Currents Turned Awry: Aposiopesis, Predestination and the *Trauerspiel* of *Hamlet**

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> This figure is fit for fantastical heads and such as be sudden or lack memory. I know one of good learning that greatly blemisheth his discretion with this manner of speech: for if he be in the gravest matter of the world talking, he will upon the sudden for the flying of a bird overthwart the way, or some other such slight cause, interrupt his tale *and never return to it again*. (George Puttenham)[1]
>
> ——so an almighty aposiopesis (B. S. Johnson)[2]

The story of *Hamlet* as Shakespeare conceived it is mainly the story of its cuts and interruptions. In a recent essay, Michael Dobson has drawn our attention to the relation between practices of theatrical cutting and the centrality of interruption to the themes and structure of a play whose three versions – the quartos of 1603 and 1604 (hence Q1 and Q2) and the folio of 1623 (hence F) – make up in themselves another tale of excisions, additions and intermissions. For Dobson, *Hamlet* is "full of interruptions, from the irruption of the ghost into the sentries' account of it" to "the final sudden intrusion of that fell sergeant death", which "appears to invite the further truncation of its last movement."[3] The metaphysical character inherent in these latter senses of interruption is hardly separable from the play's aesthetic nature. As a matter of fact, the play's revenge plot proper begins as the effect of the interruption of what could have been a theological revelation about the nature of Purgatory:

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* This essay has its origin in an invited paper for the VI *Jágónak* conference, *Shakespeare and the Reformation* (IEAS, University of Szeged, 5–7 October, 2017). It was presented on the last day of the conference, in a memorable session on *Hamlet* and the hereafter, chaired by Attila Kiss, which I had the privilege to share with the late Géza Kállay. At that moment I could not know that its contents were predestined to honour the career of one of the members of that audience, Professor György E. Szőnyi, an intellectual beacon within the admirable community of Hungarian Shakespeareans, and a dear colleague whose friendly, learned and generous conversation has always graced my visits to Szeged.

[1] George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy,* ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 251, emphasis added.

[2] B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 167.

[3] Michael Dobson, "Cutting, Interruption, and the End of Hamlet," *New Theatre Quarterly* 32 (2016): 269–75.

GHOST [...] But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fearful porpentine –
But this eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, O list
If thou ever thy dear father love –
HAMLET
O God!
GHOST
– Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder![4] (1.5.15–25)

Rhetorical aposiopesis, or the interruption of a speech before its end, deprives us from a hair-raising tale of the afterlife, and in its place enables a more worldly though equally spine-chilling one. In *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), George Puttenham anglicised aposiopesis as "the Figure of Silence, or of Interruption, indifferently", and also as a "figure of defect", which occurs "when we begin to speak a thing and break off in the middle way, as if either it needed no further to be spoken of, or that we were ashamed or afraid to speak it out."[5] And *Hamlet* scholars have commented, though usually through scattered and sometimes interrupted observations, on the relevance of *aposiopesis* to Shakespeare's dramaturgy. Rhodri Lewis has stressed the play's "structural attachment to the figure of aposiopesis – to things that look as if they are about to happen but that break off before they can arrive at completion."[6] David Amelang argues that aposiopesis in *Hamlet* is a figure of "ineloquence" and "iconic distress", often emerging as an indicator of emotional breakdown.[7] And Bruce Smith cursorily points to Shakespeare's indebted-

[4] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* eds. Anne Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury / The Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 1.5.15–25. All references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene and line number. When other editions are cited, references are preceded by an abbreviation.

[5] Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy,* 250.

[6] Rhodri Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 188. Lewis also argues that Shakespeare employs this figure consistently "to frustrate completion, closure and meaning" (Ibid., 38).

[7] David J. Amelang, "'A Broken Voice:' Iconic Distress in Shakespeare's Tragedies," *Anglia: Journal of English Philology / Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie* 137 (2019): 39.

ness to Puttenham in his use of this figure, which signals the termination of life apropos "the incomplete pentameter of Hamlet's last line in the folio text", which, reads "O, O, O, O", followed by the stage direction "*Dies*."[8]

