

Jason Barker*

Introducing Hell's Bottom

“You can’t be a poet in hell,” remarks Rimbaud in a manuscript draft of *Une Saison en Enfer*.¹ Strange assertion. The miserabilist reputation of the poet as a perennial wanderer who suffers all manner of indignity in the name of art suggests that she must. She can’t. She will go on. Hell: such is her lot and her substance. Moreover, her dubious status as artist, the fact that the republic doesn’t take kindly to forgers, invests her art with a directly political meaning.

Suffering is not surrendering. We must rescue *pathos* from its Heideggerian perversion, i.e. *pathos* as the reception of the pathetic heart of Christian existence. For Heidegger, *pathos* (*Stimmung*) is being-in-awe and the undergoing of its suffering. The Christian (or Lutheran²) legacy proves stubborn in politics and the arts, subordinating human *praxis* to divine nature and the channeling of supernatural forces. Everywhere *pathos* is surrounded and encompassed by God’s own *poiesis*, which enjoins the actor to submit to states of mind, moods, dispositions; attunement (*Stimmung*) and “tuning in” to Human Be-In.³

Fail Better. This volume aims to investigate the *active* dimensions of *pathos*, those involving tragedy as social contract, and of *poiesis/praxis* pertaining to the arts and politics as *works*. For Alberto Toscano, whose focus is the visual arts,

¹ See Graham Robb, *Rimbaud* (Oxford: Picador, 2001), p. 352.

² For the Lutheran (mis)reading of *pathos* and on Heidegger see Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans), 2000, esp. pp. 29–32.

³ The reference to Timothy Leary is admittedly superficial, but not altogether irrelevant given his attempt to conceive the ecstatic project of time. Interestingly his manifesto for the sixties countercultural movement was inspired by Marshall McLuhan. As Leary declares: “Like every great religion of the past we seek to find the divinity within and to express this revelation in a life of glorification and the worship of God. These ancient goals we define in the metaphor of the present—turn on, tune in, drop out.” Quoted in Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd, *The Time Paradox: The New Psychology of Time That Will Change Your Life* (London and New York: Free Press, 2008), p. 48.

* Kyung Hee University, School of Global Communication, Republic of Korea

the aim is to conceive tragedy through the image-work that grasps the process or project of tragedy's political content—its real mobility, so to speak—without falling into abstractions. If the revolution is frozen then in the context of Toscano's inquiry it would signal quite the reverse of Saint-Just's melancholy downfall. Instead, frozen revolution is the *iconographic seizure* of the uprising.

In politics, something happens in 5th century Athens with the shift to *tragedy* under the aegis of the new idea of *democracy*. In *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet provide a wealth of resources in their truly ground-breaking approach to thinking politics on the basis of a constitutional reform (revolution?) which is equally felt in the sphere of dramatic performance.⁴ Plato has his own reasons for abhorring the practical consequences of mimesis. Complex reasons, no doubt. But in any case far from philosophical in the purely intellectual and dispassionate sense that compels us to abhor the beds of the poets. Where in his *Republic* is thought given to the constitutional arrangements of the City of Dionysia, of how this civic festival works in the interests of democracy? Surely the omission is symptomatic; in any case it should be read symptomatically.⁵ It seems we can no more reject musical innovation for posing a “danger to the whole State” than reject a tragedy by Aeschylus, since isn't it the case that such works, in working through the tragedy, produce superior designs for life and models for the citizen?

Plato's rejection of poetry on the basis of its intuitive production of an *object* which provides no knowledge of the ideal thing is of course outdated in the sense that modernism renders the antagonism between art and philosophy redundant. So-called conceptual art, Alain Badiou contends, is a *production of truths*, not objects, which philosophy moreover has nothing to do with. Art subverts philosophy in the process of its inventions, “twists” it in accordance with its own designs.⁶ If Plato had once conceived the Philosophers as rulers and Truth tellers, for Badiou it is the practitioners and producers of truths them-

⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

⁵ For a speculative account of Plato's hidden allusions in the dialogues to the political events of his day see Michael G. Svoboda, *Plato and the Peloponnesian War* (PhD Thesis). Pennsylvania State University, 2002.

