
The Pathetic Fallacy of Modern Tragedy ^[*]

Modern Trajedinin Hazin Yanılışı

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Abstract: Tragic characters fight battles they cannot possibly win. That is what makes heroes out of them. However classical and modern tragedy display ontological differences whose fault line is to be found in the philosophical shift from the rationalist principle of sufficient reason to that of insufficient reason. Hence, life ceases to be a necessity imposed by the wrath of the gods to become the ordinary outcome of man's failure. Given that, the paper will consider the different implications the Greek term hamartia assumes in the economy of classical and modern drama, and the equivalent redefinition of Weltanschauung. Modernity does not have the cosmic range of the classics, thus it is less about fate than it is about guilt.

Keywords: Tragedy, Aristotle, Hegel, hamartia, hubris, modernity.



The Crisis of the Anthropocentric Paradigm

This manuscript is thought for an audience with no specialist knowledge on ancient Greek, let alone Greek tragedy, and that is because my purpose is to offer to the non classical reader an experience into the cultural significance of tragedy. While centering on a few ancient and modern plays I will try to sketch the two forms of tragedy as related through the prism of *hamartia* but fundamentally contrasting. The aim then is to apply Aristotle's meaning to a restrict analysis of modern drama. I hope that there is still sufficient ground for a new interpretation. In the end, the message that I want to convey is less about theater studies than it is about idealist theory of the tragic. Greek tragedy, stages the temporary disruption of a divine cosmic order and its re-establishment, while modern tragedy, which has undergone a process of secularization or "humanization," represents a rupture with the divine and the insignificance of humans.

Tragedy is, in essence, a conflict. Rightly Philo Buck and Elizabeth Drew sustain that the Hebrews, unlike the Western playwrights, did not create tragic literature because they did not have challenging heroes: "To the Hebrews evil was only disobedience, and suffering was justice meted out in full measure for their sins." (Buck, 1930, 258). Conflict of moralities or institutions, a conflict between humans and divine, internal passions versus external impediments, this is what tragedy is. It is a state of false consciousness, where illusions at different degrees take the resemblance of reason, and, save for a few cases, the final episode is a tragic resolution. To understand where the conflict lies it is to understand the difference between classic and modern tragedy. Properly, the British scholar William M. Dixon (1924: 351) pointed out that tragedy started *as an affair with the gods*, more proudly it was Sylvia Plath to confess that dying, the atavic tragic experience, is art. To a superior level of abstraction, it is the whole of art that has begun as a manifestation of divinity. Hegel named it *symbolic art*, which is a state of pre-art through which we observe an attempt to symbolically express divine power. But because the divine cannot be understood, then it cannot either be represented. Hindu art, Hegel claims, falls short of beauty for it surrenders to unnaturally distorted shapes of animals and human beings: Shiva comes with many arms, Gane-



sha has the body of an infant and the head of an elephant, Brahma comes with four faces. The same goes for Egyptian art; it fails in its aesthetic representation because the interiority it expresses moves within the realm of death: The Pyramids are not created to celebrate freedom and life, as art should do, but to hide a dead body. Next in chronological order is the *classical art*, the art of the ancient Greeks. Here we assist to a perfect representation of beauty for the idea of divine is not distorted or transcended by grotesque fusions of human and animal forms (Hindu), nor hidden (Egyptian), but finds perfect execution in a visible and comprehensible shape. That would be the human body. At last, *romantic art* comes, by which Hegel does not refer to 18th-19th century Romanticism, but art produced in Western Christendom. All in all, it is religious art; specifically, Christian art representing a more profound beauty than the relatively cold statues of Greek gods, for it has, as central figure, a God who dies. Spiritual beauty is then on the stage, the drama of the tortured body on the cross, the attempt of reconciliation between the suffering Christ and His divinity confesses a beauty the Greeks cannot match. And yet, this is an art that has already begun its process of secularization, somewhat humanization, it slowly moves away from the ethical virtues exposed by the heroes in the Greek tragedy, so irremediably committed to the State, the *res publica*, the democratic *polis*. Romantic art, and what follows next, replaces the heroes and their Greek ethics with men carrying secular virtues. Courageous men in the pursuit of quasi-religious ends, men in love, independent men that in their magnificent search for freedom arrive to challenge the very same God they celebrate. Hegel sees it as a post-Reformation phenomenon: The personal reading of the Holy Scripture is the moment when the binomial art-religion finally breaks. Religion turns inward as a private experience, somehow a silent apostasy,¹ art turns outward, no more delivery of ultimate truth, but ordinary daily life. Hegel goes as far as to declare the end of art: “Art considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past” (Aesthetics, I; 11). What interests me is the progressive humanization of art, a phenomenon already in act in the tragic form of the Greek drama. God, man and

¹ The reference to the silent apostasy is mine alone. Hegel did not foresee the soul of the XXIth century.



nature are entangled. Zeus is less an individual god than it is the representative of a generalized divine will; on the other hand, man is connected to the cosmos in the shape of Mount Olympus. As it happens, humans are collateral damage in the wars between the gods, as it is for Artemis and Aphrodite in the *Hippolytus*,² or object of divine madness. That would be the case, for instance, of an erotic madness inspired by Aphrodite and Eros (*Hippolytus* or Andromache in the *Iliad*), or prophetic madness inspired by Apollo (cfr. Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*, or perhaps the very same Orestes).³ Yet there is an order, socio-political and heavenly, behind the immediate disorder. Classical tragedy happens because that established order has been, consciously or not, infringed. But the outcome of the ambiguous relationship is for the gods to become embodiment of human justice. By so doing, they lose part of their transcendence, and become a humanized divinity. Hence modern tragedy is ready to perform. Modern tragedy simply contemplates a universe in which man is no longer the measure of all things. There has been an uncompromising rupture with the divine, the universe does not tremble before humans' mistakes, and despair becomes intolerable because it is no longer even significant.

The problem of modernity is wide open. "Damn be Copernicus" is the outcry of the twentieth century, a way to say that science has surely redeemed man from medieval fear and superstitions, but simultaneously has forged contemporary individuals: Contradictory, scattered, undecided between multiple values. The anthropocentric paradigm has fallen: Copernicus refused to place man in the center of the universe, Darwin reduced man to a developed animal, Freud made of humanity an entanglement of basic instincts. At last, Foucault declared man's death. "Damn be Copernicus" is the Marcusean condemn to the post-bourgeois process of reification where the silent mimesis between individual and society resolves tragedy (Hamlet, Don Juan, Oedipus) into a medical pathology. The final diagnosis is neurosis as refusal of homologation. Postmodern criticism would remark that the exposure to endless possibilities is counter-

² Hippolytus' aversion to sex, hence to Aphrodite the charming goodness of love, and devotion for Artemis the virgin goodness of the hunt, caused the rage of the former whose revenge will bring about Hippolytus' death.

³ Plato in the *Phaedrus* makes Socrates classifying four types of madness: Prophetic, Ritual, Poetic, and Erotic all caused by supernatural interference.



balanced by the coming of age of *one dimensional man* whose control is guaranteed by the needs the very same society produces. Artificial desire for non-necessary goods drives the economy: Once more Baudelaire had seen it correctly. Contradictions start emerging at the turn of the XIX century: An existential alienation that constrains individuals to nothing but themselves is the post-industrial revolution Western hemisphere. Man is reduced to labor force, labor force to commodity exchange, and commodity exchange becomes the new subject of history. For heroes, there is space no more.