It is this last moment, though in the text of the Q2, that provides the starting point of my argument. Right before his death, Hamlet commands Horatio to inform Fortinbras of "th'occurrents more and less / Which have solicited", – and here his speech is abruptly cancelled out by one of the best-remembered sentences in the play: "The rest is silence" (5.2.341–42). The rest is certainly silence, as Q2 bears no trace of the fourfold interjection which closes the speech in F. Thus, what Horatio is asked to tell Fortinbras concerns the circumstances and events ("occurrents") that have convinced Hamlet of recommending the "election" of Fortinbras as new King of Denmark – a recommendation given in the form of Hamlet's quasi-posthumous "dying voice" (5.2. 340). This is a remarkable moment, since up to this point the prince has shown little or no interest in matters of practical politics.[9] The most revealing effect of aposiopesis here is its curtailing our access to Hamlet's opinions about the political future of Denmark. Fortinbras's concluding remark that Hamlet "was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal" (5.2.381–382) comes as a last-minute conjecture in a play that up to that point had done little to acquaint his audience with Hamlet's potential abilities as a statesman. Seen in this light, the declaration "The rest is silence" does at least two different things. It is first of all a commentary on *aposiopesis* – a metalinguistic confirmation that the previous sentence will not reach its expected syntactic ending. Aposiopesis thus squints at the play's unfulfilled political content. But Hamlet's proclamation of "silence" does not merely sanction the interruption of his previous speech; it also, as we have been taught frequently, nods proleptically toward what may come after the termination of his life. Shakespeare thus transforms an observation about syntactic abruption into an invitation to share his protagonist's "dread of something after death", his vertigo at crossing the "bourn" leading to the "undiscovered country" (3.1.74, 77–78). Shakespeare's conscious widening of the gap in the "silence" of Hamlet's last word brings together rhetoric and theology in order to

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[8] Bruce Smith, *Shakespeare / Cut: Rethinking Cutwork in an Age of Distraction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 50. For the First Folio text, see William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, eds. Anne Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury / The Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 5.2.309–13: "But I do prophesy the election lights / On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice. / So tell him with the occurrence more and less / Which have solicited. / The rest is silence. / O, O, O, O. *[Dies]*. Other references to this edition are cited parenthetically, with the abbreviation Q1 (First Quarto) and F (Folio) preceding acts, scene and line numbers.

[9] Only at the beginning of this last scene does Hamlet manifest for the first time his complaint that Claudius has "[p]opped in between th'election and my hopes" (5.2.64).

raise questions about the interrelation between the nature of tragic drama and the consequences of a reformed theology of predestination. Two transcendental though hardly reconcilable dimensions of the play – the political and the theological, one focusing on succession and the other on salvation – are then rooted in the same void and motivated by the same silence. This final aposiopesis irrupts as a kind of metaphysical black hole, absorbing and capturing its unreleased political and spiritual energies. As will be argued at the end of this essay, the infinite content galvanised into the interrupting silence of *Hamlet* appears as another reason for vindicating the play's constitutive role in Walter Benjamin's theory of a Baroque dramatic form, essentially different from classical tragedy, for which a century ago he recycled the German term *Trauerspiel*.[10]

I would like to invoke briefly what remains the most substantial contribution to the study of aposiopesis in *Hamlet,* Michael Neill's compelling five-page discussion in his now classic monograph *Issues of Death* (1996).[11] For Neill, *Hamlet* is fascinated by a paradoxical idea of death as fulfilment of the meanings of life and as purposeless incompletion. Neill's idea of *Hamlet* is that of an unfinished narrative full of other unfinished narratives, whose final half-line – 'Go bid the soldiers shoot' (5.2.387) – structurally epitomises the "great aposiopesis" of "Death's arbitrary arrest." In his words,

> [t]he story of our lives, the play seems to suggest, is always the wrong story; but it also half-persuades us that somewhere on the other side of the silence imposed by abruption of death, Hamlet's *true story* remains, waiting to be told. This, however, of necessity, is a story that also lies on the other side of language, tantalizingly glimpsed only as Hamlet himself is about to enter the domain of the inexpressible.[12]

Neill's "true story" seems a figuration of the Lacanian *real,* always on the verge of final revelation but ultimately inaccessible to the *symbolic* order in its resistance to be contained in a coherent tale.[13] Neill disavows full relevance to any religious perspective on

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[10] Walter Benjamin's essay *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* was finished in 1925. I am quoting from the English edition: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977).

[11] Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 241–46.

[12] Ibid., 242.

