# 14 Posthumanism and the Death of Tragedy

> Humanists have long found in Greek tragedy an illustration of their ideal, but tragedy seems a strange genre on which to pin the celebration of the human.[1]

Taken literally, the phrase 'posthuman tragedy' sounds somewhat counterintuitive. If the genre of tragedy depends on the "downfall or death of the protagonist" (*OED*), then surely the idea of *human* tragedy should be unsurpassable. What imaginable or unimaginable posthuman figure or form of agency could take the place of Antigone, or Hamlet, or Faust, or any other tragic hero – and produce a similar (if any) tragic affectivity or mode in human spectators? Machines, cyborgs, animals, chimeras and objects are usually the subjects of 'lower' genres and registers like science fiction, fables, or (animistic) fairy tales. They are far closer to comedy and 'error'. It is true, they might be able to cause much (human) suffering (which corresponds to the second, 'modern', definition of tragedy as "an event, series of events, or situation causing great suffering, destruction, or distress, and typically involving death (esp. on a large scale or when premature; *OED*)", but what could be their *hamartia*? What cruel *tyche* might afflict a nonhuman? What *anagnorisis*, what kind of *catharsis* would the death of a posthuman bring, *for humans*?

However, for posthumanisms of various kinds, the human is no longer self-evident, or the whole story. They predict or call for 'transcendence' of the human, they erode boundaries between humans and (their) nonhuman others, they question human exceptionalism and promote postanthropocentric value systems. They reopen the question concerning technology and human (and nonhuman) 'technogenesis'. They advocate new relationships between human and nonhuman forms of agency, new understandings of environment and ecology. They also revolutionise 'our' self-understanding in terms of embodiment and materiality, cognition and consciousness, community and ethics. They foresee a 'world without us', speculating about human extinction in the age of human-induced, anthropogenic, climate change. They promote a more-than-human ethics, based on new materialisms, entanglements and object ontologies. How could they not also have a radical effect on aesthetics (and thus literature and 'the literary'), pedagogy and spirituality? In other words, how could they *not* affect the very notion of tragedy with their timeless desire to re-engineer the human condition, especially when the outcome of that desire in the traditions of literature, theatre and other representations has tended to be, always already, inherently tragic?

There seems no other choice then but to take posthumanism and the posthuman *seriously*. If seriousness is a question of raised stakes, then the tragic potential of posthumanism and the posthuman, especially when taken *literally*, could not in fact be higher. These posthuman stakes, after all, concern human survival, a world 'after' humans, the evolutionary passing of a species, climatic cataclysm, utter destruction and extinction. What more do you need for the finale of a grand tragedy? Leaves the question of *catharsis*. Without humans, who would be 'cleansed', educated or uplifted by these tragic events? Surely AI, Nature, nonhuman animals, or Gaia would remain quite unmoved by 'our' demise.

[1] Bonnie Honig, "Antigone's Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism", *New Literary History* 41.1 (2010): 2.

*Tragic Times*

> The question whether tragedy is possible in our times sounds paradoxical because the times *are* tragic.[2]

There has always been a strong case for explaining the tragic as a fundamental reaction to the experience of the meaninglessness of the world, of life, of suffering. It is a reaction to theodicy and the question of evil that can spark either nihilism or a dogged insistence on positivity emerging from and getting the better of existential despair in the form of cultural 'mourning'. It is in this sense that meaning can arise from suffering, namely from overcoming the kind of the suffering existence tends to cause. A tragic *humanism* depends on this in that it turns tragedy and its cathartic experience into the highest form of art and humanity. It sparks a fundamentally melancholic 'yearning for the human', as one might put it, understood as the overcoming of adversity and a purification or cleansing, a transcendence of the otherwise senseless 'human condition' – or, the 'gnostic' drama.[3]

Central to a modern and contemporary understanding of tragedy and the tragic in these terms is twentieth-century existentialism and its (tragic) humanism based on "despair and revolt" in the face of the "absurd".[4] Raymond Williams here specifically refers to Albert Camus, for whom "humanism is insistent: a refusal to despair; a commitment to heal", while "the tragedy lies in the common condition, against which the revolt is made"[5] – an attitude shared by Marxism, Freudianism and Existentialism, all of which, according to Williams, are "tragic":

> Man can achieve his full life only after violent conflict; man is essentially frustrated, and divided against himself, while he lives in society; man is torn by intolerable contradictions, in a condition of essential absurdity.[6]