Being Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) by large the father of Modern theatre and Arthur Miller (1915-2005) one of his most accomplished disciples, *Ghost* (1881) and *Death of Salesman* (1949) are the plays I will analyze here as evidence. Not surprisingly, both these tragedies come close to the ancient drama, having a tragic fate inherited in the family that becomes social drama. However, in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Oswald Alving, is not struck down by the gods, as Hippolytus was, but by syphilis for he knows the gods do not exist, and if they do, they are blind and deaf. Oswald is not Hippolytus essentially because he has lost that tie with the supernatural world that the latter had. No spirit will encourage or warn him, there is no curse to avoid, no dream will awake his suspicions, no possible reconciliation between men and divine. Oedipus blinding himself harmonizes himself with the gods becoming a blessing for the land he died on, not the same can be said for Ibsen's and Miller's plays. Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman*), Oswald simply dies, none of them is able to reconcile with the natural order of the universe, which is the ultimate significance of their existence. Paraphrasing Nietzsche, modernity has killed the gods, thus producing a shift from necessity to guilt in the intervening episodes. Utter self-confident Oedipus freely commits his crime, being it only the murder of Laius. Rage, hot temper, impulsivity play the trick of his doom. But the unwitting parricide and the subsequent incest are a prearranged, unchangeable phenomenon, so had vaticinated the oracle at Delphi when Oedipus still was someone else's son. On the contrary, in modern tragedy nothing is inevitable, improbable protagonists bring on themselves the consequences of disputable choices, tragedy is not a matter of destiny, but a snowball of personal flaws where personality is somewhat lacking in



greatness. I will re-approach this aspect at the end of our discussion, it should be clearer by then.

Managing to find “laws of tragedy” is an exercise for philologists, and a dogmatic request. Having in mind the Greek tragic drama or the Elizabethans, and the Aristotelian definition, critics contend that tragedy is dead. The usage of distinct technical devices is easy to be detected. The play setting shifted from outdoor to indoor, from daylight to a darkened auditorium, the number of actors from a few, two in Aeschylus three in Sophocles, to many. Evident is also the new adaptations in terms of structure. The ancient Greeks would blend together discourse, music, dance, in a few men show; contrary, the aesthetic of contemporaneity has divided art into disciplines, musicals, opera, and concerts. More than that, we expect to see a realistic representation with psychological truth, rather than raging gods hanging down on a crane-like machine.

Conceptually speaking, the dictatorship of realism, the crisis of the anthropocentric paradigm, the waning of myth stand among the most accepted explanations against the possibility of tragedy in our time. According to “the late, late, late Renaissance man”⁴ George Steiner, since religious and ritualistic foundations have been virtually obliterated, tragedy has no room in the twentieth century drama. To some degree, the structure of feeling with which ancient Greece sustained the dramatic tension and the moral-mortal clash, is now outdated, weakened and lost.⁵ “Christianity made total tragedy implausible” is George Steiner’s unequivocal statement (2004: 1-15), as to say that Christological optimism has blurred the ancient *tragic sense of life* attenuating the ontological fall with the concept of redemption, salvation, and social betterment. Ergo, Steiner concludes, we no longer have an absolute tragedy for tragedy to be absolute is immune to hope. The argument is sound, there can be no doubt that the concept of tragedy has undergone considerable change,

⁴ Definition given by the British novelist and poet Dame Antonia Susan Duffy (1936), known as A.S. Byatt, so to describe Steiner as a polyglot and a polymath.

⁵ “Structure of feeling” is a term I borrow from Raymond Williams in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952). In one of his first attempts to describe the concept, Williams comments: “It is as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it is based in the deepest and often least tangible elements of our experience” (Ibsen 10); it is “not an unformed flux of new responses and perceptions, but a formation of these into a new way of seeing ourselves and our world” (11).



but while it is true that many literary historians do not incorporate “tragedy” in reference to Western modern drama (Thorndike, 1908; Campbell, 1930; Nicoll, 1931; Steiner, 1961), I believe there are ontological, if not structural, elements to be found both in ancient and modern tragedy. Namely: (a) the “struggle” between the protagonist and the antagonist, being the latter no longer the gods but a Darwinian society; (b) a realm between the metaphysical and the poetic where the hero is destroyed but the “heroic deeds” recall a possibility of victory; (c) a challenge to the status quo through which achieving catharsis in the end. To use a modern terminology, an ‘enlighten redemption.’ Ergo, it is a transformation the one we are observing, and if we reject the “end-of tragedy” assumption, then Arthur Miller’s message remains unsurpassed, “the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were.” From this perspective, tragedy loses its universalistic somewhat permanent character, to be interpreted with the changing human nature so that the ancient immortality-drive is replaced by a more humble need for self-preservation. A profound sense of personal dignity is the dot connecting the whole sense of tragic. Orestes, Medea, Willy Loman, Helene Alving (*Ghosts*), Nora (Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*), all struggle to find their legitimate position in society. Medea is a barbarian who fights her way up to Greek citizenship, and a woman left alone to confront males’ despicable conduct. Orestes claims back the throne of Argos and his father’s memory offended by a treacherous death. All that Willy Loman wants is to keep up with the expectations of the American Dream oblivious to the fact that he is the first victim of it. In the end, Helene and Nora might not have found their rightful position in society, but they paved the way for the next century. With some effort, we could see some of the protagonists celebrating inward victories in the wake of Lu Xun’s Ah Q’s moral victory.⁶ Antigone has done what a Kantian imperative asked her to do, that is honouring the spirit of the departed. She succeeded in burying Polynices, challenging the State authority and human laws embodied by Creon’s ordinance. What no one seems to notice is that she is caught in doing so, hence she is compelled to abandon the corpse to scavenger

⁶ The foremost Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) in *A Madman’s Diary* (1918) created his most famous character, Ah Q, who convinced himself that his defeats are indeed triumphs, thus his is the strategy that turns humiliations into victory.



animals, besides of course being condemned to death. Perhaps not enough to claim victory. Even so, Creon's conclusive downfall and misery, "I who am nothing more than nothing now" (*Antigone*, 1325), is the ethical measure of Antigone's triumph. Orestes after having been persecuted by the Furies for his matricide is finally rescued by the reconciling figure of Athena. His father has been murdered by his mother, his mothers' blood is on his hands, but he has been acquitted by the divine court for the vicious circle of retaliation is finally over. Meanwhile, the Furies, by now Eumenides, have obtained a place in the community of men, custodial goddesses who watch over the fertility of the land and the fecundity of its women.

In Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, if there is an achievement that would be Biff's honesty to see through his family's lies, the grander of all would be that of being special. Ironically, the universality of the play lays within that final message "I am a dime, a dozen and so are you" (Miller, 1998: 105), perhaps enough to break the deceiving cycle of an average American family. In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora's epiphany sets her free. The sound of the door slamming while Nora is leaving echoes around the world, she slams away the incommunicability of a century. The wild dance is over, poison has left her veins. She sees with clear eyes. "Yes, I have changed my dress," her life is no longer a masquerade (Ibsen, 1978: 190). No more dolls, no more dances. She leaves her doll's house. Tragedy hints the inevitable wretchedness and inconsolable suffering that result when the finitude of man challenges a complex world. But tragedy does not offer only destruction, sorrow, and twilight. The aesthetics of tragic is multifaceted and historically grounded: A tragic spirit, in ancient and modern time, hides possibilities of greatness. Truth is that tragedy offers antithesis without presenting a solution to the ambiguity of human action, and for this reason it is still analyzed by those who dare inventing such a solution. Naturally, modernity brings along a different fragility, hence another tragic perception. Hereon, my attention is on the socio-philosophical clash between classical and modern tragedy or better said, when the gods are no longer believed.