[13] For a notion of the Lacanian real as that which remains outside language and resists the symbolic order, see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 388. For an introduction to the Lacanian concepts of the symbolic and the real, see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 201–3 and 159–61 respectively.

what he calls the play's "desperate incompleteness."[14] Aposiopesis thus embodies in the text of *Hamlet* a radical break between life and afterlife, a discontinuity that the play's language painstakingly endeavours – though ultimately fails – to bridge over. We should not try to make *Hamlet* a treatise of theology, even if its preoccupations engage in current theological issues like faith, the role of good works in human life, the problem of predestination, and the states of election and reprobation. The English Calvinist William Perkins defined theology bluntly as "the science of liuing blessedly for euer."[15]. Tragic drama, by contrast, sets its boundaries in the finitude of human life. The difference between a theology-informed play like *Hamlet* and a theological treatise is that the play drifts between the eschatological certainties of faith and people's anxieties about their own uncertain afterlives. And here is where rhetorical aposiopesis in *Hamlet* acquires relevance: if, with Puttenham, we believe that with this figure we "break off in the middle way, as if [...] it needed no further to be spoken of", what we recognise in *Hamlet* is an invitation to *seeing beyond* the limits of tragic life without the need for words. In theological terms, this seeing beyond addresses the problematic relations between immanence (the presence of the divine in this world) and transcendence (God's radical independence from the material world and from man's access to that other world). However, in the rhetorical or aesthetic terms into which any poetic text is ultimately shaped, the problem is of a slightly different nature: the primary aim of aposiopesis in *Hamlet* is not to reveal that radical cut between the incompletion on this side and the doubts about the world beyond; rather, it predisposes us to the conclusion that the ultimate cut is between language and existence on this side, and the strong intuition that our seeing beyond into the other side may not help us fill that gap.

Theological interpretations of *Hamlet* in the light of the conflicts between the old Catholic and the new Protestant faith are by no means new. Scholars like John Dover Wilson, Karl Kindt, Roy Battenhouse, Eleanor Prosser, Charles Cannon, or Stephen Greenblatt have discussed, from different points of view, the play's closeness to theological conceptions of either side, particularly in relation to the Ghost's belonging to Purgatory or Hell.[16] Others, like Linda Kay Hoff, have interpreted the play as more consistent religious

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[14] Neill, *Issues of Death,* 246

[15] William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine, or The Description of Theologie, Containing the Order and the Causes of Saluation and Damnation, According to Gods Word* (London, 1591), sig. A3r.

[16] See John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 51–86; Karl Kindt, *Der Spieler Gottes: Shakespeares Hamlet als christliches Welttheater* (Berlin: Wichern-Verlag, 1949); Roy Battenhouse, "The Ghost in *Hamlet:* A Catholic 'Linchpin'," *Studies in Philology* 48 (1951): 161–92, and *Shakespearean Tragedy and Its Christian Premises* (Bloomington: Indiana University

parables. In her book *Hamlet's Choice: Hamlet as Reformation Allegory* (1989), Hoff sees the tragedy as a Calvinist allegory of the Book of Revelation, in which prince Hamlet's choice of Fortinbras signifies the rise of a new religion against a corrupt Catholic faith embodied in the Danish state – somehow solving, though in ways that one could regard as far-fetched, the dichotomy pointed at the beginning of this essay between the political and theological dimensions of the play.[17] More recently, an exhaustive and suggestive monograph by John T. Curran has interpreted *Hamlet* as an exploration of its author's dislike of the Calvinist doctrine that had become dominant in late-sixteenth century England. In *Hamlet,* Curran argues, Shakespeare mourns the world lost with the old religion. In Curran's view, while between acts 1 and 4 the play shows Hamlet as trying to stick to humanist, primarily Catholic ideas of man's unlimited potentials to alter the conditions of his existence, act 5 presents a diminished prince that has surrendered to the pessimistic helplessness of the individual at the preordained, static universe propounded by Calvinist faith.[18]

However, these illustrations of how dogma can enlighten the play risk overstating the influence of the former over the latter. While I accept that English Calvinism and *Hamlet* are worlds that have a lot to say to each other, my interest lies in the mutual transformations that theological doctrine and dramatic form undergo when they pervade each other. I will return more explicitly to this issue in the conclusion to this essay, although for now I will focus on one single aspect of this problem in *Hamlet,* namely its addressing the question of human action in the context of Reformation doctrines of salvation by faith and the role of good works. Luther's dismissal of good works since his early writings is one of the most controversial aspects of his doctrine. In 1520, and in an attempt to clarify his position on this point against current denunciations of the doctrine of justification by faith, Luther published the *Treatyse of Good Workes,* translated into English in 1535. The goodness of works, Luther argued, was measured by their origin in man's faith and

