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The Form of Tragedy (S.A.) Brown, (C.) Silverstone (edd.) *Tragedy in Transition*. Pp. xii + 315, ill. Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Cased, £55, €77. ISBN: 978-1-4051-3546-7 (978-1-4051-3547-4 pbk).

Olga Taxidou

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Sebald (S. Corngold); Brecht's *Antigone-Model 1948* (O. Taxidou; her comment that 'The convention of men playing women [on the Attic stage] is endemic to tragedy and at once nods to the exclusion of women from the civic sphere and toward a male homosexual sublime' [p. 255] strikes me as nonsense); West African re-working of Greek myths, of which the best known is perhaps Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* of 1973 (T.J. Reiss); Billy Wilder's 1940 film noir *Double Indemnity* (E. Bronfen); David Lynch's 2001 film about Lesbian desire, *Mulholland Drive* (H.K. Love); and a translation of a chapter by the French critic Michel Maffesoli, in which he analyses, as the Editor puts it in her introduction, the post-modern attitude of 'living for the moment, recognizing the precariousness and vulnerability of existence and the limits of human agency, and yet affirming life in the face of death with exuberance and passion' (p. 22).

The book ends with a selective 'Commentary' by T. Eagleton in which he takes swipes at the positions espoused by some of the contributors (generally ones whose views clash with his own) while singling out others for approbation. *Rethinking Tragedy* would serve as a useful *texte de base* for an upper-level seminar in comparative literature or the history of literary theory. It has been attractively produced but there are two serious editorial oversights: Euripides five times on p. 192 and p. 195 n. 30, and (Charlie) Chaplain on p. 264 and in the Index on p. 353. Nor am I happy about 'King Oedipoi' on p. 269.

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THE FORM OF TRAGEDY

BROWN (S.A.), SILVERSTONE (C.) (edd.) *Tragedy in Transition*. Pp. xii + 315, ill. Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Cased, £55, €77. ISBN: 978-1-4051-3546-7 (978-1-4051-3547-4 pbk).

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This collection of essays is bold and unashamedly far-reaching in its approach to the subject of tragedy, a topic that has enjoyed a high status in the history of literary criticism and aesthetics. Always central in any revival of the battle between the ancients and the moderns, whether in formal debates, in the history of ideas or in philosophical discourse, the subject of tragedy has enjoyed a privileged position in the history of criticism. That is until the advent of late-modernity (and/or postmodernity), which in many ways defined itself against what it understood as a classical tragic sensibility, where notions of fate, the elevated protagonist, the gods and the metaphysical seemed to be at odds both with the positivist humanist tradition and with the later renditions of the so-called post-human condition. At the same time, the critical traditions after post-structuralism that rely on difference and identity politics exhibit an obvious embarrassment with tragedy's universal and transcendent claims (E. Fernie and N. Rhodes refer to this aspect in their chapters). Although the discourses on the death of tragedy have shadowed most thinking about tragedy from the end of the Greek model to George Steiner's twentieth-century aphorisms, the impressive essays in this volume testify to the genre's enduring persistence and ability to address notions of loss and mourning, death and resurrection, history and transition. Indeed, the term transition, as it appears in the

title, proves central for the understanding of tragedy as a genre whose form and content are particularly sensitive to notions of the boundary (individual/collective, past/present, history/metaphysics, life/death) and exhibit a level of adaptability that adds an intertextual quality, which throughout time has become constitutive of the form. S.A. Brown in her illuminating introduction calls this quality tragedy's 'capacity to be adapted and transformed' (p. 1). And it is this quality that the authors pick up on as they draw a number of dazzling connections between texts and periods (from Sophocles and Euripides to Jonson and Shakespeare, Mary Shelley and Oscar Wilde, Wole Soyinka, Sarah Kane, Cormac McCarthy and Tarantino). This trans-historical aspect of the book is what makes it at once an example of 'classic' genre theory *and* a corrective or intervention in the more recent schools of criticism, mostly identity or neo-historically-based, where any gesture towards trans-historical or universal claims is seen as anathema.

The collection is framed by two insightful essays, one by each Editor. The Introduction by S.A. Brown helpfully sets out the methodological parameters of the project, where the interdisciplinary dimension (so beloved of funding bodies and usually a code-word for the distortion the humanities have to endure in order to comply with the epistemological demands of the 'hard' sciences), gives way to the trans-historical (which indeed may be a trope to which the humanities can have a particular claim). This trans-historical aspect, however, never becomes ahistorical, and this tension is one that informs many of the essays in the book. The Afterword by C. Silverstone does not simply summarise the concerns of the volume; it also points towards future areas of research: the interface between tragedy and trauma, tragedy and mourning; readership and spectatorship; the possibility or impossibility of tragedy after Auschwitz; the centrality of the tragic mode in contemporary philosophical reflection, as it appears in the work of Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben, for example.