The Principle of Sufficient Reason⁷

To accept a fact without a cause, that is, indeterminate in its necessary conditions, is neither metaphysics nor science for the ancient Greeks. The principle of sufficient reason was already well known to the Greek philosophers, it was the ideological scaffold within which society moved, a must be correlation between facts and causes so to maintain an intelligent universe. Of course, such a principle responds to the larger Western's quest for rationality, overall the attempt to understand, to decode, the puzzling forces underlying the existence. For the sake of clarity, we need to start again from Hegel: His theory of Tragedy is next to Aristotle's *Poetics* the most studied account on the topic, and, as my understanding goes, *Lecture on Aesthetic*⁸ is probably the most accessible text we have on the subject. Aristotle, in a widely known scheme, wants to convince us that tragedy's aim is to generate fear and pity (unmerited misfortune)⁹ in the audience in order to produce *catharsis*, an action of purification the actors or the audience undergo after having shared the pathos expressed in the plot. Due to a 'great mistake' or an Act of God, a good man has suffered disaster: Aristotle seems to say that the injustice of his punishment generates some sort of tragic pleasure, meanwhile the audience is released by the pain for not having been the targeted victim. Essentially a good tragedy is a transaction from empathy to apathy, literally absence of suffering. I do not see Hegel subscribing the argument. He draws a clear distinction between classical and modern tragedy that would be the distinction between ethical contrasting forces and subjective interests. Modern characters, Hegel insists, do not act out of ethical drives, but destructive passions clashing against the external, hostile world. Put it bluntly, a heroic-to-be-liberator staged against and destroyed

⁷ The Principle of sufficient reason (PSR) is the 17th-18th-19th century philosophy based on the implication between facts and explanation. Where there is no explanation there is not science. Formally, the Principle states: For every fact F, there must be an explanation why F is the case. Its modern formulation is usually attributed to the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716).

⁸ *Lecture on Aesthetic* is substantially a compendium of Hegel's notes, and a student's transcriptions of Hegel's lectures.

⁹ I believe with the late classical scholar T. C. W. Stinton that "Pity depends on undeserved suffering. The more undeserved it is, the greater the pity; (...) It should follow then, that the better the man and the greater the pity, the more intense tragic emotion and consequent pleasure (1975: 239).



by a false society. On the other hand, the conflict between Antigone and Creon for instance or the unfolding in the Oresteia is of ethical origins, it is family concerns versus the reason of state. According to Hegel classical tragedy arises when two substantive positions, both just, correct, right, come into conflict with one another, yet each of which wrong in a sense that they fail to acknowledge the validity of the other standing. Thus, the aim of tragedy is not so much about fear and pity (Aristotle) as it is the disclosure of this ethical impasse in front of the audience. In other words, the audience has to feel the dialectical, emotional dilemma behind each protagonist, torn between values and necessity, and perhaps reaching a synthesis through their suffering. Usually, the fall of the hero, or heroes, solves the riddle and a new enlarged truth establishes itself on the stage of the historical development. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), chapters five and six, Hegel analyses part of the Greek world referring chiefly to Sophocles' *Antigone* as evidence of a historic, ethical and social order. Antigone is the embodiment of divine-moral laws, specifically the irrefutable right to give a proper burial to her brother Polynices who lays lifeless in the dust. On the other side stands Creon, epitome of the State, man-made laws, ordering Polynices' corpse, the corpse of a traitor, to be left unburied, not to be mourned but disgraced, to become dinner for birds and dogs. Ergo the inescapable clash over which value is higher. Hegel concedes that Antigone and Creon are deeply similar: Stubborn, obstinate, unyielding, they fail to see the other legitimate position. Both are magnificent and flawed, both involved in justice as much as in guilt. Innocent insofar they act on behalf of just, single-minded principle; guilty insofar they both violate the other will, the other's property. Hegel would name it "the guilt of contradiction." Protagonists move within what Hegel calls "an ethical reality," where characters are unshaken due to "their immoveable nature, their inherent constancy, and regard them as something which is perhaps true, but possibly may also be not true." (Hegel, 1931: 452). What Hegel wants to say is that if taken by itself the idea the character is bearer of is justified (Antigone willing to bury her brother), but if mirrored by the antagonist value, Creon's insistence on separating rigorously the dead-to-be-honored from the dead-to-be-contemned, then tragedy, alike history, proceeds dialectically. Thesis and antithesis, para-



digm shift, crisis, transitions, contradictions, move the plot toward a more comprehensive and rational truth. Thus, Antigone has to die so history can march on. The argument is correct, but not complete. Classical tragedy is ethical though until a certain point. Greek heroes adjust ethical virtues to action of self-interest, and this is what takes them to self-destruction. Back to Antigone, she openly admits that she would not cross the state's decree if she was to bury her husband or her children. She simply would not because they are replaceable, another husband can be found or another pregnancy from another man obtained. But with her parents already gone, Polynices becomes irreplaceable to her not as a human being, but as a brother, no other brother can possibly be born. Hence, Antigone out of self-interest challenges Creon and replaces the divine law, under whose realm she lived until then, with human law, under whose realm she will die.

At this stage of our discussion, another tragic feature must be introduced, that would be consistency. Self-consistency is how Aristotle defines it, as to say once a character's personality is established he should act accordingly throughout the play. When Agamemnon's corpse is revealed at the end of Aeschylus' play, his death is over determined by a variety of causes all related to the *philos-aphilos* hate-in-love knots the drama has set before us. Clytemnestra has loved Agamemnon, but Agamemnon going back home with his mistress Cassandra, and Agamemnon sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia in order to appease the goddess Artemis, makes her hate him. Out of mother-resentment, jealousy, and perhaps pride, she now loves Aegisthus. There is more to it than that: Aegisthus' own desire for vengeance, the curse on the house of Atreus, Agamemnon's atrocious actions at Troy, all in all what we are facing is a domestic tragedy (Clytemnestra vs. Agamemnon), a tragedy of war (Greece vs. Troy) and a political tragedy (Aegisthus vs. Agamemnon). Hegel would probably note that they are all equally justified and, we have seen above, here lays the core of classical tragedy, the refusal from the side of the hero to recognize the validity of the other's position. What I have not said before is that the hero cannot acknowledge, due to his nature, the alternative argument. "The hero who alters his position may appear to lack character" (15:533, A 1204), and again "Such changes may diminish the determination



and pathos of the hero's position" (15: 568, A 1233; quoted in Roche, 2006). As to say, Antigone might as well recognize the good of Cleon's demand, and vice-versa, but none of them can vacillate, save the loss of their tragic status. Orestes is genuinely confused before the matricide, until a word from his friend Pylades reminds him of the irresolvable conflict beneath classical tragedy, which is honor against shame. The Greeks believed in 'arête' loosely translated as action towards the common good, it is a reciprocal commitment to the community in a way that helping one's friend while hurting one's enemy would be its best expression. To Plato, *arête* is a life's goal ergo always out of reach. The problem, as Douglas Cairns already noticed, is that in the Greek tragedy those who are considered as one's enemies have a claim to be regarded also as friends (Sophocles' *Antigone*), and the line of action that drives one to harm the enemy leads also to harm one's friend (Euripides' *Medea*). Yet, since the Greek society is a 'results culture' (Adkins, 1960) where success and failure define honor and shame, revenge must be taken after an offence has been committed. The play turns into tragedy the moment society's revenge-code becomes corollary to some other personal, moral imperative. Orestes knows his matricide to be just and shameful, to be accomplished, in spite of all, in name of the necessity of retaliation. In Cairns 'words:

Aeschylus' Orestes firmly believes that his revenge is just; his spontaneous *aidos* (shame) at the thought of matricide in the same scene (*Libation Bearers* 899), however, is a sign that his act of justice is also traditionally shameful.

This clash of values is not the problem's solution (*of interfamilial revenge*), but its essence (Cairns, 2013: 309; *italics is mine*).