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Press, 1971), 204–66; Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), esp. 118–72; Charles K. Cannon, "'As in a Theater': *Hamlet* in the Light of Calvinist Doctrines of Predestination," *Studies in English Literature: 1500–1900* 11 (1971): 203–22; and Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[17] Linda Kay Hoff, *Hamlet's Choice: 'Hamlet' as Reformation Allegory* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989). My views of the far-fetched nature of Hoff's arguments are shared by György E. Szőnyi, "*The Elizabethan Hamlet* by Arthur McGee; *Hamlet's Choice: 'Hamlet' as Reformation Allegory* by Linda Kay Hoff," *Comparative Drama* 25, no. 2 (1991): 198.

[18] John E. Curran, *Not to Be: Hamlet, Protestantism and the Mourning of Contingency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 2–3, and passim.

confidence in God, regardless of any other aspect of their nature. In the English translator's words:

> In this faythe al works be made lyke and equall / and one as good as another. In this faythe also falleth away all difference of works, whether they be great or lytell, longe or shorte, many or fewe / for the works be pleausant to god not for them selfes but for faythes sake [...][19]

Taken literally, Luther's argument regards faith as a leveller of all works. One could think of the consequences that this notion entails in the context of a theory of tragic action. To mention only two examples passingly, we may continue to admire tragic characters for what Aristotle termed the "magnitude" *(mégethos)* of the tragic action, or for what Philip Sidney believed to be the "high and excellent" qualities that distinguished a tragic character's endeavours.[20] Yet the reasons why we may admire those actions and those characters will not ultimately make the actions theologically significant nor will lead the characters to redemption – as is seldom the case with tragic protagonists. The issue haunts Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, which we frequently read by way of dichotomies between action and inaction, between resolution and vacillation, between choosing to live or die – and it is particularly haunting if the "we" that dominates the soliloquy is understood as a socially excluding and gender-biased reference to those men that share Hamlet's excellence and magnitude as a prince rather than as a universal deictic encompassing the whole mankind.[21] We tend to pay more attention to the prominence of suicide than to Hamlet's considerations of other actions that might prevent "our" – or better, *their* – endurance of "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (3.1.56–57). "Our" death-wish, Hamlet argues, is often stopped by "the dread of something after death" (3.1.76–77). And this motivates the first conclusion to his soliloquy:

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[19] Martin Luther, *A Propre Treatyse of Good Workes* (London, 1535), sigs. B4r–B4v.

[20] "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (VI, 1449b), in Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle,* ed., trans. Samuel Henry Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1922), 22–3; "high and excellent tragedy [...] openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue [...] maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their Tyrannical humours," Philip Sidney, "A Defence of Poesy," in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney,* ed. Katherine Duncan Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 96.

[21] This reading demands a certain questioning of the universal appeal of the soliloquy by considering Hamlet's tendency to universalise his own position of privilege in the Great Chain of Being. For a recent thought-provoking interpretation of Shakespeare's perspective on these matters, see György E. Szőnyi, "'Contending with the Fretful Element': Shakespeare and the (Gendered) Great Chain of Being," *Gender Studies* 11 (2012): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.2478/v10320-012-0025-6.

"Thus conscience does make [cowards | *cowards of us all*]."[22] Q1 ended this speech here, all the more for the coherence of its message.[23] But the Q2 and F texts expand the argument, often to the critic's migraine. What we read in these versions increases the sense of logical and rhetorical *dilemma,* that figure that another Renaissance theorist, Henry Peacham, detects "when we diuyde a thing into two partes, and reprove them both by shewing reasons."[24] If "conscience" reproves suicide, what the ensuing lines refute is Hamlet's will "to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them" (3.1.58–59). In order to show the differences between the two versions, Jesús Tronch-Pérez's synoptic edition is again quoted here:

> Thus conscience does make [cowards | *cowards of us all*];
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is [sickled | *sicklied*] o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great [pitch | *pith*] and moment
> With this regard their currents turn [awry | *away*]
> And lose the name of action. (*Synoptic Q2/F*: 1737–1742, 3.1.82–87)

In his canonical commentary of the play, Harold Jenkins identified the difficulties posed by "the repeated 'thus'", adding a "further reflection" to the first conclusion to the soliloquy's "initial 'question';" as Jenkins argues, "the frustration of the impulse to seek death now offers itself as a particular example of a general tendency in men for any act of initiative to be frustrated by considerations which it raises in the mind."[25] This effect whereby a particular example is subsumed into general meditation relies on the heavily allegorical strain of these lines: nouns like "conscience", "resolution", "thought", "enterprises", and "action", all sharing an exclusive pertinence to the human condition, are transformed

