

**GESTUS, EMBODIMENT, AND PROBLEMATIZED IDENTITY IN BRECHT AND BECKETT: A REASSESSMENT OF PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY'S USEFULNESS IN THE STUDY OF TRAGEDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In light of continuing theoretical challenges to Freud's utilisation of Oedipus Rex and its application in literary analyses, as well as shifts away from the Aristotelian model of tragedy within theatre, this essay critically examines the value of psychoanalytic theory in studies of tragedy. Through examination of Brecht's Life of Galileo and Beckett's Not I and Play, as well as the theoretical writing of Laplanche and Deleuze and Guattari, it is argued that whilst psychoanalytic concepts are still able to generate powerful insights a change is required in the way in which we view and use them. Through noting the emphatic physicality in the plays of both Brecht and Beckett, and the increased focus on the body in later psychoanalytic theory, the contention of this essay is that both share a fundamental concern with questions of subjectivity and embodied identity and that this creates numerous opportunities for further study in the area.*

The potential value of psychoanalytic theory for the study of tragedy is significant; considering Freud's recourse to Classical tragedy, there is much to the claim that "on the horizon of any critical engagement with either [...] there looms the ineluctable question of both" (Ray 13). André Green's argument for a "psycho-analytic [sic] reading of tragedy" (27) aimed at the "mapping of the traces of the Oedipal structure concealed in its formal organisation" (27) is, however, a limiting one. Firstly, the insistence upon the oedipal model might rightly be criticised for operating within a frame of reference that is anachronistic, no longer able to provide adequate explanations (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 14). Secondly, such a 'reading' of tragedy implies the kind of hermeneutic approach that Jean Laplanche argues to be antithetical to psychoanalytic principles, in which "discovery is masked, concealed, by the return of synthesis, of 'reading'" ("Anti-Hermeneutics" 10); it becomes a form of his notion of 'theoretico-genesis reproduc[ing] ontogenesis' ("Uncomplete Copernican Revolution" 81). Green would establish a closed system with tragedy positioned as a projection of the unconscious; not allow that tragedy, as performance, might be "its own kind of thinking" (Cull 3). Important also, here, is the implicit false conflation of 'tragedy'

with ‘the tragic’ that William Storm suggests is often made (1); accordingly it will be argued that tragedy needs also to be seen as a form of exploration of the tragic in its own right.

In arguing for the value of psychoanalytic theory in the study of tragedy this essay will, therefore, explore how both have an interest in the challenges posed to the concept of our subjectivity in terms of the body and its relations. The cognateness of tragedy and psychoanalytic theory in this regard will be studied in consideration also of Peter Szondi’s claim that “there is no such thing as *the* tragic” (49) but that “[t]here is only *one* tragic downfall: the one that results from the unity of opposites, from the sudden change into one’s opposite, from self-division” (55). Accordingly, the reformulations of Freudian psychoanalysis presented by Laplanche, and by Deleuze and Guattari, in which the notion of a complete and endocentric individual identity is radically altered, shall be focused upon here. It will be contended that these theories allow for an opening up of the study of theatrical tragedy, and they will be analysed in relation to plays that challenge the Aristotelian model, primarily Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* and Beckett’s *Play* and *Not I*. In particular, Laplanche’s ‘enigmatic signifiers’ will be considered in regard to the Brechtian *gestus*; Beckett’s challenging of the unified, functioning, body assessed in comparison to the schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Guattari.