In the end, rational order has been reestablished. There is a general reconciliation between the elements, Oedipus is blind but honored, Orestes is free of charge, at large the hero is submerged by the greater gravity of the historical process. On the other side of the spectrum, neither consistency nor reconciliation can trace back the soul of modern tragedy, and that is because the principle of sufficient reason is washed away by a principle of insufficient reason. The dramatist and playwright John H. Lawson, also dealt with the problem of will and necessity arriving at the same conclusion: "The modern stage has taken for its special province the actions of people who *don't know what they want*. Hamlet is aware of his



own vacillation; Tartuffe seems to be aware of his own deceit.” (Lawson, 1936: 88). Events proceed without explanations, the ethical conflict supplanted by sociological issues, consistency of characters shatters into a myriad of disconnected and incoherent impressions of daily life. At last, abandoned is the final reconciliation between humans and divine for a life balancing above mediocrity. How did it happen? In the face of modernity, reflected by the crisis of Positivism and the influence of Quantum Physics, *the tyranny of idealism*, as George Bernard Shaw defines it, becomes anachronistic. The classical-romantic emphasis upon the ideal and idealistic characters seemed both too vague and too impractical. Truth, that in the Greek world belonged to the gods, becomes partial, imperfect, related to the finitude of the knowing subject and the infinity of the object of knowing. So to speak, modernity has introduced in the everyday life an element of entropy, the Russian writer Evgeny Zamyatin put it very well: “Euclid’s world is very simple, and Einstein world is very difficult; nevertheless, it is now impossible to return to Euclid’s.” (Quoted in Barth, 1984). By way of brief illustration, the chain of cause and effect was a useful tool to describe a society that no longer exists. The skies have been opened, time and space became relative and continue expanding beyond the universe; position and speed of a subatomic particle cannot be simultaneously measured; science and life evolve into a matter of agreement more or less acceptable, a statistical probability whose odds must contemplate an element of irrationality. “No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely everything” was Arthur Miller’s brave insight into the twentieth century (Miller, 1981), and because the author does question everything, the optimistic principle of sufficient reason is shattered. Reason is insufficient to comprehend after all.

In Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, every single character is won over by the alluring promises of the American Dream. Allegedly the play is based on the last 24 hours of Willy Loman’s life, a salesman; his daydreams traces back his entire existential path. In fact, on the stage there is the Marxist prophecy of commoditization of human life and the Frankfurtian analysis of man-reification which becomes a social drama in literature. Human beings are thus commodities exchange, people change into an instrumental tool with a financial value. So is Willy: He is fired the mo-



ment he stops making sales, “the only thing you got in this world is what you can sell” (Miller, 1998: 75), and because he cannot sell anymore he is done for. In the junctures of clarity, he knows that at some indefinite spot his life took a wrong turn, indeed the all plot seems to be the search for that single moment. He sees it from the window of his bedroom. The grass does not grow anymore, the peonies and lilac are gone, the air is stiff, apartment buildings raise where some time before there were beautiful elm trees. Regrets pile up. Willy had an affair over 15 years earlier, it might be that the realization of Willy’s unfaithfulness to Linda compelled Biff to reevaluate Willy and Willy’s grasp of life. It might be this the turning point of the Loman family, Biff’s Aristotelian recognition of falsehood. It might but, I do not regard it as Miller’s intention, considering that tragedy has *to question absolutely everything*. In a way or another the Lomans all fail, they all manipulate the truth to create a more favorable reality for themselves. There is a perpetuating cycle of denial: Willy is an expert in editing facts, he claims to have averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commission back in 1928, but considering his desire of grandeur the reader is left with more than a doubt. He sold Biff for a salesman when he was just a shipping clerk, and Happy defines himself as an assistant buyer, even though he is just one of the two assistants to the assistant. Linda, alike Willy, is unable, or unwilling, to acknowledge the failure of the hopes America had in the 1920s and the dangerous extent of Willy’s illusions. But while Willy embraces fantasies to neutralize the disappointment, Linda hides herself and the little rubber pipe Willy might use to commit suicide. Ambiguity and indetermination are the defining structures of modern tragedy, reality is more complex than Willy’s affair; Biff going astray is the effect, but Willy is not the cause. Come what may someone actually succeeded, again there seem to be no rational explanations, not evident principle for that. Howard, Willy’s new boss, received the company through inheritance from his father, Ben, the already dead Willy’s brother, made his fortune by chance. He wanted to go north, to Alaska, to find gold, but as he says to Willy: “At that age I had a very faulty view of geography, William. I discovered after a few days that I was heading due south, so instead of Alaska, I ended up in Africa” (Miller, 1998: 33), and in Africa he found diamonds. Perhaps is the Ameri-



can Dream to have broken the promises made to its citizens, the Depression of the 1930s seems to be a shred of evidence. If this is the case then there might be a social responsibility behind the corpse of Willy, yet Miller is not interested in dwelling on the roots of a social myth. A comment he made when his play was brought to China (1983) clarifies well his position: "Death of a Salesman, really, is a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America." (Miller, 1984: 49).

Statement this last one that would not work for Ibsen. The social milieu is influenced by evolutionist theories, heredity factors and environmental conditions become one explanation for characters' traits and actions. And because circumstances are complex, they play a more evident role in the definition of the action; meanwhile, the protagonist, by now no longer hero, cannot affect the world around him as he did in the classical tragedy. Instead, he is affected by it. Hereon the shift from the ethical contest Hegel referred to, to the sociologic analysis of everyday lives is assembled. Ibsen was a romantic that wrote realistically, certainly more Flaubert than Zola, more Balzac than Svevo. Because of its contemporary characters, contemporary dialogues in a contemporary setting, *Ghosts* wants to be the foundational stone of modern realism, but it fails. Paradoxically, it stands as a piece of crude naturalism. An outraged wife, now widow, and a scoundrel as husband, now dead, she suffers in silence what Nora did not. As it happens often in modernist literature, the protagonist is absent, Court Chamberlain or Captain Alving has already been dead for 10 years, but his son Osvold is back from Paris. He is a person in his own right; he grew up in the enlightened France, brought up in artistic circles of modernity. He is a rational man, not much of a dissolute as his father was, at least Ibsen does not grant him time for it, nor a devoted son considering he frankly confesses not to love his mother. Tomorrow, Captain Alving will be celebrated as one of the pillars of society, his memorial will be unveiled, and no one but Mrs. Alving knows that in fact he was a broken man, a drunkard, a debauchee, a gambler. She recalls for the sake of Manders, the Pastor symbol of distorted faith, how she used to sit up at night to listen to her husbands' listless, obscene talk. She fought him off to keep him home so to avoid rumors, she provided for the ser-



vant he had seduced, she brought up his illegitimate daughter and, greatest of sacrifices, to protect her son from that filthy environment she sent him to Paris. Now Oswald is back, he stands for the whole she renounced for: Truth and freedom. Yet she will not be able to enjoy the fruits of her martyrdom, the ghosts of past horrors are back. Oswald bears the same signs of boredom and vices of his father. Idle, he sleeps late into the morning, spoiled, he has breakfast in bed, dissolute, he tries to seduce the maid, Regine. Ibsen masters the scene by making the episode happening in the same living room, under the same circumstances, with the same words of reproach, which some twenty years before had Oswald's father and Regine's mother as protagonists. Protagonists then and now, but now both are absent from the play. There is much at stake here: nineteenth century contemporaneity is on the stage, libertine relationship, illegal unions, moral dissipation, prejudices and belief confused with Christian humility, all of that made the orthodox Europe call for a *disgusting representation* (Shaw, 1891). Modern tragedy is an attack to the heart of modernity: The white race, the Christian religion, the Western civilization, meanwhile the whole humankind is going astray. In Andre Malraux's words (1949), "Western civilization has begun to doubt its own credentials." But it would not be correct to see *Ghosts* as a condemnation of empty clichés of the time. There would not be tragedy if that were the case. The crux of matter is the disbandment of reason. Due to a fragmented truth, the unsolvable conflict of modernity is our double nature, being human and social actors at the same time, not to exist in ourselves, but in everything outside. Specifically, Helene Alving bore a resemblance with Vitangelo Moscarda,¹⁰ she also discovers that all she welcomed as right and noble was, in fact, false and ugly. She married for external reasons, the orphanage is thought as a remedy against people's rumor, her son is sick and does not love her, ergo in *Ghosts* tragedy is no longer given by an ethical struggle for the universe is no more truth-laden. But it is her sociological epiphany, the inner conflict between conventional morality and justice to make tragedy possible. At the end of the second act Ibsen has Oswald enlightened by the awareness that that place, the country estate, the fiords of Norway, will stifle his joy of life: "I'm afraid that everything

¹⁰ Protagonist of Luigi Pirandello's play *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* (1926).



that's most alive in me will degenerate into ugliness here." (Ibsen, 1978: 257). And Mrs. Alving, in a modernist epiphany, does recognize his insight as being the only possible explanation to her sufferings, "the whole pattern -for the first time- I see it."¹¹ What is that she sees exactly? Being her son a reflection of her late husband, she sees physical nature shaping human nature. It was the dull routine of that little world, the lack of stimuli, that made the young lieutenant waste away his life. It was the Darwinian nature of the little provincial town, perhaps she played a part in it too, in forcing her husband into twisted expression of passion, at the very last to turn a noble soul into a vicious man. Ibsen's society is filled with compromise and lies, and because he considers history in evolutionary terms, a man that belongs to it must inherit also its destructive power:

Ghosts!... I almost believe we are all ghosts, Pastor Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that walks in us. It is every kind of dead idea, lifeless old beliefs and so on. They are not alive, but they cling to us for all that, and we can never rid ourselves of them (Ibsen, 1978: 247).