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[22] *A Synoptic Hamlet: A Critical-Synoptic Edition of the Second Quarto and First Folio Texts of Hamlet,* ed. Jesús Tronch-Pérez (València: SEDERI / Universitat de Vàlencia, 2002), 1737, 3.1.82. Further references to this edition are cited parenthetically by line numbers (Q2) and act, scene and line numbers (F), preceded by the abbreviation *Synoptic Q2/F*.

[23] The entrance of Ofelia (sic.) is the cause of a new use of aposiopesis in the text of the First Quarto: "Who would this endure, / But for *a hope* of something after death, / Which puzzles the brain and doth confound the sense – / Which makes us rather bear those evils we have / Than fly to others that we know not of? / Ay, that – O, *this conscience makes us cowards of us all.* / – Lady, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered" (Q1, 7.131–137; both emphases added).

[24] Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence, Conteyning the Figures of Grammer and Rhetorick* (London, 1577) sig. T2r.

[25] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), "Longer Note" to 3.1.56–88; 488.

into sensual realia. "Resolution" is personified by its being assigned a "native hue" – i.e., a healthy, reddish complexion. By contrast, "thought" possesses a "pale cast." The *Oxford English Dictionary* (hence *OED*) lists this use of "cast" in *Hamlet* as the first recorded instance of the word in the sense of "hue" or "shade", although it also registers late-fourteenth-century uses of the word meaning "a glance, a look, expression." No editor or commentator that I know points at "regard" in relation to this semantic field. *OED*'s sense 6 of the word is "aspect, appearance, facial expression, countenance", perhaps here a pun also suggesting *OED*'s sense "intention, design, purpose", a now obsolete meaning for which various Shakespearean instances are recorded.[26] "Resolution" is determination, decision, and thus the potential to transform intention or design into act by means of "action." In Hamlet's imagined allegorical playlet, the healthy look of Resolution is diffused and made sick or pale ("sicklied" in F), or more drastically cut off with the deadly "sickle" (as in Q2), of pale-faced, melancholy Thought.[27] This "regard" transforms Resolution into its opposite, coward-making Conscience, which here means "scruple", and which reinstates the pertinence of "the dread of something after death" in this final part of the speech. If enterprises lack resolution, Hamlet seems to suggest, then their "pitch", or "pith" (notice that the first option suggests the highness of tragic deeds, whereas the second suggests the physical and/or moral strength of a resolute character), cannot reach the full status of Action, as those "currents" of becoming, which would connect intention to act, are either drastically discontinued by adversity ("turn[ed] away"), or rather deflected, deprived of their original intention ("turn[ed] awry"). This conclusion embodies the destiny of heroic action in *Hamlet*: "conscience", "the dread of something after death", or our fears about the preordained destiny of man, radically interrupt or turn *away* our enterprises, or simply disfigure and diminish their heroic nature by twisting or turning *awry* their courses – thus causing a fissure between intentions, ideals and events. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* imagines a humanist universe in which we invest our faith on the pursuit of our noblest undertakings against a Reformation universe in which we must put all our undertakings to the service of our faith. Deeds for Hamlet, and particularly after this speech, lose the heroic name of action. This statement should not be interpreted as a sign of the play's being a straightforward allegory whereby Shakespeare makes Hamlet

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[26] See *OED* Online, senses 35 and 6, both obsolete, of "cast" (noun), accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/28530. See also senses 6 and 10.c of "regard" (noun), the latter being apparently found in Shakespeare only, accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161186.

[27] See *OED* Online, "sickly" (verb), accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/179228 – as well as sense 1 of "sickle" (verb 2), accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/179211.

act in accordance with the principles of the new or against the old faith. It rather introduces a Reformation theology of works, and thus a philosophy of action, as a shaping force of the aesthetics and metaphysics of Shakespearean tragic drama.