#### Copernican Revolution – Laplanche’s ‘enigmatic signifier’, Brecht’s ‘gestus’

Freud’s bold claim to have dealt the third great blow to human narcissism (143) can be seen to highlight one of the crucial conceptual connections between tragedy and psychoanalytic theory. Freud is referring to his discovery of the psychical unconscious, which he saw as having decentred the human subject in relation to their mind, just as Copernicus had done to the Earth within the universe: the ‘blow’ being the revelation that “*the ego is not master in its own house*” (143). It represents a tragic division of self in the sense that if ‘you’ are no longer autocrat of your own self then the implication is that something else is. Laplanche, however, argues that this radical potential of this psychoanalytic thought was actually left unrealised by Freud as a result of his 1897 abandonment of the seduction theory in favour of autochthonic drives. For Laplanche, Freudian psychoanalysis therefore represents an unachieved Copernican revolution; he argues: “if Freud is his own Copernicus, he is also his own Ptolemy” (“Uncomplete Copernican Revolution” 60). In order to re-radicalise psychoanalytic theory, Laplanche returns to the idea of seduction and resurrects it in a more generalised form; from this new foundation, he conducts a rigorous critique of Freud’s work so as to establish a truly Other-centric, or “excentric” (62), model. Unlike Lacan, who privileged linguistic models, Laplanche argues for the importance of non-verbal messages, referred to as “enigmatic signifiers” (“Short Treatise” 97) or “designified signifier[s]” (97), in the creation of the subject. Describing these, Laplanche writes that they “include in large part signifiers of affect” such as “a smile [...], an angry gesture, a grimace of disgust” (108). They are ‘enigmatic’ because the meaning is unconscious to both parties (97). In terms of assessing

how this might be of use to the study of tragedy, a comparison to Brecht, and his use of *gestus*, suggests itself.

Brecht, it might be argued, is a problematic playwright to study in relation to either tragedy or psychoanalytic theory: he positions his work in strong opposition to the Aristotelian conception of tragedy and its tradition in theatre. For Brecht, the importance that dramatic theatre grants to plot and identification with characters, as well as the catharsis that is its telos, is limited and outmoded; in contradistinction, epic theatre must not “believe that one can identify oneself with our world by empathy, nor must it want this” (“Last Stage: Oedipus” 25). Critical also of the fate beyond question, the impossibility of change, that he sees implicit in Aristotelian tragedy (“Short Organum for Theatre” 189) Brecht attempts “a deliberate unseating of the supremacy of tragedy and tragic inevitability” (Mitchell xii) that is in fitting with his Marxist desire for change. Despite, however, refuting one form of the tragic, Brecht’s emphasis on intersubjective relations, over psychological depth of character, shifts the focus to “the space between the characters” (Maclean 87); an effect of this is the presentation of a decentring of the subject, through tragic division of identity into self and Other, that Laplanche’s psychoanalytic theory also works to elucidate.

The *gestus*, fundamental to Brecht’s theatre (Benjamin 3), therefore assumes a particular interest in this regard. In acting, *gestus* has an important physical quality and is necessarily relational in nature: described by Brecht as a matter of “overall attitudes” (“On Gestic Music” 104) it can be understood as referring “not so much to movements of the body as [...] to a language whose specific function was to provide a mimetic medium for the presentation of disharmonious processes” (Asman 48). It is, as Pavis defines it, “a simple movement by one person when faced with another, in a particular social or corporal kind of behaviour” (164). With this notion of *gestus*, then, the presumption that Maclean suggests is sometimes made about Brecht not being concerned with the body in practice because he does not discuss it in detail in his theory (82) can be refuted. Furthermore, the limitation of Green’s psychoanalytic approach to tragedy, and the usefulness of Laplanchean theory, also becomes especially apparent. In *The Tragic Effect*, Green, offers a flawed interpretation of theatre, suggesting it to “owe its peculiar power to the fact that it is an exchange of language” (2) and that “there is nothing but the unglossed text of the statements” (2). To make such a claim, however, is to essentially ignore the fact of theatre’s physicality, the acknowledgement of which is crucial to understanding Brecht’s work, as is evidenced in *Galileo*.