Camus himself, in 1955, when he wrote his "Sur l'avenir de la tragédie",[7] remained undecided as to whether after the Second World War there was likely to be a revival of the tragic genre, but he conceded that there was at least a legitimate claim to one: "Our time coincides with a drama of civilisation which, today as before, might favour a tragic expression".[8] Even in the absence of spiritualism or the transcendental in modern times, where "man" only confronts "himself", tragedy remains thinkable, since "tragedy moves between extreme nihilism and unlimited hope":[9]

> The world the eighteenth-century individual thought to be able to submit to and model according to reason has indeed taken shape, but it is a monstrous shape. Rational and

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[2] Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 309.
[3] Cf. Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
[4] Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 174.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 183.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 189.
[7] Albert Camus, "Sur l'avenir de la tragédie [1955]", in : *Œuvres complètes III: 1949-1956* (Paris : Gallimard, 2008), pp. 1111-1121.
2008: 1111-1121)
[8] *Ibid*., p. 1114 (all translations unless indicated otherwise are mine).
[9] *Ibid*., p. 1117.

> outrageous at the same time, it is the world of history. Given this outrageousness, history has taken the face of destiny. Man doubts whether he will be able to control it, he can merely fight it. It is a curious paradox that humanity thanks to the very weapons used to reject the idea of inevitability has created another hostile destiny for itself. Having turned the reign of the human into a new god, man now once again turns against this god. He is being challenged, at once fighting and disconcerted, divided between absolute hope and definitive doubt. He therefore lives in a tragic climate. This is maybe what explains that tragedy wishes to be reborn. Man, today, cries out his revolt knowing that this revolt has limits, he demands freedom and suffers necessity. Thus torn by contradiction, man hence is conscious of his ambiguity and that of his history and is therefore tragic *par excellence*. He may be marching towards the formulation of his own tragedy that will be obtained on the day *Everything Will Be Fine*.[10]

There are nevertheless several ways in which this tragic humanism may no longer be entirely adequate, if it ever was, notwithstanding its undeniable and venerable 'heroism' and 'greatness'.

Bonnie Honig is rightly suspicious of the humanists' predilection for tragedy and the sacrificial desire that informs it, which is why she speaks of "mortalist humanism":

> If humanists promote tragedy as their genre of choice, it is because they think tragedy renders clear the human spirit, exhibiting human willingness to sacrifice on behalf of a principle, commitment, or desire, or knowingly to accept one's implication in unchosen acts or defiantly to march to one's death with head held high or to refuse vengeance or even justice on behalf of love for another or perhaps even an ideal of the self. Tragic characters die but their principles live on. They suffer, but something beautiful is made of their suffering.[11]

The arch-human protagonists of classical tragedy, like Antigone, appeal to humanists because they "dignify, universalize, and humanize suffering", which means that:

> A certain human commonality is furthered by tragedy's tendency to depict with sympathy the suffering on all sides of a conflict. Just as the 'cry' of suffering gets under

[10] *Ibid*., p. 1119. The French original is:

> Le monde que l'individu du XVIIIe siècle croyait pouvoir soumettre et modeler par la raison et la science a pris une forme en effet, une forme monstrueuse. Rationnel et démesuré à la fois, il est le monde de l'histoire. Mais à ce degré de démesure, l'histoire a pris la face du destin. L'homme doute de pouvoir la dominer, il peut seulement y lutter. Paradoxe curieux, l'humanité par les mêmes armes avec lesquelles elle avait rejeté la fatalité s'est retaillé un destin hostile. Après avoir fait un dieu du règne humain, l'homme se retourne à nouveau contre ce dieu. Il est en contestation, à la fois combattant et dérouté, partagé entre espoir absolu et le doute définitif. Il vit donc dans un climat tragique. Ceci explique peut-être que la tragédie veuille renaître. L'homme d'aujourd'hui qui crie sa révolte en sachant que cette révolte a des limites, qui exige la liberté et subit la nécessité, cet homme contradictoire, déchiré, désormais conscient de l'ambiguïté de l'homme et de son histoire, cet homme c'est l'homme tragique par excellence. Il marche peut-être vers la formulation de sa propre tragédie qui sera obtenue le jour du *Tout est bien*.

[11] Honig, "Antigone's Two Laws", pp. 2-3.

