyes themselves, stalk a frantically prolix Drissa:

Who are you? (Silence) Since when did you get here (Silence) What did you see (Silence) Who are you (Silence)...But speak, say something! Who are you and what do you want with me? (Silence) So her mother thought this was the time...for her good...But you know Bintou, she can decide just as well never to come back, just like that...But stop following me. (47)

He exits the stage, trailed by the chorus. In these final moments of the play, the chorus abjures utterance—its “great tongue”—in order to provide the only form of discourse possible in the wake of Bintou’s horrific death; which is to say, the complete absence of discourse. The chorus becomes the silence that has lingered within the gap between word and deed throughout the play, turning Drissa into a protagonist who apostrophizes an on-stage presence that is both specter and spectator. Just as wisdom makes it own compact with wordlessness in the final choral passage of *Antigone*, the Lycaons’ silent ambushade provides the transitive link with which the plays spectators lay claim to the tragedy on stage.

At the end of *Antigone*, Creon leaves the play shattered by his “hard-born destiny [πότμος δυσκόμιστος]” (1346), and the chorus, in response to the multiple calamities to which it has borne witness and on which it has progressively commented, sings its final speech. As opposed to the happiness principally earned from wisdom [φρονεῖν],

Great words [μεγάλοι δὲ λόγοι]
of the over-proud exact great blows [μεγάλας πληγὰς τῶν ὑπεραύχων]
in retribution, [ἀποτείσαντες]

which teaches wisdom in old age [γῆρα τὸ φρονεῖν ἐδίδαξαν]
(1350-1353)

We are as much punished as rewarded for words that supersede the bounds of reality, and thus wisdom enjoins a kind of silence rooted in either death or mute spectatorship. The final ode, in its blind circularity, in its depiction of a world in which wisdom transitively makes old age the necessary condition of happiness, implies an ulterior intelligence accessible only to the spectators silently listening to the “great words” and watching the “great blows” contained within the confines of the theater. The dramatic irony the spectators enjoy implies not just their foreknowledge and relative omniscience, but also their silence.

This silence also inheres to the spectator of the modern adaptation, who enjoys an uncanny brand of dramatic irony, bearing mute witness between and within the two plays. It is in this sense that the spectator or reader of the modern adaptation assumes the variously silent and communicative modes of tragic spectatorship.

Facing Bintou in Brussels



Illustration 1

In November 2003, Rosa Gasquet, a young director from the immigrant neighborhood of Schaerbeek in Brussels, staged *Bintou* in an underground garage. Entranced by the “choral dynamic and musical language of the play” (Chalaye “Bintou De Koffi Kwahulé: La Tragédie Au Choeur De La Cité”), Gasquet cast her production largely with young men and women from the struggling Schaerbeek.³⁶ The production was a success, selling out through much of its run. As Chalaye reported: “...[it was] a young Bruxellois public from Schaerbeek mostly not in the habit of going to the theater, but the original take by Rosa Gasquet, centered on rap and slam poetry, was enough to convince them to come” (“La Tragédie”)...

The poster for the event (see “Illustration 1” above) displays a young woman’s face—we presume Bintou’s—whose half-silhouette darkens into a nocturnal urban skyline striped in luminescent blues and reds. Her face is split, one half lost to the darkness of the cityscape, the other lit by an unseen source. She gazes straight at us, as if to issue a challenge, or patiently inspire a response. Her sealed lips suggest a silence that is as self-possessed as ours is disquiet. Bintou could be asking her silent spectators, as did Camus’, to maintain a “force of rebellion” while not forgetting the lessons of tragedy. If true, hers was the face Camus sought all along.

³⁶ The translation of Sylvie Chalaye’s article is my own.

Afterword

The Second Tragic Spectator and Rebellion

There is an inevitable question that must be asked not only of any modern adaptation, but also of any theory that purports to define, categorize or explain such a practice. What, pragmatically, is gained in claiming literary antecedents in works whose reception histories alone complicate if not overwhelm studies of influence?

In all of the works discussed in this dissertation—Roth’s novels, *Disgrace*, *The Wire* and *Bintou*—a doppelgänger lurks behind the spectator in the *theatron*, living room or library. This doppelgänger exists “on stage” long enough to channel tragedy’s ambiguities and ironies through to the spectator. These “on stage” surrogates include Zuckerman, Lurie, the epigraphs in *The Wire* and *Bintou*’s chorus. It is through these “mediums,” in both the expected and Camusian senses of the word—that the dramatic ironies collapse and that the spectator is able to understand her tragic status. In each of the Greek tragedies under discussion, there is a point at which the protagonist knows what the audience has known all along. At this point of no return, stripped of the tragedy’s dramatic ironies, the distance between the stage and audience disappears, turning the ironic spectator into a tragic spectator.