In the second act Oswald confesses to his mother that he has syphilis, "the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children" (Ibsen, 1978: 250), is the metaphorical medical diagnosis, but we know syphilis cannot be transmitted by the fathers, thus it plays out as a symbol, not a sin.¹² What Oswald really inherited is his father's cheerful, engaging nature, a nature suffocated by the austere Norwegian society, while Regine took after her mother, a social climber heading to a brothel. Darwinism plays a part in *Death of a Salesman* as well: Both Biff and Happy have inherited a flawed image of America, as damaged is the image they have of themselves. Matter of fact, by rejecting the American inheritance and bringing back the Greek-like ethical conflict on the whole family, it is Biff to shorten the gap between classical and modern drama. Willy is too much encompassed in the system to be tragic, the one who is really tragic is Biff

¹¹ Translation is mine. Fjelde's translation (1978): "Now I see how it all fits together."

¹² The play indirectly implies that Oswald inherited syphilis from his father. However, we today accept the notion that syphilis is not genetically passed down from a parent in the genetic code, but is instead caused by a bacterium. Thus it is either transmitted sexually or congenitally transmitted to a child from the birth mother. See Shepherd-Barr, 2006: 158-159).



or better Willy and Biff together. Willy is a desperate bearer of a *modus vivendi* that Biff openly rejects at last. For one of them to win, the other has to lose. It would take Biff the loss of his freedom to save his father, and it would simply take an impossible turn for Willy to grant that tomorrow life might not necessarily be better.

Dissolution of self is an incontrovertible historical happening; objectivity is a fable of the past. Alike Oedipus, modern characters are entangled in a quest for true identity, only some of them are accompanied by a final, partial understanding. Ibsen with Mrs. Alving gave us a Job-alike character: By refusing to leave her husband she became a servant of conventional morality, and by obeying Pastor Manders, she, too, as much as Job, identified herself with God's will. And she is well aware of the impasse: "Yes, I felt it was my duty and obligation- so year after year, I've gone on lying to my own child. Oh, what a coward-what a coward I've been." (Ibsen, 1978: 237). Both Oswald and Biff echoes the Aristotelian moment of recognition (*anagnorisis*), the precise instant when tragedy reveals itself. Recognition somewhat more dominant in Biff than in Oswald, rightly, I would add, since Biff is a much more an influential character than Oswald can possibly be. Incapable of seeing beyond himself, it is not quite the confession of his disease to his mother to move Oswald toward an incomplete awareness as it is his mother's confession, Regine is indeed his half-sister. Ergo, in the end, the cry for light becomes in Oswald an impossible aspiration against the net of conventions. Likewise, Biff has felt his recognition striking inside every spring. At first it is a sense of inadequacy for falling short of material success, afterward is a recognition of identity: "*Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!*" (Miller, 1998: 105), a man of one dollar an hour. Ibsen and Miller, paralleling Sophocles, remove veil after veil; the underlying rhythm of *Ghosts* and *Death of a Salesman* is the same as *Oedipus Rex*, there is a crescendo of pathos, and complementary characters. However, mark this point, the process of recognition is incomplete as much as the project of modernity, surely never followed by a universal reconciliation. Unlike classical heroes, Mrs. Alving, Oswald, Willy, Biff are trapped in a chamber of torture and neither Ibsen nor Miller seem able to free them. None of them can live according to their will, fated to remain suspended in a room, on a stage without conclusion,



a definitive salvation, always in between their true being and the matching representation. Clumsy at times facing a reality Camus would not hesitate to declare as absurd, awkward to madness and yet gifted of a sharp, beautiful reason which enables them to scream. We bid goodbye to a trembling Mrs. Alving, after everything else has already been consumed. She is left screaming the raw impact of life, unresolved before the poison. Willy Loman screams in the end all the heaviness of modern individuality, he shouts out his name. Betrayed by the future, guessing the entire gap between what they might have been and what they are, forever searching for the source of evil. Insight this one that will take our discussion on to the next difference. The Aristotelian concept of *hamartia*.

Hamartia

One of the most controversial terms in literary critique, *hamartia* comes into view only once in Aristotle's *Poetics*, ch.13. Since decoding the meaning of *hamartia* is to give significance to tragedy, I doubt Aristotle knew the burden his sintheticity left in heredity.¹³ Truth is that the word has a range of significance, from 'ignorance' to 'moral defect', from 'mistake' to 'moral flaw' that has created confusion on analyzing Aristotle's intended meaning.

For Aristotle the most important part of the tragedy is the plot: "You can't have tragedy without action, but you can have it without characters" (*Poetics* 1450a:21) that is deficient in character, personality, emotional effect, complexion of reasoning. Using an analogy, we have to imagine the protagonists as empty boxes fill, from time to time, with every sort of gift. Likewise, the character's personality does not exist before the action, but it is the action to shape it. Thus, in Aristotelian terms *hamartia* cannot be a moral flaw innate in the protagonist, a pre-determined, pre-installed evil which would clash not only with Aristotle's view, but with the whole of Greek humanism. If that had been the case, if *hamartia* had been an inner flaw, then the hero would have been just a mechanism

¹³ While a critical review on the topic impels a philological exercise and one that would take me too far from my line of research, a throughout analysis on the term *hamartia* and its multiple interpretations can be found in Glanville, 1949; Bremen, 1969; Stinton, 1975. I am personally indebted to Stinton (1975) whose explanatory essay contemplates the significance of *hamartia* within a 'range of applications' which might not be all-inclusive, but it has been fundamental for the arrangement of this paper.



incapable of recognition, a passive victim of fate rather than *the measure of all things*. But the hero in Aristotelian terms is a man of action shaping his narrative (*telos*) through his actions, hence through his mistakes. Rightly George Whalley in his translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (1997) observes that the world *hamartia* appears in the section Aristotle dedicates to the plot, confirming that *hamartia* is a functional element of the plot and not an integral part of the character. Accordingly, it is the plot to move in a direction so to limit the subject's range of knowledge, *hamartia* takes over as a mistake, not as a personal flaw, as an act of ignorance, cognitive and/or moral blindness that pushes the actors to the edge of nothingness. To be plain, in the classical tragedy men are ignorant, thus they suffer. Oedipus pleads legal and moral innocence: "Before the law and -before god- I am innocent" (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 448), Theseus and Phaedra ignore the part played by Aphrodite in her suicide: "The gods have robbed me of my senses" (Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 1581), is the regret Theseus will confess to the dying Hippolytus. As expected such ignorance has been created ad art by the gods, they do take part in the definitions of people/actors life but, if we consider carefully, their office is not fundamental, as to say that the fact that Oedipus cannot comprehend, "then knowing nothing I went on" (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 273), is not enough to make him a passive victim of fate. Paradoxically, Oedipus did not suffer the 'Oedipus complex,' Aristotle did not know it back then, and Oedipus himself seems to have forgotten in old age: "O Zeus, what have you designed to do with me?" (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Rex*, 738), what he knew well in youth: "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo/That brought this bitterness, my sorrows to completion./But the hand that struck me/Was none but my own." (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Rex*, 1329-1331). It cannot be denied that the events leading to his doom had been foreseen from the very start. Until the very end, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, it is Oedipus cursing Polyneices, to seals the destiny of his family course thus condemning the two brothers to kill each other. However, Oedipus' curse is no more than the final act of a curse working within the roots of his family before he was even born for all we know. Following the same pattern, Apollo had commanded Orestes to murder his mother Clytemnestra, Agamemnon was told to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to pacify Arte-