> language's surface to access a common humanity said to underlie our linguistic divisions, so tragedy gets under the skin of politics to scratch the essence of the human. Here tragedy's power is not that it redeems suffering but that it exemplifies it in ways that highlight the human's most basic common denominator.[12]

One reason for this humanist attraction and 'exemplarity' is of course that it is based on a fundamentally 'solitary' understanding of the heroic human, who is usually male and 'noble'. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore that, (a) the human (as a solitary figure, but more importantly, as a species) is also the cause of immense suffering not only to other humans but even more so to nonhumans (from nonhuman animals to the entire planet); and, (b) that suffering is not only a unique attribute of the human, thus taking Bentham's 'can they suffer' seriously and extending it to life more generally and even beyond, to the 'inorganic', including, in posthuman times, the proliferation of 'technological' others.

If one follows Anthony Miccoli's argument, technology might indeed have become the main source for the "human expression of suffering and pain".[13] This "posthuman suffering", Miccoli characterises as an "affective state characterized by a perceived feeling of inadequacy, alienation, or lack of agency or efficiency in relation to technological artefacts or systems of use".[14] Posthuman tragedy would then arise out of "the awareness that both knowledge and existence are contingent upon the supplement and presence of a technological other through which that knowledge and existence can be achieved", or, in other words, that "the only way in which we can know ourselves or *be human* is through technology or the supplement of a technological other"[15] – i.e. a stronger variant of Günther Anders's "Promethean shame".[16]

*The Law of Genre*

Tragedy classically involves "the downfall or death of the protagonist", as the OED reminds us; it is therefore always somehow 'sacrificial'. There is something elegiac to the tragic, a gravity of matter, form and tone. Tragedy is, by definition, no laughing matter, due to its seriousness – this is its fundamental difference to comedy. It requires an end of a particular kind that also marks the outcome of a flaw (*hamartia*) that leads to (some) destruction and atonement – which differentiates it from hybrid genres like tragicomedy or *Trauerspiel*. It involves shock, often even horror and distress leading to sorrow, lamentation and grief. It requires a 'catastrophe', a disaster and a cataclysm of events that unfold almost inevitably – a 'mechanism' of which the characters implicated remain unaware, hence the irony that is supposed to evoke pity, a human reaction not to be expected from the unforgiving gods or fate.

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[12] *Ibid*., p. 3.

[13] Anthony Miccoli, *Posthuman Suffering and the Technological Embrace* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), p. 1.

[14] Anthony Miccoli, "Posthuman Suffering", *Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2017), n.p.; available online at: https://criticalposthumanism.net/posthuman-suffering/ (accessed 20/12/2023).

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] Cf. Christopher Müller, "Günther Anders", *Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2016), n.p.; available online at https://criticalposthumanism.net/anders-gunther/ (accessed 20/12/2023).

This is why tragedy "tears us apart, it shatters our sense of ourselves and the world".[17] It 'creates' a certain hostility, or a face-off with the world, which it perceives as 'strange'. It is about human 'alienation' from itself, from divinity, from materiality which, fundamentally or existentially, even morally is unacceptable. In its "apocalypticism"[18] it causes an outrage or "revolt" (cf. Camus above). The dramatic nature of life and its (tragic) truth lies in its twists and turns (*peripeteia*) which ultimately lead to the realisation or self-knowledge (*anagonorisis*) of the true misery of existence and the ultimate absence of a reason, cause or justice. What tragedy finally reveals is thus the "ethical and spiritual horror of a world in which violence, torture and terror recur unendingly".[19] The only positive aspect of this loss of sense and self in tragedy lies in the sharing of its affects and insights, in the 'sympathy' – therefore: "there is no drama without sympathy, but there is no sympathy without drama".[20] Between pity (*pathos*) and fear (*phobos*), tragedy is an "*affront* to our desires for meaning and coherence".[21] This is its most important 'pedagogical' aspect, its experimentation with 'limit experiences' and with what happens when visible or invisible boundaries are transgressed and order is preserved or reinstated and existential conflict is 'resolved'.