Two theoretical models of tragedy occur to me as tests for the study of *Hamlet* from a perspective that integrates the attention to theological issues and the preoccupation with form. Both were proposed about a century ago, and they may be regarded as incompatible. The first derives from Hungarian philosopher and critic György Lukács, more specifically from "The Metaphysics of Tragedy", the essay closing one of his early books, *Soul and Form* (1911). "Tragedy", Lukács argues, "can extend only in one direction: upwards. It begins at the moment when enigmatic forces have distilled the essence from a man, have forced him to become essential; and the progress of tragedy consists in his essential, true nature becoming more manifest."[28] Tragedy embarks on an inexorable ascension to transcendence. Tragedy and the tragic hero interiorise action, suffering, humiliation and death into a single end. Even if in drama God acts as a spectator without mingling "with the words and gestures of the players", true tragedy "brings forth the voice of the god who slumbers inside man, the voice which, in life, has fallen silent; the immanent god awakens the transcendental god into life."[29] Hostile to ordinary life and opposed to history, the Lukácsian idea of tragedy becomes "the form of the high points of existence, its ultimate goals and ultimate limits."[30] As Sophocles is Lukács's definitive model, we could exemplify his argument with Oedipus's acceptance of his curse as a path to blissful atonement and death leading from *Oedipus Rex* to *Oedipus at Colonus*. In Lukács's model, the distillation of tragic essence, which bans anything banal or atmospheric from heroic life, but whose individuality, by becoming the only measure of its ideal authenticity, also denies universality, would not allow action to lose its own name. For that reason, Hamlet's soliloquy is spoken at the other end of Lukács's theory; and consequently, Lukács sees Shakespearean tragedy as a paradox – and to some extent as a failure: the "anti-historical" essence at the core of Shakespeare's plays is constantly challenged by "all the colourful variegation of real life" that pervades them.[31] Genuine tragedy, Lukács implies and Walter Benjamin would insist shortly after him, is only feasible if it remains circumscribed to the sphere of myth.

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[28] References are from the English translation: György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974), 155. The original German edition is of 1911.

[29] Ibid., 154.

[30] Ibid., 159.

[31] Ibid., 171.

I have just introduced the second model, as announced in this essay's title: Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925). Conceived partly as a reaction to Lukács's idea of tragedy, Benjamin's attempt to confer generic status upon the Baroque *Trauerspiel* – i.e., mourning-play, an early modern alternative to classical tragedy for seventeenth-century German drama – is brought forth here for the importance granted to the English tradition, to Shakespeare, and particularly to *Hamlet* in the configuration of this form.[32] And also for two additional reasons: first, because, in Benjamin's view, the *Trauerspiel* replaces the tragic universe of myth with the sphere of historical life; second, and more specifically, because historical life enters this new seventeenth-century genre in the form of a radically pessimistic, melancholic universe that is the consequence of the new Protestant doctrines of salvation. More specifically for Benjamin, the "contemporary theological situation" inherent to the Reformation determines a kind of drama in which "the total disappearance of eschatology" is compensated by "the attempt to find, in a reversion to a bare state of creation, consolation for the renunciation of a state of grace."[33] Benjamin insists on the necessity to leave aside the classical notion of tragedy when studying the plays of this period.[34] And this is so because the dramatic conflict at stake is no longer the heroic struggle of an individual with fate but one between two Christian ideas of history. In words of a recent commentator of Benjamin, Samuel Weber, the *Trauerspiel* sets up a dialectic between *"Heilsgeschichte",* or a Christian history as a promise of salvation and redemption, and *"Naturgesichte",* or the natural history of an unredeemed and perpetually guilty humanity.[35] In replacing myth with allegories of Christian history, the *Trauerspiel* also disregards the idea of one single tragic hero in favour of a choral cast of characters presided over by type figures like the tyrant, the martyr and the courtly intriguer.[36] It consequently focuses on vice and moral disintegration against tra-

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[32] Interest in the relevance of Benjamin's theories to Shakespeare's theatre has grown recently. For two pioneering essays, see Zenón Luis-Martínez, "Shakespeare's Historical Drama as *Trauerspiel:* Richard II – and After." *English Literary History* 75 (2008): 673–705; and Hugh Grady, "*Hamlet* as Mourning-Play," in *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 131–92. Grady's essay, of undoubted interest to the present one, focuses on Shakespeare and Benjamin as precursors of a post-modern aesthetics of fragmentation.

[33] Benjamin, *Origin,* 81.

[34] Ibid., 60–68.

[35] Samuel Weber, "Tragedy and *Trauerspiel:* Too Alike?" in Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard, eds., *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 94.