Camus’ Athenian speech on tragedy posed a question: is there a future for tragedy? Theorists such as Steiner, Williams and Eagleton would develop many nuanced and suggestive answers. Understanding tragedy as a phenomenon unique to particular historical circumstances—circumstances that arose in fifth-century Athens and

eighteenth-century Europe alone—Camus was understandably skeptical about such a possibility. And yet he suggested that his era, and those that would follow, provided political, social and artistic conditions under which ancient Greek tragedy might experience an unexpected renaissance. His time, like that of Athens and Europe, lingered midway in the ambiguous uncertainty between two faiths. In 1955, these faiths were in a triumphant Enlightenment modernity on one hand, and the precarious enrichments of what would come to be known as postmodernism. Unfortunately, according to Camus, artists had yet to imagine and shape a tragic form apposite to the historical substance of his age.

Before making final, concluding remarks, it will be necessary to address two concerns central to this dissertation: the terms “world tragedy” and “spectator”. It is of course important to note that the notion of a “spectator” in the singular can only constitute a heuristic abstraction that merely suggests the heterogeneous and historically situated individuals who attended the Festival of Dionysus, took public transportation to the Schaebeck garage-theater, read paperback novels in the 1990s, or rented television shows on DVD in the 2000s. As Loraux helpfully suggests, the term “spectator” does not indicate a monolithic abstraction, but rather, an “expression of neutral identity” (Loraux 89-90). There are only two possibilities according to which it is possible to conceptualize spectators. The first would be to insinuate the first-person into the discussion, offering one individual’s subjective experience as properly indicative of the universal. The second would be a thorough discussion of historical evidence that examines the role and demographics of each work’s audience or readership. Neither strategy would function within the theoretical scope of this dissertation.

Like the term “spectator,” the phrase “modern tragedy” is also, of course, highly problematic. It is the purpose of this dissertation to create a comparative perspective on “world tragedy” that crosses boundaries of nation and genre. By no means does it pretend to claim that the works under discussion are representative or constitutive of modern adaptations across the global spectrum. Instead, this term “world tragedy” is meant to indicate a kind of translational gesture according to which tragedy creates modern spectators across generic and geographic boundaries.

It is the assertion of this dissertation that Roth, Coetzee, Simon, Burns and Kwahulé have fashioned such a form, but a form that does not accord with the criteria primarily discussed in the five decades since Camus’ speech in Athens. Following on the heels of this speech, Steiner and Williams’ theories on tragedy have provided invaluable insight into the nature, challenges and possibilities of the genre. Yet they have primarily argued for or against Aristotelian criteria whose central concerns are with content rather than form. Steiner’s belief that tragedy is inextricably rooted in aristocratic traditions and metaphysical transcendence has too severely limited the definition of tragedy such that its secular and democratic possibilities, for which Williams rightly argued, were prematurely suspended. Williams and Eagleton have, on the other hand, opened tragedy to far more inclusive categories and criteria, asserting that pity, fear, falls, recognitions, reversals, catharsis and terror befit the postindustrial age as much as any other. But if Steiner foreclosed by too severely limiting the definition of tragedy, the elusive comprehensiveness of Williams and Eagleton’s theories went too far in the other direction.

This dissertation argues that there is a middle-ground between the two, which is the formal process according to which modern tragedy creates its own tragic spectators. By incorporating allusions to, and echoes of, ancient Greek tragedy within the formal structures of their tragedies, *Bintou*, *The Wire*, *Disgrace* and Roth's trilogy inspire the spectator to acknowledge the aesthetic composition of tragedy, the process of modern adaptation itself, and therefore, in the end, the collapse of form into life itself. And it is this consequence of modern adaptation—the spectator's integration of the tragic into her own life and time—that addresses the primary concern of Camus' lecture in Athens. What is most important, in the spectator's consciousness of tragic history and aesthetics, is that she also understands that the tragic boundaries of form, history and human nature define, delimit and inspire a rebellion that negotiates the political horrors of absolute freedom and absolute necessity.

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