From a religious point of view the tragic is about guilt and expiation (cf. Girard's "scapegoat"), and in its highest form, namely to be 'guiltlessly' guilty. 'It wasn't my fault!' the hero might claim. 'It's always your fault!', the Gods will reply. From a moral point of view, tragedy is about freedom, even if it may only be the 'noble' (maybe even sublime) acceptance of a guiltless blame (cf. Jesus as the (sacrificial) lamb of God), or in the difference between believing oneself to be free while the gods have already decided otherwise. From a 'liberal' point of view, this freedom is a continuous internal, psychological, struggle between good and bad, between guilt and conscience, crime and punishment and so on, which ultimately is said to constitute the individual (human) subject, who is (always belatedly, so to speak) called upon to make the 'right' decision. Isolation, damage and "self-mutilation"[22] are thus at the heart of the tragic experience whether it may be 'staged' or lived as 'everyday life' experience.

The paradoxical character of the attraction that tragedy and the tragic still hold over (many of) 'us' lies in the fact, as Julian Young explains, that tragedy is about distressing events that happen to an individual, often to "the finest among us",[23] while still, at the end, it leads to a kind of release, a kind of enjoyment or an "enthusiasm" that translates into applause – an almost perverse kind of "tragic pleasure" arising out of the acquisition of some higher "knowledge". As Walter Kaufman writes:

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[17] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, "The Tragic", in: *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Harlow: Longman, 2004), pp. 103-112.
and Royle, p. 103.
[18] *Ibid*., p. 104.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 107.
[20] *Ibid*.
[21] *Ibid*., p. 108.
[22] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 208.
[23] Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Zizek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1.

> And if we praise the delights of reading and writing about tragedy, are we not seeking joy through the contemplation of the sufferings of our fellow men? Why seek out past sorrows when there is more pain and grief now than a man can cope with?[24]

The question as well as the 'joy' undoubtedly persist even in the kind of pleasure experienced in posthuman times and scenarios, where (at least some) humans display both awe and a certain, maybe perverse, enthusiasm at the prospect of a 'world without us', of human apocalypse and extinction. Maybe the world would be a better place 'after' us, maybe it would even "miss us", as Alan Weisman conjectures.[25]

Kaufman also reminded us that tragedy, at least in its classic form, is also an indictment of the "brutality and inhumanity of most morality".[26] This, one may suppose, depends on where one stands in terms of 'tradition' and whether the 'best' of humanity already lies behind, or still before 'us'. Is the posthuman(ist) aspect of that scenario that it is an entire species which is disappearing – and as it happens, that of the 'paragon of animals' – or the fact that any extinction 'event', from asteroids to climate change or a pandemic, will always hit the underprivileged masses of that species most, while preserving the most 'noble' and affluent longest? There therefore seems to be nothing 'democratic' even about posthuman tragedies and their radical nihilism. A planet without us is only one remove from the idea that it would have been better if the human had never seen the light of day, or had never been the outcome of evolution, better never to have been born.[27]

If it is true that tragedy has been a subject of philosophical discourse since Aristotle, but that only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic, as Peter Szondi's famously opens his *Versuch über das Tragische,*[28] and if this shift from tragedy to the tragic entails the loss of the sense of 'ineluctability' in a (classical) tragic conflict, which is nevertheless required for an 'intense' emotional response, where does the inevitability of catastrophic anthropogenic climate change range on the scale of tragicness? Ludwig Pfeiffer points to modern bureaucratisation, rationalisation and the ubiquity of media as main obstacles for a tragic sense of self which requires a direct experience of a person to the world.[29] The modern "hankering for re-enchantment" Pfeiffer evokes[30] can also be seen at work in contemporary (posthumanist) ecological thought that is looking for some deeper, but not necessarily exclusively human, significance, or a new form of 'worlding', even while the deepest form of human conflict might now involve an increasing dependence on technology and a perceived lack of agency, all the while the planet or Gaia seem to be turning against 'us'.

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[24] Kaufman, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, p. xvi.

[25] Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), p. 5.

[26] Kaufman, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, p. xvii.

[27] Rita Felski, "Introduction", in: Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 4; cf. also David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm Of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[28] Peter Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische* (Frankfurt/Main: Insel Verlag, 1961); also taken up by K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, "The Tragic: On the Relation between Literary Experience and Philosophical Concepts", *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, 77 (1990): 24.

[29] Pfeiffer, "The Tragic", p. 27.

[30] *Ibid*., p. 28.