Although Brecht saw *Galileo* as being “a step backwards” in terms of epic theatre (qtd. in Hugh Rorrison xxxvi) it is this ambiguity in its aesthetic positioning that makes the play particularly interesting in terms of reconsiderations of tragedy and the tragic. Ellis opens the question by arguing *Galileo* to be an Aristotelian tragedy, partially based upon an interpretation of *Galileo* as a character of *arete* struggling against the system (240). This argument, however, offers a restricted and problematic understanding of the play: fundamentally, *Galileo*’s characteristics, noble or otherwise, are presented not as being intrinsic but as dependent upon the scene in which he is physically implicated. It is not an exploration of an individual’s struggle against the larger order; rather a critique of the notion

of there being true autonomous individuality in the first place. This is clearly evinced in the gestic content in Scene 1 in particular, in which the body as a means of conveying messages is important is present from the opening which sees Galileo “*washing down to the waist, puffing and cheerful*” (5) with Andrea in his study; Brecht, also analysing this scene, stresses the way in which each gest is to express different, defining, relations. Galileo’s open, carefree attitude with Andrea, is contrasted with that which he assumes in his conversation with the Procurator, in which you “see from the way in which he [Galileo] offers his thesis that he is used to being refused and corrected” (“Short Organum” 199). Indeed, there is a difference between Galileo’s connection to his work with his student and his distance from it when with the Procurator, shown through his indications to his manuscript (15) “*glances longingly at his work table*” (16).

Advancing this, and working towards a further consideration of Laplanchean theory again, Scene 12 of *Galileo* is a nexus of ideas concerning tragedy, gestus, and the alterity of subjectivity. In it, the Inquisitor speaks with the new Pope and manages to get permission to show Galileo the instruments of torture. The stage directions indicate that “*In the course of the audience he [the pope] is robed. Outside is heard the shuffling of many feet*”; the robing and the shuffling sounds then are important throughout the rest of the scene in relation to the debate. The scene opens with the pope loudly disagreeing with the inquisitor, “No! No! No!” (90) but halfway through their discussion the presence of those outside is noted again:

THE POPE: This shuffling is getting on my nerves. I cannot help listening to it.

THE INQUISITOR: It may speak to you more persuasively than I can, your Holiness. (93)

The scene then later closes with:

THE POPE: [...] All this stamping in the corridors is really unbearable. Is the whole world coming in here?

THE INQUISITOR: Not the whole of it but its best part.

*Pause. The pope is now in his full robes.*

THE POPE: At the very most he can be shown the instruments.

THE INQUISITOR: That will be enough your Holiness. Instruments are Mr Galilei’s speciality. (93-4)

Made evident, here, is a challenge to the notion of individual subjectivity and a shift in importance from the internal to the external. The pope is depicted as multi-faceted – at once former Cardinal Barberini; mathematician; acquaintance of Galileo – and these senses of identity depend upon, and exist within, the relations he has with others. We are shown, in this gestic scene, the pope’s ontogenesis as character in a manner that has a number of similarities to Laplanche’s notion of general seduction. The pope that is left at the end is determined, in character, not so much by anything endogenous to him but, rather, through the insistent sound of feet, and to an extent the Inquisitor’s ‘less persuasive’ words, that have become central to the way he thinks. In further refutation of Ellis, the tragic concern of *Galileo* can be seen to

be as much in evidence here as when Galileo recants: the tragic cannot be tied to individuals; it is rooted in multiplicity.

Considering this, it is tempting to equate *gestus* to the enigmatic signifier, and Blau does write of “the pregnancy of the question suspended in the *Gestus*” (qtd. in Maclean 86). That Brecht, however, tried to avoid undue ambiguity in the message of his plays in order to create his *Verfremdungseffekt* makes such an equation difficult. Arguably, though, the performative nature of theatre positions *gestus* within a double-bind in this regard: as it exists between characters in the play, it is enigmatic and the “vehicle of the ideologeme” (Gleitman 150), ideology paralleling the role of sexuality within Laplanchean theory; to the play’s audience, however, it is ‘de-enigmatised’, to be noted and acted upon.