[36] "For the 'very bad' there was the drama of the tyrant, and there was fear; for the 'very good', there was the martyr-drama and pity" (Benjamin, *Origin,* 69). On tyranny and martyrdom, see further, Ibid., 69–74. On the intriguer, see 95–8. On Shakespeare's *Richard III* as model for the intriguing Vice, see Ibid., 228.

gedy's traditional treatment of individual excellence. The foregrounding of death and mourning, materialised in the presence of emblematised corpses and dismembered bodies, becomes the sign of the unresolved dialectics of salvation and guilt, transcendence and immanence, the will for redemption and unredeemed creatureliness.[37]

Shakespeare, and particularly *Hamlet,* is crucial for Benjamin's aesthetic project. In *Hamlet* Benjamin opportunely detects the *Trauerspiel*'s questioning of the individuality and authenticity of tragic death as argued by Lukács.[38] Hamlet dies by a mere accident that alienates the protagonist's end from his own insights into his fate. Hamlet's death resigns individuality in order to embark itself in a historical continuum of communal destruction.[39] A second aspect of *Hamlet* that Benjamin links to his idea of *Trauerspiel* is the articulation of its dramatic conflict around Lutheranism's antinomic relationship to everyday life: *Hamlet,* and I have made the point earlier, displays the disenchantment of a theological worldview that has deprived human action of all value, particularly the actions of those of great estate. This "grim belief in the subjection of man to fate" is projected in the princely figure. Benjamin's general statements that "[t]he prince is the paradigm of the melancholy man" and that "nothing demonstrates the frailty of the creature so drastically as the fact that even he is subject to it" find their supreme representation in Shakespeare's character.[40] But a third aspect of *Hamlet* carries us to the exceptionality of the play in relation to other European *Trauerspiele,* particularly the German examples, which Benjamin saw as "a rash flight into a nature deprived of grace."[41] While in those plays the abandonment of eschatology led to a depiction of melancholic types dominated by a slothful "self-absorption" and mournful contemplation, Benjamin believes that Shakespeare's Danish surpasses this type: "only Shakespeare", Benjamin writes, "was capable of striking Christian sparks from the baroque rigidity of the melancholic." In Benjamin's argument, Shakespeare adds a new dimension to the genre by situating his prince as "a spectator of the graces of God" through which he comes to the understanding of his own fate in a Christian world: "[h]is life, the exemplary object of his mourning, points, *before its extinction,* to the Christian providence in whose bosom his mournful images are transformed into a blessed existence."[42] Without overtly referring to them, Benjamin

37 On the corpse as emblem, see Benjamin, *Origin,* 215–20.

38 For Benjamin on Lukács and tragic death, see *Origin,* 135–36.

39 Ibid., 136–37.

40 Ibid., 142.

41 Ibid., 81.

42 Ibid., 158; emphasis added.

seems to have in mind Hamlet's insights into providence in the last act of the play: his understanding of his rash participation in the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the light of "a divinity that shapes our ends" and his detecting "a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.10, 5.2.196–197).

Benjamin does not go further in his analysis. Understanding the fifth act of *Hamlet* as a voyage into Christian acceptance is a commonplace of Shakespearean criticism, but the specific referents or contents that may support such acceptance still remain hidden in the text's undiscovered country. Shakespeare had at his disposal the popular *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches,* published in 1547, with a second volume and edition in 1571, a theological primer touching on the essential points of the reformed faith. Besides, the years before *Hamlet* saw the publication of the works of Calvinist theologian William Perkins. Specifically, *A golden Chaine, or the Description of Theologie: Containing the Order of the Causes of Saluation and Damnation* (1591) displays the whole Calvinist machinery of double predestination, that is, the path leading both the elect and the reprobate from the signs of their condition during life through a transitional period of bodily death leading to final judgement and eternal life in salvation, and particularly in damnation. Perkins does not spare the details in describing the tormenting circumstances populating these paths for the reprobate. The reprobates' deaths involve "a separation of the body and the soule; of the bodie, that for a time it may lie dead in the earth: of the soule, that it may feele the torments of hell, even untill the time of the last iudgement."[43] During Last Judgement, their bodies "shall rise againe to condemnation".[44] After Last Judgement, they "are separated from the presence and glorie of God", "punished with eternall confusion", and "tormented with an incredible horrour."[45] For Calvinist theology, the rest is never silence, but exhaustive description of the courses of the body and the soul both in human life and in the afterlife. Calvinism does not indulge in aposiopesis. Thus, as we imagine Hamlet's "dread of something after death" in act 3 and his Christian enlightenment in act 5, shouldn't we also decide whether these take the paths of salvation or of damnation? Should we entirely abandon the possibility to argue that, if there is any Christian finding made by Hamlet, that may be no other than the discovery of what Perkins would call his "hardnes of heart" and his "reprobate sense" – that is, an extinction of "the iudgement of good and euill"?[46] How else could he reinsert