Life in the ruins, postapocalyptic life, after the worst but not after the end, of course, at least for now, is this tragic? As David Scott claims, ours is a "tragic sensibility" that is "less driven by the confident hubris of those teleologies that once extracted the future (postcolonial and otherwise [one might also add 'transhumanist' here]) so seamlessly from the past, and it is more attuned to the ambiguities and paradoxes of the relation between time and action, intentions and contingencies, determinations and chance".[31] The threatening posthuman scenario undoubtedly does return us to the tragic – even while, from a cosmic point of view, it might also look 'comic', as Mark McGurl claims.[32] "Tragedy shows what is perishable, what is fragile, and what is slow moving about us", as Simon Critchley opens his *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us*.[33] Some posthumanisms are banking on this 'slowness' of the tragic experience of deceleration, which might act as an "emergency brake" to the "worship of the new prosthetic gods of technology".[34] Maybe before hastening to move on towards the posthuman we need another thorough confrontation with ourselves and what we do not know – tragedy may be giving time to thinking in the absence of certainty. Which means that there is, as one might argue, a strong correlation between deconstruction and the tragic, as the time of theory and of/or as theatre:

> Theatre is always theoretical, and theory is a theatre, where we are spectators on a drama that unfolds: *our* drama. In theatre, human action, human *praxis*, is called into question theoretically.[35]

It may thus be our very complicity in our downfall that could be properly tragic today, our willing handover to a technological successor species, a 'destiny' that transhumanists not only foresee but actively indulge in as 'inevitable'.

*The Posthuman Death of the Death of Tragedy*

> *What is Tragedy in Utopia?* There is tragedy in Snowman's melting. Mass murders are not required.[36]

As Susan Sontag remarked in "The Death of Tragedy" in 1961: "Modern discussions of the possibility of tragedy are not exercises in literary analysis; they are exercises in cultural diagnostics, more or less disguised".[37] Mourning the 'death of tragedy' as a genre implies a loss of tragic 'ability', or, in other words, an overabundance of contemporary "self-consciousness", that prevents modern writers from writing tragedies – "an increasing burden of subjectivity, at the expense of [a] sense of the reality of the world", as Sontag calls it.[38]

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[31] David Scott, "Tragedy's Time: Postemanciaption Futures Past and present", in: Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 215.
[32] Mark McGurl, "The Posthuman Comedy", *Critical Inquiry* 38.3 (2012): 533-553.
[33] Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us* (London: Profile Books, 2020), p. 3.
[34] *Ibid*.
[35] *Ibid*., p. 6.
[36] Nick Bostrom, "Letter from Utopia" (2010), n.p.; available online at: https://www.nickbostrom.com/utopia.pdf (accessed 20/12/2023).
[37] Susan Sontag, "The Death of Tragedy (1961)", in: *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 13.
[38] *Ibid*., pp. 133-134.

George Steiner's stakes in *The Death of Tragedy* (also in 1961) are even higher. For him it is "absolute tragedy, the image of man as unwanted in life" as "almost unendurable to human reason and sensibility", embodied by only a handful of classical and early modern examples, that has 'died'.[39] As Steiner later recalls, in 1990:

> Absolute tragedy is very rare. It is a piece of dramatic literature (or art or music) founded rigorously on the postulate that human life is a fatality. It proclaims axiomatically that it is best not to be born or, failing that, to die young (…). In the absolute tragic, it is the crime of man that he is, that he exists. His naked presence and identity are transgressions. The absolutely tragic is, therefore, a negative ontology.[40]

It is in this sense that "the tragic absolute solicits suicide",[41] but not on a large scale it would seem, since, for Steiner, "the scale of modern violence and desolation is resistant to aesthetic form". According to a well-known, humanist, sensibility "we are made numb by the routine of shock pre-packaged, sanitized by the mass media and by the false authenticity of the immediate".[42] The "testing of theodicy" – the outrage against divine injustice and human suffering – is a lonely, individual and "singularly Western" affair, it seems: "It ministers to radical doubts and protests in a confrontation with the non- and inhuman, where these designations have two senses, ominously kindred: they mean that which is potent, more lasting, more ancient than man, and that which does not demonstrably share the ethics, the compassions, the self-examinations, the graces of pardon and of forgetting in humanness".[43] This is why neither the "Christian promise of salvation" nor "utopian socialism" will ever generate tragedy, because in absolute tragedy there can be "no reparation" in the face of "the searing mystery and outrage of innate evil, of a compulsion towards blindness and self-destruction incised irreparably in man and woman".[44] In short, tragedy in this absolute sense requires despair without hope. So, in theory, the prospects for a resurrection of tragedy are not that bad at all, should we fail to 'save the planet', it seems.