The tragic that can be seen in this regard in *Galileo* is, then, that you are not as individuated as you would think; that your subjectivity is crucially determined by interaction with others by merit, to an extent, of bodily presence. In this regard, the work of Beckett suggests itself as a means of taking this line of comparison between psychoanalytic theory and tragedy further.

#### Embodied tragedy? – Beckett, Deleuze and Guattari, Schizoanalysis

Beckett’s work challenges the idea of tragedy and the tragic in a manner that appears notably different to Brecht: in terms of their aesthetic praxis, they fall on opposing sides of the Adorno/Benjamin divide; Benjamin championed Brecht, Adorno favoured Beckett. Whilst Beckett’s work certainly differs from Brecht’s in its lack of push for action, it shares with it the absence of plot in the Aristotelian sense, emphasis on the body, and an exploration of an idea of the tragic related to problematized subjectivity. Blau provides an illuminating consideration of the bodies in Beckett’s plays but does not really relate this to either tragedy or psychoanalytic theory. It will be argued here, however, that “the degrading incapacities of the body” (Blau 91) explored in Beckett provides a point of connection between these two other models of thought.

*Play* is a work that allows an interesting way into analysis, here: onstage are three characters encased in thin, grey urns, necks “*held fast in the urn’s mouth*” (307), their faces “*so lost to age as to seem almost part of the urns*” (307). The effect that this has is that whilst the actors maintain a presence upon the stage they are refused a bodily identity as a ‘character’; the Aristotelian “cathartic rhythms of performance” (Worthen 405) denied also by the crucial instruction to “[*Repeat play.*]” (*Play* 317). Worthen also implies, in her analysis of the problems of performing *Play*, an interesting link to psychological identity. She argues that “the athlete of the subconscious [...] finds scant opportunity to un/re/discover the state of ‘I am’ in the playing of *Play*” (406); that, rather than this Stanislavskian ‘I am’, the actor’s “performance nearly reduces them to ‘not I’” (406).

It is this idea of ‘not I’ that is, perhaps, key to the notion of the tragic in Beckett’s model of tragedy and suggests, in addition to resonating with both Szondi’s concept of tragic transformation into the opposite (55) as well as Laplanche’s Other-centred subject, an



intersection with Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalytic reworking of psychoanalytic theory. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari claim that "[t]here are those who will maintain that the schizo is incapable of uttering the word *I*, and that we must restore his ability to pronounce this hallowed word" (23). In Beckett's play *Not I* this is explored to an even greater extent than in *Play*, and also with important bodily [lack of] presence. Whereas, however, in *Play* the body was challenged through placement in an urn, in *Not I* the character of MOUTH is reduced to just that: a mouth, "*faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow*" (376). The play itself consists of a monologue by MOUTH, disjointed and full of pauses, the written text punctured by ellipses: "... feeling so dulled... she did not know... what position she was in... imagine!..." (377). This disjointed narration is punctuated in turn by what Beckett refers to, in a note preceding the play, as "vehement refusal[s] to relinquish third person" (375), the last example of which is perhaps most interesting:

... what to try... whole body like gone... just the mouth... like maddened...  
so on... [...]... not knowing what... what she was-... what?.. who?.. no!..  
she!.. SHE!.. [*Pause.*]" (382).