These two chapters hold together an impressive range of essays by an equally impressive line-up of contemporary scholars, mainly from the fields of English Literature and Classics. E. Hall and F. Macintosh, who have contributed so much to the creation of reception studies within Greek Tragedy, make valuable contributions to this volume. M. looks at the reception of the figures of Oedipus and Medea in performance but also in post-Nietzschean philosophical and psychoanalytical thinking, where the centrality of Oedipus and Oedipal philosophical models gives way to the post-Kleinian and anti-Oedipal formulations of Deleuze and Guattari, valorising the figure of Medea as liminal, semiotic and transgressive. Through a reading of *Trojan Women*, H. investigates tragic form as a metaphysics and aesthetics of suffering. She draws on the work of Walter Benjamin and quotes Hölderlin's definition of tragedy 'as a metaphor of an intellectual intuition' (p. 20) in delineating the genre's relative 'formal autonomy'.

The concern with suffering permeates most of the essays. For E. Fernie, suffering comes not only with losses but also with gains, as he argues that tragedy's main function is to introduce us to the 'real'. With reference to the work of Lacan, Žižek and Badiou, F. presents an engaging reading of tragic form as an embodied experience of affect that enacts, while tarrying with negativity, a 'primal scene', one that at once makes us human *and* creates our unease in the world (Hegel's 'night of the world', but also Heidegger's *unheimlich*, or Antigone's *deimon*). His essay culminates in an insightful reading of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*; his more recent *The Road* (probably published after this volume appeared) also enacts the 'night of the world' or even 'the end of the world'. The emphasis on affect is further

elaborated by R. Douglas-Fairhurst in his chapter on tragedy and disgust (from *Philoctetes* to *The Duchess of Malfi*), which also draws attention to the genre's inherent incompleteness. A.C. Henry further elaborates on this theme through her rigorous and thought-provoking study of the notion of the eclipse in tragedy, as a 'printed sign of disorder' (p. 97).

Classicism and neo-classicism feature in J. Henderson's chapter on Jonson's Roman plays, where ideas of spectatorship and performance inform his reading of plays and their reception, which he claims work more 'through dislike of his play – a strategy for Tragedy with a prolific future' (p. 122). R. Lyne looks at the various traditions of neoclassicism starting from Aristotle himself through Racine, Jonson and Shakespeare to Tony Harrison and the complex political legacies associated with these encounters. J. Wallace, through the emblematic figure of Walter Benjamin, looks at the affinities between tragedy and exile. The parallels between Greek tragedy and modernity are here read through the figure of Oedipus at Colonus, the wandering, blind Oedipus as *apolis*, on the outskirts of Athens in search of a place to die; this has also been analysed by Derrida in *Of Hospitality* (2000). V. Zajko examines the encounter with the Other as a central concern of tragedy. Drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum, she is interested in the ability of tragedy to propose an ethics of otherness through the uses of empathy and an aesthetics of suffering; *Prometheus Bound* and *Frankenstein* act as her examples. P. Hollindale looks at the unlikely relation between tragedy and childhood and A. Hennegan reads the work of Oscar Wilde as an attempt to reconcile Greek and Christian notions of tragedy, culminating in his final work, *De Profundis* (his play *Salomé* could also be read in this context). The figure of Wilde himself, his life and trials could be read as a tragedy that enacts a transitional moment, the queer moment, as Alan Sinfield calls it. N. Rhodes looks at the encounter between Wole Soyinka and Wilson Knight, during Soyinka's student years at the University of Leeds, as formative of Soyinka's version of *The Bacchae*, proposing a reading of Soyinka's play that locates it within both Europe and Africa, informed by post-colonial debates but also by the teachings and works of Knight. M. Houlihan re-reads John Ford through Angela Carter and R. Wymer examines the possible interface between tragedy and science fiction.

This is an impressive collection but in places its strengths point to some of its limitations. Most essays rehearse the well-established critical locus of Greek tragedy and Shakespeare (the work of Adrian Poole is appropriately referenced throughout). In places it seems that the Greek aspect of the debate simply serves as a preface to the analysis of Early Modern and Renaissance drama (most scholars here are from English Departments). Similarly, there is little attention to tragedy as a mode of performance, and the cross-genre approach, while welcome, still raises methodological and theoretical problems. These are minor concerns that the Editors themselves surely encountered while compiling a volume of this scope. However, what the volume sometimes lacks in its sweeping trans-historical, trans-genre approach, it more than makes up for in the general questions it raises about the efficacy of tragedy in our time, and in setting the agenda for further research of this type.

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