As a kind of reply to Steiner's tragic loss of tragedy, Terry Eagleton rather heretically opens his *Sweet Violence* by stating that tragedy is "unfashionable" because "there is an ontological depth and high seriousness about the genre which grates on the postmodern sensibility, with its unbearable lightness of being".[45] In fact, Eagleton is mocking the left's "nervousness" regarding tragedy despite its obvious and ubiquitous relevance for twentieth-century atrocities and global injustice, or, when "for most people today, tragedy means an actual occurrence, not a work of art".[46] What Eagleton sees at work in the tragic and tragedy, reminiscent of Camus, is a certain "tragic humanism", which he refers to in the conclusion to *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, in a chapter entitled "Culture and Barbarism":

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[39] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* [1961] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. xi-xii.
[40] George Steiner, "Absolute Tragedy (1990)", in: *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 129.
[41] *Ibid*., p. 129.
[42] Ibid., p. 134.
[43] *Ibid*., pp. 136-137.
[44] *Ibid*., p. 139.
[45] Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. ix. On the "unbearable lightness of being" and the (tragic?) death of the nonhuman animal see my chapter on Kundera in this volume.
[46] Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 14.

> Tragic humanism shares liberal humanism's vision of the free flourishing of humanity; but it holds that this is possible only by confronting the very worst. The only affirmation of humanity worth having in the end is one which, like the disillusioned post-Restoration Milton, seriously wonders whether humanity is worth saving in the first place, and can see what Jonathan Swift's king of Brobdingnag has in mind when he describes the human species as an odious race of vermin. Tragic humanism, whether in its socialist, Christian, or psychoanalytic varieties, holds that only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own.[47]

In this sense, "tragic humanism" still very much haunts even posthumanism, especially at a time the worst (again) seems to be about to happen, when the 'ends of man' seem again nigh, for as Eagleton adds: "There are no guarantees that such a transfigured future will ever be born".[48] Basically, we are stuck with the tragic because there is no merit in easy achievements. Freedom needs to be hard-won otherwise there is no grandeur, no greatness. This allows for the double, tautological reading of the phrase 'the death of tragedy' – it is the very specific death or death threat (to the human) that tragedy is about while it is a genre or mode that is always already dead, unachievable, deferred. As such it might be from the essence of the 'ends of man' that the posthuman hails, as Catherine Malabou provocatively asks – returning to Derrida's famous essay about the "apocalyptic nature of man: its destruction is its truth. Its end is its end, its telos":[49]

> When we claim that the human is now behind us, that we are entering the posthuman age, that we are opening the 'interspecies dialogue', or that we cannot believe in cosmopolitanism for want of a universal concept of humanity, are we doing something other than trying to reconstitute, purify, re-elaborate a new essence of man?[50]

So are we condemned – qua human – to re-enact, tragically, even in our eternal search for the nonhuman other to reconfirm our 'essence' or 'truth' which is our 'end'? How to "stop creating new names for the human: *Dasein*, posthuman, whatever", Malabou asks? How to no longer seek "revenge from being human (…) from being humans (...). [W]ill we ever be able to be redeemed from the spirit of revenge and thus from our humanity"?[51]

*Posthuman Death – the Death of the Posthuman*

> One may detect a tragic potential in each bone of a vertebrate, because these bones are caught in the dilemma of freedom and failure of movement.[52]

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[47] Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 168-169.
[48] *Ibid*., p. 169.
[49] Catherine Malabou, "From the Overman to the Posthuman: How Many Ends?", in: Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller, eds., *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 63; Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man (1972)", in: *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 109-136.
[50] Malabou, "From the Overman to the Posthuman", p. 65.
[51] *Ibid*., pp. 66, 69.
[52] Pfeiffer, "The Tragic", p. 24.