⁶ Alain Badiou, “Preface to the English Edition” in: *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), p. xxxi.

selves who will “rule,” not remotely on merit, but by virtue of the novelty of their inventions. (One might wonder whether this formula takes us back to *ex nihilo* creation, in which no work is produced outside the One’s divinity.⁷)

As noted above, we don’t learn everything from the *Republic*. The complete picture is missing. Could it be that Plato is employing “philosophy” as a euphemism for new forms of poetry (and politics) that only philosophical discourse, in its underground novelty and marginality vis-à-vis poetry, can get away with? Is “philosophy” Plato’s Trojan horse? It goes without saying that in its literary form Plato’s text is indelibly poetic. As Benjamin R. Tarr notes, the *Republic* might be read as a work of *moral*, if not strictly speaking *poetic*, poetry. In his overturning of Homer, then, might there be cause for reconsidering Plato’s *Republic* as the *Republic of Poetry*?⁸

What’s missing from Plato’s account of music, poetry and drama is that which Aristotle will subsequently address with the term *theoria*. Perhaps Aristotle in his day, i.e. in the aftermath of the Golden Age of Athenian tragedy, is better placed to consider “new forms,” of which tragedy is understood to have emerged as the dominant one, and through which the good life is to be attained. The spectacle is for the audience’s benefit. The spectator (theorist and ideal citizen) adapts to a city whose spectacle is borrowed from the tragedy for this purpose. And yet the spectator is no passive receptacle for state propaganda. Adapting to the city is to adapt *it*. The Dionysia exists for the purpose of serving its people, of conditioning the “constitution” of its citizens, which they the citizens constitute themselves.

According to Vernant and Vidal-Naquet there is ambiguity in the language of tragedy between the old myths and the new legal discourse, a constitutional ambiguity that must translate to the arts and the spectacle. Tragedy is intended for the public good, for the practice of disinterested contemplation—*theoria*—and the working through—*catharsis*—of pity and fear. The good citizen doesn’t

⁷ See Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, pp. 32–33.

⁸ Benjamin R. Tarr, “Plato’s *Republic* as Moral Poetry,” *Inquiries Journal*, Vol. 7, no. 9, 2015. Available at: <www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1140/platos-republic-as-moral-poetry> [accessed 17 June 2018].

attend the theatre in search of consolation, nor even to be educated. Catharsis eliminates the ambiguity. It is a clarification; a recalibration of the city.

Somewhat closer to home, the idea of the poet-politician or artist as revolutionary—the one “committed”—encounters difficulties at some point between the tail end of romanticism and high modernity; between Rimbaud and Beckett. Rimbaud’s trajectory would appear to bear this out, in the sense that “one is born a poet and dies a businessman.”⁹ The way of the cross, once the preserve of intellectual terrorists (those who Gilles Grelet dubs “*théoristes*”¹⁰) and fanatics of all persuasions, has today been wholeheartedly embraced by lifestyle gurus, entrepreneurs and extreme sports enthusiasts.¹¹ Given that the injunction to “fail better” has been truncated and abbreviated to the point of “invalidity” (what Beckett would have wanted?), there is a part of us all invested in the new biopolitical or leveraged economy, which renders the originality of our “suffering” no less revelatory than a trip in a hot air balloon, or white-water rafting on the Zambezi River.

Without wishing to dwell upon the sad plight of the modern-day militant poet, the more intriguing question is in my view to be found in tragic poetry, rather than modernism per se, as the title of this special issue suggests. We infer no periodization or hierarchy from Greek forms of poetry and the passage to “modern” prose (in passing, we are not becoming more “modern” through politics and the arts, in case anyone should doubt it). The historical passage from epic poetry to tragedy to comedy is, from our perspective, split between two forms of comedy: human (Balzac) and divine (Dante as Beckett’s contemporary), the latter drawing on the epic. This of course is to say nothing of modernism’s invention of epic theatre, and the equally oxymoronic notion of modern tragedy (Arthur Miller).

8

⁹ Robb, *Rimbaud*, p. 362.

¹⁰ See Gilles Grelet, “Un bréviaire de non-religion. Du théorisme, gnose rigoureuse comme antidote au nihilisme,” in: *Discipline hérétique* (Paris: Kimé, 1998), pp. 182–216.