mis. Unwilling protagonists, they stand tall and still in the face of whimsical gods, half heroes and half victims, apparently more victims than heroes. The notion that the universe is arbitrary being arbitrary the gods' will, goes back to the beginning of Greek literature. It was the Greeks who first discovered the uncertainty ruling human actions. The sphere of human self-reflection and freedom opposed to the sphere of divine intervention has already been largely discussed and never agreed upon (See, Lesky, 1966). Is Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his own daughter the result of a free choice? Did not Oedipus flee from Corinth to escape his fate? The degree of responsibility Greeks heroes are entitled of, remains debatable, so is the fairness of their atonement. Why a man acting out of necessity should take upon himself the logic of guilt and the need for atonement? Referring to Iphigeneia being sacrificed, Albin Lesky has to say: "The freedom of will is overshadowed by the overwhelming force of the situation which clearly influences the decision." (Lesky, 1966).¹⁴ I would not support the argument. We might call it a necessary accident, but for the ancient Greeks there is not such a thing as an accident; nor the ancient Greek justice cared for personal intent, it was the act that mattered. Destiny is an epic composed by the gods. I find the late Professor E. R. Dodds right when, referring to the *Iliad*, he observes that: "The doctrine of man's helpless dependence on an arbitrary Power is not new; but there is a new accent of despair, a new and bitter emphasis on the futility of human purposes." (Dodds, 1951: 34). My understanding is that moving from the Archaic Age to the Age of Pericles, arbitrary divine powers become for the Greek some sort of cosmic justice that intervenes, in a second moment, concerned with the fate of mankind. But at first, it is free will to be preponderant. As the Marxist theorist, Raymond Williams, phrase it: "Fate, Necessity and the nature of the Gods – were not systematized by the Greeks themselves: it is a culture marked by an extraordinary network of beliefs connected to institutions, practices and feelings (...)." (Williams, 1964: 40). He forgot to name individual's will. It

¹⁴ In his inspiring piece, Professor Lesky maintains an ambiguous position regarding the existence of free will within the choices of Greek tragic heroes. Taking as example Etokles' fratricide and Agamemnon's filicide, he recognizes the twofold aspect of human action: "Man being led by fate to a terrible deed, which, however, he not only accepts but desires and passionately undertakes."



is a philosophical stereotype to place necessity, determinism, fatalism and its laws above human wills; of course, Hellenistic Greeks would have said that men cannot judge the gods, but classical characters had a degree of free will that modern protagonists do not have. In his insightful essay, Professor Stinton reminds us that Aristotle distinguishes between four kinds of culpability: (1) Acts done in ignorance where the result of the action could not have been foreseen. (2) Acts done in ignorance where the result of the action could have been foreseen. (3) Acts done knowingly, but as result of an impulse, e.g. anger, which blunter moral perceptions. These are wrong acts but those who commit such injury are not wicked men since the harm done is not due to vice. (4) The wrong act is done as result of malice. I place Oedipus between the first and the third classification. He acts out of ignorance and due to natural passion, thus not deliberately. Even so, it is his free will to condemn him. It was perfectly possible for Oedipus to abandon his search by seizing on the acknowledged fact that a group of robbers had murdered Laius. But he did not, and he chose action. His decision to look for the only eyewitness left, by now a shepherd far off the city, is the subtle space of possibilities where free will replaces fate. Oedipus' honesty, his will to power, is independent of any divine intervention; it rather celebrates the importance of human reason by revealing that the whole drama hangs on a discrepancy of calculation:

You said that he spoke of highway robbers who/ Killed Laius. Now if he still uses that/ Same number, I was not the one who killed him./ One man can not be the same as many./ But if he speaks clearly of one man in his own,/ Indeed the guilty balance tilts toward me (Williams, 1964: 841).

Somewhere along the line, it was possible for Polynices not to move an army against the seven gates of the city of Thebes, knowing, as he knew due to his father's curse, that the fight would have been fatal for himself and for his brother Eteocles. Medea could have chosen to forgive, Antigone and Cleon to understand. Classical characters suffer because they do not know. Through a painful act of free will ignorance is challenged, the progressive attainment of self-knowledge plays the trick and turns men into heroes, death is the prize to be paid for that moment of recognition.



At this altitude, I am not arguing that Aristotle did not prescribe the 'moral error' for the best kinds of tragedy, I am arguing that Greek tragedies, in their best kinds, were not occasioned by 'moral error' from the side of its protagonists but a mistake of evaluation. On the contrary, the inclusion of 'moral flaw' in the scope of *hamartia* brings us to modern drama. Modern characters, using the scholar George Kimmelman's words, "do not "struggle" enough; they are victims of resignation, vacillation, and impotence" (Kimmelman, 1946: 141-160),¹⁵ more important they do not make mistakes, as classical heroes do, they rather have moral, personal flaws. In his quintessential essay on modern tragedy, *Tragedy and the Common Man* (1949), Arthur Miller fails to see the double nature of *hamartia*, but he is right on his insight on a 'tragic flaw.' Only those who passively accept the lot life assigned them are really flawless. But someone acts against the scheme that challenges their dignity, the routine degrading their will to power, and so they shake it all, changing the unchangeable environment, stretching their size to a tragic stature and once again generating the Aristotelian fear and pity. More than an aesthetic theory on pity and fear, modern tragedy is about common men in a world of dissonance. Kin to Faust and Frankenstein, the final product of human understanding is not freedom, but suffering. It is specifically because they know that they suffer. It is not ignorance to move the plot (Oedipus), but social awareness of disorder, they know life being meaningless after the gods have bid goodbye, hence in a sense they surrender to chaos. Ibsen is a playwright who allows free will to be defeated by the social reality, and when it does not happen, as in *A Doll's House*, his characters are in inferior position against the social milieu, as in fact it is for Nora. In *Ghost*, Oswald and Mrs. Alving are both defeated by their fate symbolized by the syphilis he inherited from Captain Alving. Oswald will yearn for an overdose of morphine, Mrs. Alving's rationalist plans crumple together with the burden of her secrets. But Mrs. Alving is different from Oedipus, she knew it all along. Quite consequentially we are tempted to say that her

¹⁵ Kimmelman is here referring to a widespread position over modern tragic characters he does not share. His view would be: "The unfree, on the other hand, are the ignorant, the irresolute, the slaves of whim and confusion. They are the very ones, in other words, who are the protagonists of classical and Elizabethan tragedies and whom the critics strangely enough refer to as "free"!"



initial rebellious was, morally speaking, the right path to take had she not been shy of courage. Yet no one can conclude that she should have left home twenty years earlier as Nora did, for we do not know what has been of Nora's life after she slammed the door never to go back. The general perception is that her choices are not directed by free will but chaos since this is what modernity is in last instance. And because individual's behaviors are determined by factors beyond the individual's control, modern characters can be blamed with mitigating causes. Absurd, Camus would remind, arises when the world fails to meet our demands for meaning, hinting a gap of understanding between what we are and our expectations. Modernity budes within this gap of indetermination, blurred in its discoveries, shaking in all its accepted significance, aware that the impossibility to be converted into the mystery of faith is the last station of Socratic rationalism. There are dark and shadowed zones we cannot resolve, a moment of fuzziness, indefinable and incomprehensible, so the individual cannot be entirely simplified through the category of cause and effect, and if God is dead, then everything is possible.¹⁶