43 Perkins, *Golden Chaine,* sig. V5r.

44 Ibid., sig. V5v.

45 Ibid., sig. V6r.

46 Ibid., sig. V4v.

the atrocities that he has committed into a cogent providential scheme? Benjamin offers a key here when he describes that the "Christian sparks" that shine in him are briefly seen "before his life's extinction", an extinction that is immediately later subsumed into that wider communal extinction where his individuality loses all relevance.

Such an almighty aposiopesis only stomachs a perplexed conclusion: in putting an end to Hamlet's life, it sends those Christian sparks lighted in the play to inevitable darkness. Hamlet, we intuit, has been placed before his destiny by an unseen God, but whatever sort of transcendent knowledge he has acquired about his own existence is concealed from the spectators. The radical immanence of his experience dies in his desire that his story transcend the very act of being told, and in Horatio's rather disappointing transmission of that tale, reduced to the disconsolate triteness of the poetics of *Trauerspiel*: "So shall you hear / Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, / Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters / Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause / And in this upshot purposes mistook / Fallen on the inventors' heads" (5.2.364–369). This emblematises the universality of purposeless destruction that finally inters tragic telos and individual excellence into a phenomenology of lust and carnage.[47] Elsinore is not Colonus, and Hamlet's acquiescent return to the violent scene of his fate shares little with Oedipus' blissful fading into transcendent existence:

> But in what manner,
> Oedipus perished, no one of mortal men
> Could tell but Theseus. It was not lightning,
> Bearing its fire from God, that took him off;
> No hurricane was blowing.
> But some attendant from the train of Heaven
> Came for him; or else the underworld
> Opened in love the unlit door of earth.
> For he was taken without lamentation,

[47] "Res tragicae, grandes, atroces, iussa Regum, caedes, desperationes, suspendia, exilia, orbitates, parricidia, incestus, incendia, pugnae, occaecationes, fletus, ululatus, conquestationes, funera, epitaphia, epicedia" [The matters of tragedy are great and terrible, such as commands of kings, slaughters, despair, suicides, exiles, bereavements, parricides, incests, conflagrations, battles, the putting out of eyes, weeping, wailing, bewailing, eulogies, and dirges], in Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem* (Geneva, 1561), 3.97. Translation: *Translations from Scaliger's Poetics,* ed., trans. Morgan H. Padelford (New York: Henry Holt, 1905), 57. For the influence of this definition on German *Trauerspiel,* see Benjamin, *Origin,* 62.

> Illness or suffering; indeed his end
> Was wonderful if mortal's ever was.[48]

For truly tragic characters like Oedipus, the currents may turn *away* (F), but adversity does not hinder their aspirations to transcendence. For the characters of the *Trauerspiel,* and for Hamlet as its ultimate representative, the currents turn rather *awry* (Q2), disfiguring and interrupting the path toward a blessed existence. The final image of Hamlet – the display of his corpse while Fortinbras reminds us of the likelihood that, "had he been put on", he would have "proved most royal" (5.2.381–382) – does little else than confirm Benjamin's diagnosis:

> The level of the state of creation, the terrain on which the *Trauerspiel* is enacted, also unmistakably exercises a determining influence over the sovereign. However highly he is enthroned over subject and state, his status is confined to the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature.[49]

The deceptive excellence of Hamlet's corpse, an allegory of the thwarted potentiality of ideal sovereignty, copiously instructs us on the dissolution of the history of salvation into the less sacred history of the fall of a perplexed prince in the midst of a baffling scheme of personal revenge and an even more baffling fray over "a moiety competent" of land won by his deceased father (1.1.89). As Benjamin reminds us, in the *Trauerspiel* "death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance."[50] As Hamlet's interrupting silence seems to announce, crossing the "bourn" from life to death may hardly lay bridges between meaning and existence. As the impenetrable woods of the undiscovered country keep being combed in search for the end of the sentence, a reeking, shapeless lump of dead flesh rots in a dark room near the royal chamber.

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[48] Sophocles, "Oedipus at Colonus," in *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Sophocles I,* ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), 150.

[49] Benjamin, *Origin,* 85.

[50] Ibid., 166.