¹¹ See Mark O’Connell, “The Stunning Success of ‘Fail Better’. How Samuel Beckett Became Silicon Valley’s Life Coach” in: *Slate* (online), January 29, 2014. Available at: <www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/01/samuel_beckett_s_quote_fail_better_becomes_the_mantra_of_silicon_valley.html>.

What are the implications of this jumbled picture? Among them that the innate bond between politics and tragedy, where tragedy is understood as a necessary and universal constraint on politics—a constraint conceived as the very condition of our modernity—must be utterly rejected. Put differently: to adhere to a *certain* loosely Hegelian reading of tragedy is to be seduced into believing that *everything* is political. There are few who better exemplify this position than Judith Butler in her reading of *Antigone*. As M. Doust argues in this volume, for Butler,

The implicit presupposition is that a pure negativity, a non-representable—the uncanniness of the radiating beauty of a heroine before whom the kinship structure reveals its outer limits and the regime of intelligibility founders—somehow widens the field of new possibilities for social transformation. How can this wish, this fast track from negativity, law and guilt to social transformation, be conceived as intelligible? Why couldn't the opposite be the case, that the play brings forth the closure of the field of possibility, as was probably the case for an Athenian spectator, who would deem the mode of governance in Thebes as too primitive and thus doomed to founder?

Butler appears to have forgotten that nothing will come of nothing. Her position is characteristic of a naïve yet common misconception of abstract generality (recall that for Hegel the “unmediated indifference” of the outside, or nature, is just empty space¹²) according to which “what does not kill me makes me stronger,” i.e. where the fall from grace is an affirmation (a measure, even) of self-overcoming, when in actual fact plumbing the depths of hell is a measureless task, and that despite numbering nine circles, Hell’s “bottom” turns out to be Satan’s navel, which is only relative to the gravitational centre of a falling body in space. A man on his head is the same man when he is finally walking on his feet; history is process without subject or goal; the only historical “goal” is planetary oblivion.¹³

¹² Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, § 197: “To speak of points of space, as if they constituted the positive element of space, is inadmissible, since space, on account of its lack of differentiation, is only the possibility and not the positing of that which is negative and therefore absolutely continuous. The point is therefore rather the negation of space.” Available at: <www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/na/nature1.htm>.

¹³ In my novel *Marx Returns* I tell the hero’s life story as a journey through such historical materialist precepts. Jason Barker, *Marx Returns* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2018).

As Justin Clemens observes in his essay on Blake criticism, attempts to “circumvent Enlightenment” soon rebound in a “post-Newtonian world”; a world where, for Butler, asking the question “What is Enlightenment?” is “to show that critique has not stopped happening, and in that sense neither has enlightenment stopped happening.”¹⁴ Perhaps Blake, the “visionary anarchist”¹⁵ who, as Clemens notes, grew up entertaining visions of angels and fairies, would have found a fellow traveler in Butler, given the latter’s commitment to what she describes as an “inventive elaboration of the self,”¹⁶ and her quasi-revelatory faith in “an ungrounded inquiry into the legitimacy of existing grounds, one that might be understood in Kantian terms as the free and public use of reason but that extends outside the domain of the public to a sociopolitical field that is broader and more complex than the public/private distinction can avow.”¹⁷ Butler assures us that:

The operation of critique and even the subsequent petition can emerge from the interstices of institutional life (which is not the same as emerging from a transcendental field); it may emerge precisely from those interstitial sites where disciplinary boundaries have not been firmly maintained.¹⁸

Critique in the “sociopolitical field” may of course emerge from almost anywhere at all. However, bearing in mind that the post-Cantorian concept of infinity refutes the existence, never mind the positive diversity, of very small spaces—“the interstices of institutional life”—militants of politics and the arts may be advised to show themselves, to come out on one side or other of the public/private divide. Even pessimism, as Walter Benjamin argued, must be politically organized. “It is the only way,” adds Michael Löwy, “we can avoid becoming vapid.”¹⁹

10

Butler is right to be concerned for the current state of knowledge and the university, which has become a technocratic machine, a branch of the knowledge

¹⁴ Judith Butler, “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity” in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, no. 4 (Summer 2009), p. 787.