Death of a Salesman is another case in point. It is knowledge, or acknowledgement, that makes Biff feel inconsistent as soon as spring comes. Again, as already for Mrs. Alving, he always knew it, "we never told the truth for ten minutes in this house", (Miller, 1998: 104), he admits to his family in their ultimate confrontation, ergo he is well aware of it. What shatters on his return is not the American dream but his life. A kleptomaniac since he was a young boy, at times we have Miller making Biff stealing a basketball case, a fountain pen, and in the end we discover that for the past three months he had no address since he was in jail for robbery. He tried to be everything, a clerk, a salesman, a farmer, he took correspondence courses of radio and television, he tried to be everywhere in Nebraska, in Dakotas, in Arizona, in Texas, but always incapable to hold to some kind of life. He knows it so well that in the first act he confessed it to Linda, his mother. But what he really holds on to is the certainty of an unbearable feeling, that of wasting his life: "I've made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I come back here I know that all I've

¹⁶ This idea is well expressed by the existentialist philosophy. Reference texts are Camus, 1989; Dostoevsky, 1994; Sartre, 2007.



done is to waste my life.” (Miller, 1998: 11). Also, Miller wants us to believe Willy being a man poisoned by his dream, blind to the existential dynamic he is responsible for. If this is the aim, then the success is partial. And Miller himself does not believe in it, that is why he has Willy planting seeds just before committing suicide. The neighborhood has been *massacred*, the old fragrance has gone, Willy plants seeds in the hope of having fruits in the future in the face of today’s dryness. Out of metaphor, Willy has read the defeat through the layers of Biff’s constant changes. As the day declines in a moment of sore lucidity, he asks Bernard, now a successful lawyer and Biffs’ ex-classmate, “What-what’s the secret?” (Miller, 1998: 71). Bernard and his father Charley’s achievements parallel his frustration for an immense unfulfilled universe of expectations; now sixty-three years old, unemployed, with a house mortgage yet to pay out, he senses life for him has been a game to lose. Willy and Biff, akin to Oedipus and Antigone, broke the law, not human or nature are the offended part but society; failure is not admissible, society closes on them removing whatever free will they have left and trapping its victims in a Weberian iron cage of vanity. His suicide is then the economical seed that will enable Biff to inherit twenty-thousand dollar to start his ranch in the near future, in the face of today’s failure. In brief, it is not because he ignores the truth that he dies, but it is because he knows that he has to dream.

Going back to the original meaning of the term *Hamartia*, it should be clear by now that I refer to it as a mistake if committed by the heroes of the classical tragedy and as a personal, innate flaw when dealing with modern tragedy and its common men. However, an underlying question deserves more attention. What is exactly the mistake committed by the classical hero? And what is the flaw demanding the reverse of the common man? *Hubris* is what the Greeks would call the above mentioned mistake, tragic pride, is probably the best translation we have for it. It is arrogance, overconfidence in one own capacity; it is a verbal or physical offence against the other, against the gods when human action challenges divine disposition, and an offence against the Athenian laws whenever people’s right to dignity is violated. Greek heroes die for being proud. Oedipus is an enlightened monarch, a tyrant coming from Corinth, iras-



cible and temperamental character, tinged with anger and passion, dominated by choleric instincts. When insolently approached by Laius' carriage, his biological father, King of Thebes, Oedipus is the first to strike the coachman and then killed them all. He is the one who solved the riddle of the Sphinx, he used human, perhaps prodigious, intelligence, to decode a world that is not subject to human understanding. In *Oedipus Rex* he verbally abuses of the blind prophet Teiresias and threatens Creon with death. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, he, who has been forgiven by the gods, does not forgive his son Polynices, but curses both his sons, Polynices and Eteocles to a bloody end: "You shall die by your own brother's hand, and you shall kill the brother who banished you." (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1388-1390). *Hubris* is what drives Polynices to move war to his brother, in this case the impossibility of giving away from his determination, which is part of that consistency of characters Aristotle and Hegel recognize to Greek heroes. Medea, foreign bride, acts out of *hubris*, she is a furious woman offended in her most sacred principles, the oaths of loyalty and fidelity have been violated, consequently her infanticide is a female denounce against misogynist belief. And so does Antigone: A sister determined to do the right, *hubris* is her self-asserting attitude before the law. As compensation, *nemesis*, which is the divine retribution, steps in no more as a punishment than it is an act of justice, order is re-established, at last man and universe are once again reconciled. Next to it, Aristotle makes them fall because of a mistake; we should see *hubris* as a mistake of perspective, killing Laius and marrying the widowed queen fulfills Aristotle definition, Oedipus switches from good to bad fortune, tragedy is served.

Greek heroes die for being proud, common men die for being mediocre. Hellenistic Greeks deal with capricious gods, modern man in his Babylonian grandeur simply killed them all. And that surely was an act of *hubris*. Once the gods are no more man finds himself lonely and mediocre. Western quest for rationality brought the Nietzschean madman to kill God, the non-existence of God is the atrocious doubt introduced by modernity. We have learned how to live without kings. After Einstein's relativism, Heisenberg's indetermination principle and Godel's incompleteness theorems, we grew skeptical. Science no longer provides definitive



answers, we do not want God to redeem men's sin, hence the border between good and evil is vanished, and reality becomes incommunicable. Given that, the common man is aware of his own finitude, he has accepted his own solitude and his reduced status. Even so in Miller's analysis: "The common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were." (Miller, 1949). Nevertheless, these modern characters are inconsistent as much as time is displaced; they live in a progressive becoming. *Death of a Salesman* has Biff who is thirty-four and no clear direction, Willy is leading a temporary life, the meaning of his life is always deferred until some evasive future, as a salesman he travels but he never arrives for good. In *Ghosts*, Oswald is in his twenties, pseudo-artist with no inspiration, no plans. Somewhere along the line, modern characters bring tragedy down on themselves, not by opposing compromises and conventionalities, but by living them all. In this sense, they are defeated before life while ancient heroes are redeemed just before death. The latter is a martyr, the former an outcast. They always seem at odds with themselves, anxious to keep up with their inconsistent improvisations, rather than definitive goals, in fact they do not have any. Hence, this inner fallacy makes them pale in comparison to the bigger-than-life protagonists of the Greek tragedy, to an extent to appear mediocre. Their personal flaw is the modern *hamartia*. Ibsen describes the could-have-been happy family, they seemingly lived happily, they are happy now, indeed everything is a ghost, everyone holding on to his own dark secret, until the sun, cutting through the darkness at last, frees them of the unspoken burdens. Oswald surrenders under the weight of his mother's symbolic values, somewhat a libertine of *Parisien* education; even with syphilis, he finds time to harass the maid. Indifferent and disregarding of the sacrifices made to keep him safe, this Meursault ante litteram, after his mother's revelation, fails to recognize the drama at stake, instead he clings to his definition of filial love as a 'superstitious nonsense.' Regine departs in search of pleasure and money, Engstrand is about to open a brothel, the orphanage has burned down, the fire, as a purifying symbol, eradicates the illusions everyone had created, and so does with Captain Alving's memory. The human wreckage is complete. Nothing is left of the overwhelming splendor of Greek heroes, ideologically far from the immense honesty Oedipus per-