This last exclamatory insistence upon a distinctly other "SHE!" can be seen as a refusal, in schizophrenic terms, of an 'I'-grounded identity: MOUTH maintains that the monologue concerns another unidentified female; with neither whole body nor an 'I', all that MOUTH can be is the relentless undoing and denial of individuated subjectivity that continues after the curtain falls. The notion of bodily dissolution that is presented in the monologue itself – 'whole body like gone... just the mouth... like maddened' – is also intriguing in its adoption of simile: the whole body is 'like' gone; it is 'like' maddened. Simile, being a linguistic device operating through explicit comparison, challenges here the idea of the essentialism of the unified body in terms of its connection with identity and subjectivity; it disallows its discussion in terms of absolutes, positioning it, instead, within a framework of relativism. There is similarity, here, with elements of psychoanalytic theory as it is figured, in radically revised form, by people such as R. D. Laing as well as Deleuze and Guattari, especially as MOUTH also mentions 'madness'. These thinkers critique the notion of a relativist model for the diagnoses and analysis of madness and identity, arguing that "to be mad is not necessarily to be ill [...]. Our sanity is not 'true' sanity. Their madness is not 'true' madness" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 131-2). This then adds another complication to the idea of tragedy and the tragic in the sense that we are considering it in.

Taking that further, there is also a useful resonance with the general argument developed throughout *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* which contends that "self-identity is formed only through the *coercive* unification of the body" (Tauber 147) as a result of desire being forced to become self-repressing (147). For Deleuze and Guattari, the idea of the organism, the synthesis of the individual organs that are attributes of the Body without Organs into one whole, is one that is to be rejected: "[t]he BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 175). The concept of the BwO is too complex to elaborate fully here but, briefly put, it is not an imagined projection of the body but rather "the body without image" (*Anti-Oedipus* 8) that is "the

unproductive, the sterile, the unengendered, the unconsumable" (8): in Spinozist terms, "immanent substance" (327). Through this reconceptualization of the body we can, by comparison, find an understanding of Beckett's handling of tragedy: tragedy in which what seems tragic is not death but, instead, its refusal: the fact that there is no 'ending' to his tragedies, MOUTH will continue speaking for ever. For Deleuze and Guattari, the BwO is the "the model of death" (329); they argue that:

it is not death that serves as the model for catatonia, it is catatonic schizophrenia that gives its model to death. Zero intensity. The death model appears when the body without organs repels the organs and lays them aside: no mouth, no tongue, no teeth [...]. (329)

There is here, then, an inevitable point of difference between schizoanalytic theory and tragedy as written by Beckett: whereas the former can easily talk about the total rejection of the organs theoretically, the latter is inevitably always bound by the body on the stage. In *Not I* the idea of the 'whole body like gone' also echoes the fact that the body is still physically there, if largely hidden: there is still MOUTH/the mouth. It is the case that, as Blau argues, "[t]he awful truth is that existence cannot be without the body and its detestable organs. As awesomely displayed in tragic drama [...] this schizoid bind may be a self-evident archaic truth" (90). The tragic depicted in Beckett, in consideration of this, is therefore partially the recognition of two opposing facts: both, that we are trapped within a 'self' of false unification and that we can, in this sense, never fully escape it. In this manner, Beckett's plays are tragedies that would seem to present the tragic in the same way as Deleuze does in his reading of Nietzsche, independent of Guattari, in which he argues that the tragic is not to be found in anguish or disgust, nor in a nostalgia for lost unity. The tragic is only to be found in multiplicity, in the diversity of affirmation *as such*. What defines the tragic is the joy of multiplicity, plural joy. (17)

MOUTH does not wish to regain her body; M1, W1, and W2 start the chorus that marks the repetition with a synchronised "yes" (*Play* 317).

### Conclusion

To close, then, we can contend that psychoanalytic theory is not only genealogically closely intertwined with tragedy but that it is a school of thought that, diverse and constantly evolving, offers the means to augment the study of tragedy whose own notions of the tragic change over time. The usefulness of psychoanalytic theory, though, is contingent upon recognising that tragedy is an engagement with the tragic in its own right, rather than viewing it merely as an object to be analysed. Thus, studying Brecht in relation to Laplanche, a form of tragedy concerned with ideas of decentred subjectivity formed and determined by social relations is argued for; positioning Beckett alongside Deleuze and Guattari enables considerations of tragedy that takes the same idea but in the opposite direction, limiting relations and destroying the body.

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