It is no surprise that transhumanists do not like tragedy. Tragedy is dependent on death and mortality. For transhumanists, death is the tragedy that needs to be overcome, eliminated, transcended. Whoever *believes* in tragedy, its inevitability, its unsurpassability, even only ironically, i.e. in its unachievability – the tragic as the always deferred perfect reconciliation with one's destiny – is indulging in "the pursuit of unhappiness".[53] Death remains the main 'scandal' – or the persistence of evil. All the more important to choose 'life', survival, to stave off extinction. To save lives, to save life, this remains the all-overruling imperative that governs COVID-19 politics, itself governed by a "sanitary definition of (biological) life", or 'desperate' biopolitics for "our post-tragic societies" in the face of a global (human) pandemic.[54] It is, ironically, the "denial of the tragic" in our risk-averse societies, so protective of life, that may prove fatal in the end, as Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine argues.[55] However, is hoping for a return of a "strategic" sense of the tragic the best way to "resist this transhumanism"?[56] Is not the real tragedy that tragedy will no longer be able to save the human? This is what *post*humanism seems to have ultimately recognised and embraced, namely that the tragic sense that informs humanism can neither be escaped nor indulged. There is no point in wishing for a return of a tragic understanding of life at the very moment the human of humanism has been identified as the main villain in the planetary history of life (and death).

So, as the humanist pathos recedes and the human, instead, becomes more and more pathetic, what actually remains of tragedy and the tragic? Here are some suggestions: a posthumanist sense of the tragic begins with the realization of human "contingency" and the "ontological void" this apparently leaves.[57] However, this void turns out to be an anthropocentric delusion designed to repress the proliferation and irreducible multiplicity of (nonhuman) ontologies. In this sense:

> Posthuman tragedy will never uphold traditional tragedy's grand anthropocentric designs. It seeks the more intimate ground of shared materiality.[58]

Or, as Brian Deyo writes, "[i]nsasmuch as tragedy encourages a collective recognition of our shared, mortal condition with our animal cousins, it may enliven our capacities for sympathy and love, thereby honouring the evolutionary heritage with which our species is so richly endowed".[59] This, in fact, implies that there is still a lot to learn from the experience of tragedy for the human. For a start, it might prompt a process one might call *un*learning to be human

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[53] Cf. Stephen D. Dowden, "Introduction: The Pursuit of Unhappiness", in: Dowden and Thomas P. Quinn, eds., *Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art, and Thought* (Rochester: Camden House, 2014), pp. 1-20.

[54] Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *La déraison sanitaire – Le Covid-19 et le culte de la vie par-dessus tout* (Lormont: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2020), p. 11.

[55] *Ibid*., pp. 27-41.

[56] *Ibid*., p. 33.

[57] Cf. Jörg Zirfas, "Kontingenz und Tragik", in: Zirfas and Eckart Liebau, eds., *Dramen der Moderne: Kontingenz und Tragik im Zeitalter der Freiheit* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), pp. 9-30.

[58] Elin Diamond, "Churchill's Tragic Materialism; or, Imagining a Posthuman Tragedy", *PMLA* 129.4 (2014): 756.

[59] Brian Deyo, "Tragedy, Ecophobia, and Animality in the Anthropocene", in: Kyle Bladlow and Jennifer Ladino, eds., *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), p. 209.

(in the humanist, anthropocentric, sense). An important 'lesson' is that the world without us, life after the human, *pace* Weisman, will almost certainly *not* 'miss us' much. 'Life' is unlikely to *care*. In this respect, in this radically *in*human (not *post*human) view – if that view was still a perspective conceivable for humans – the posthumanist, new materialist, recognition that human and nonhuman are inextricably 'entangled' might still be far too reassuring in suggesting at least some minimal form of human survival, even in the form of an evolutionary trace. This is what Claire Colebrook insinuates in her *Death of the PostHuman*:

> Is not the problem of both sides – the dire prediction that we are losing our capacity to synthesize ourselves and the posthuman affirmation that we are really, properly, nothing more than a dynamic power to perceive – that there is still (for all the talk of loss) a reliance on a normative notion of the human, whereas what is required is an inhuman perception?[60]

Posthumanism's impact on tragedy and the tragic affectivity that persists in the posthuman may in fact already be heard in Camus's 'sigh' that: "life can be magnificent and overwhelming – that is its whole tragedy".[61] As stirring as this may sound and despite all the perfect tragicness this insight might (still) bear, it nevertheless assumes that life *itself* may be, and may even understand itself as, tragic – which would be the ultimate anthropocentrism! Posthuman, nonhuman or even inhuman tragedy, if it is still about loss, might turn on the realisation that what may be irretrievably lost, after all, is the prospect of any catharsis.

[60] Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Open Humanities Press, 2014), pp. 21-22.

[61] Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Tody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 201.