formed in his search for truth, far from the philanthropy of Alcestis' sacrifice, not a match for the folly of Medea's anger, not on a par with Atin-gone's unshaken resoluteness. Helene's determination saves the plot from the general atmosphere of insignificance: She does not walk out the doll's house. I believe this is Ibsen answering the indignant protest against Nora's conduct: Mrs. Alving, her not breaking the moral code, is the answer to those who wished Nora, her breaking the moral code, to have never walked out the century's door.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller, before than the Lomans, deals with the American Dream. It all started with it, the idea that people are always reaching towards something greater than themselves, *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. A cultural credo whose sociological roots are somewhere between a Napoleon complex and Victorian morality, and whose pragmatism lies in class mobility and ideal family. Inevitably the idealism of the Founding Fathers has mutated into market ideology, *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness* has become a choice about where one plays golf or what shirt to wear. Chiefly, the belief of the possibility of happiness through material success. Even so, the play is not an attack on American values, and if it is, it is not the America of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to be under attack, but that of Rock Feller, those new rich who believed "to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator." (Quoted in Roudane, 1987: 184). Willy is a salesman in a society where class boundaries are fluid if none at all; surely, a victim of consumerist culture where market takes priority over the individual. Notwithstanding the obviousness, my reading is that society's responsibilities play a minor role compared to individual ones, as to say it is not Willy to live in a flawed society, but is Willy himself to be a flawed individual, the modern implication of *hamartia*, thus guilty to bring tragedy down over his family. He believes in the American promise, he considers America's success to be inevitable, and the symbiosis is so complete that the quest for success becomes a quest for self-realization. The moment the former is lacking, the latter capitulates. Life is divided into two parts, a real segment where Willy Loman and his sons are unable to achieve prosperity in sales, and an unreal dimension, where everything is great or is going to be so. While fantasizing about lost opportunities for wealth, fame, and noto-



riety, at some unspecified point in the past Willy loses the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, thereby diminishing his ability to survive in the present. He towers over illusions of greatness, the greatest being America, for his sons more than for himself, the firstborn Biff more than the second born Happy. Biff is recalled as a young Hercules, tall, handsome, magnificent; Happy, on the other hand, is a common selfish upstart. He is the real common man, not tragic but ordinary, he takes bribes and does not hesitate to ruin a female colleague to cover his existential lack of power. Miller has Happy turning his back on his parents, literally and metaphorically, on more than one occasion. The scene at the restaurant in which he pretends not to know his father, can be taken as the main reference. However, Willy is not Oedipus at all; he is not interested in truth, as I said before he suffers because he knows. This is why until the end he wants to be sold illusions. After having been fired, at the dinner table with Biff and Happy he quite plainly asks Biff for it: "Don't give me a lecture about facts and aspects. I am not interested." (Miller, 1998: 830). Linda wants us to imagine Willy exceptional. Sometimes he is. The intensity of his dreams raises him above the ordinary people, and provides him stature, the poor harvest after a life of sacrifice adds tragedy to it:

Why shouldn't he talk to himself? Why? When he has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me that it's his pay? How long can that go on? How long? You see what I'm sitting here and waiting for? And you tell me he has no character? The man who never worked a day but for your benefit? When does he get the medal for that? Is this his reward—to turn around at the age of sixty-three and find his sons, who he loved better than his life, one a philandering bum (Miller, 1998: 41).

But I do not see Willy suffering from a "Bovarsism phenomenon," he does not have her passion, but he does have her tendency to fallacy. Linda knows better: He never made real money, he was never in the paper. Mediocre because he fails in everything he does: He wants to be a good father, a devoted husband a great salesman, but he is none. Not an invincible father, not a loyal husband, nor a successful salesman like he wants everyone to believe. *I am vital in New England* he keeps repeating, but he is simply not, he is just self-centered ignoring how people, his family first, pity him. He fails to appreciate his wife, whom he rebukes



throughout the play, meanwhile he is consumed by false pride. He begs Howard to give him a job of 50 dollars a week in New York City and when his successful neighbor Charley offers the very same job to him, he refused it out of pride. As all modern characters he is displaced, Miller does not say it, but Willy deeply feels the absurdity of his path, the gap between his expectations, -his sons becoming successful salespeople-, and the reality, -his sons failing to become wealthy. Yet this is not what makes Willy losing the game. His most evident moral flaw, as modern protagonist, is the lack of *anagnorisis*, recognition, the Greek moment of self-acknowledgement, which, we have already seen, Biff painfully assumes. Instead, Willy dies with all his demons: *That boy is going to be magnificent* he repeats to Linda once more a few minutes before committing suicide. Aristotle would probably suggest that Willy is not a tragic character then, he lacks the greater significance of life. I would agree. Willy misunderstood life, for this reason we have to read Biff and Willy together, the collision between opposite social *weltanschauung* makes tragedy happening. His funeral is a reminiscence of Gatsby's. No one was there to attend, the American Dream proved itself at the edge of collapse. But his death is in line with his character, Willy, alike Gatsby, is not a revolutionary hero questioning the capitalist system, Willy is just a salesman who has got nothing more to sell but his life, he trades it for another dream, for Biff to achieve what he could not. In the end the mortgage has been paid, so all the debts. Linda, ultimate bulwark to leave the stage, lacks as well of final recognition, hence her moral-mortal flaw. To the silent grave she confides that they are free at last; ironically she fails to understand that they have all surrendered their freedom to a society that believes in the supremacy of material over spiritual.

Neither for classical nor for modern characters life has been inevitable. Greek humanism, through ratio, learned how to control the gods. The limited universe they observed and the order of it ruled by witty gods conferred to them a space of free will where to act accordingly. Centuries later modernity has open the Pandora's box of possibilities: The universe has been opened and we have lost the gods. The overwhelming sense of human helplessness in face of the divine order is part of the cultural inheritance of Western Man. Next in line is the fear of freedom, -"the un-



conscious flight from the heavy burden of individual choice which an open society lays upon its members.” (Dodds, 1951: 246).¹⁷ Unexpectedly, the dialectic reason-freedom has been rejected for a more flexible position in favors of indeterminacy, plurality, partiality, but that also exposed individual beings to experience of disorder and marginalization. The implication of an anti-deterministic view, that is saying the retreat of a divine mystery, does not prove free will but the relative, weak status of the human condition. It legitimates the concept of entropy introducing in the everyday life an element of chaos and eventually apocalypse. The overall failure has to be ascribed to personal flaws, disputable choices, lack of personality. The misery of ordinariness. Mrs. Alving has not been brave enough; meanwhile, Willy has placed the justification of his existence on a social myth. Thus, it is individual guilt what takes them down, not necessity; to be called on trial is man alone, not God. If we do not consider modern characters as victims, that is because modern tragedy moves within a time independent from the wrath of the gods. On the other hand, the equilibrium, if there is equilibrium at all, is to be found on a step above mediocrity.

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¹⁷ In *The Greek and the Irrational* professor Doods traces the origin of the phenomenon back to the Greek society in the third century B.C.: “For the refusal of responsibility in any sphere there is always a price to be paid, usually in the form of neurosis (...) The centuries of rationalism had weakened their social influence and thus, indirectly, their power over the individual” (cfr. 1951, Ch. VII, 247). Surely, the West has been subjected to a process of secularization that began with Socrates, became official with the enlightened philosophy of Descartes, and took finally shape with the latest Marxist historical materialism. Simultaneously, the philosophical death of God generates nihilist shipwrecks that the twentieth century failed to solve.



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Öz: Trajik karakterler kazanamayacakları savaşlarla savaşır. Onlardan kahramanlar yapan şey budur. Bununla birlikte, klasik ve modern trajedi, yeterli aklın rasyonalist ilkesinden yetersiz aklın felsefi değişiminde fay çizgisi bulunan ontolojik farklılıkları göstermektedir. Bu nedenle, hayat, tanrıların gazabının, insanın başarısızlığının sıradan sonucu haline gelmesi için dayattığı bir zorunluluk olmaktan çıkar. Bu göz önüne alındığında, makale Yunanca hamartia teriminin klasik ve modern drama ekonomisinde üstlendiği farklı etkileri ve Weltans-



hauung'un eşdeğer yeniden tanımlanmasını ele alacaktır. Modernite, klasiklerin kozmik aralığına sahip değildir, bu nedenle kader hakkında suçluluk hakkında olduğundan daha azdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Trajedya, Aristoteles, Hegel, hamartia, modernite.

^[1] The expression 'pathetic fallacy' is taken from John Ruskin's famous discussion of it in *Modern Painters*, vol. III, 1856.

A technical note: By the time of writing I had no access to the original texts, thus I worked on already translated work and I have used the original terms when they have no true equivalent in English.