¹⁵ See Peter Marshall, *William Blake: Visionary Anarchist* (London: Freedom Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Judith Butler, “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity,” p. 787.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 786.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia*, introduced by Donald LaCoss (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), p. 50.

economy, with knowledge as its product. Its by-product, even, since nowadays no one in their right mind believes that the institution is out to serve the public good, or has anything to do with knowledge and learning, or even training. Instead of “know thyself” or “dare to know” (the Kantian version of “yes we can!”) perhaps the motto of the modern university should instead be *pathei-mathos*: “knowledge through suffering”. Might the answer to the erosion of the “academic freedom” Butler wants to defend be to renew and extend the old struggles for the university beyond “the domain of the public to a sociopolitical field that is broader and more complex than the public/private distinction can avow”? The university: a place beyond. “Organized pessimism” might be a more sensible university motto in the circumstances. Or let’s listen to Gilles Grelet, whose attitude towards the complexity of the sociopolitical field—but who’s “complex” is it, anyway?—is absolutely uncompromising: “Society owes everything to the university, which owes it nothing.”²⁰ And “with no other responsibility,” Grelet continues, “than to save society from itself.”²¹ Being realistic, demanding the impossible. Building a university that doesn’t work.

Today the science and technology war machine stands poised to pulverize the interstices of institutional life, and the last vestiges of philosophy, which makes the survival prospects for our “poetic” language-landscape—“the literality of literature and the meaning of meaning,” as Justin Clemens remarks below—look slim. The concept of literature relies for its creativity on communicating with alien discourses, in politics and the sciences, the better to break through the walls of academic specialization. There is nothing more intellectually moribund than the vulgar appetites of the corporate university in its quest for R&D funding, whose commercial rationale can only hasten the transformation of the humanities into the handmaiden of science and engineering: a kind of TESL for autistic programmers. Then again, is it still required that the professional revolutionary adhere to the “reasoned derangement of all the senses” in order to achieve his aims? Rimbaud had shaken off this romantic superstition before he was out of his teens, and while Rimbaud’s teens hardly provide a model for a theory of literary production, the “late” Rimbaud’s turn to prose suggests that we might

²⁰ Gilles Grelet, Twitter post, 19 April 2018: “Construire une société autour de son Université, comme instance expressément anti-sociale : vouée unilatéralement à l’institution des hommes, sans autre responsabilité vis-à-vis de la société que de la sauver d’elle-même. La société doit tout à l’Université, qui ne lui doit rien.”

²¹ Ibid.

wish to attend more closely to the transitions between epic and tragic forms of poetry before inferring, on the basis of a generally assumed decline of literature, a corresponding decline of revolutionary politics as well.²² One might respond glibly that Rimbaud, in his adolescent pomp, might certainly have embraced the decline of both literature and poetry, welcomed it as a challenge, in his quest for “new forms.” In departing for new worlds, literature and poetry might be the means, rather than the ends. If this entails their dissolution, well, so be it. Let the new human being break free from her literary chains!

I am being somewhat facetious. Clearly there is no moral justification for sacrificing literature on the altar of science and technology. But is literature’s presumed institutional decline and the question of literary form and composition vis-à-vis scientific invention based on sound assumptions? In briefly addressing this question I shall cite, side by side, two notable thinkers, similar in age, whose contributions to their respective fields are contemporaneous and comparably significant, and each of whom endorses the non-reductive relationship between mathematics and philosophy. First, the mathematician and computer scientist Gregory Chaitin:

And yes, I’m a mathematician, but I’m really interested in everything: what is life, what’s intelligence, what is consciousness, does the universe contain randomness, are space and time continuous or discrete. To me math is just the fundamental tool of philosophy, it’s a way to work out ideas, to flesh them out, to build models, to understand! As Leibniz said, without math you cannot really understand philosophy, without philosophy you cannot really understand mathematics, and with neither of them, you can’t really understand a thing! Or at least that’s my credo, that’s how I operate.²³

12

And the mathematical philosopher Alain Badiou:

This is where we find ourselves. On one hand, the ethical pathos of finitude, which operates under the banner of death, presupposes the infinite through tem-

²² Graham Robb goes some way towards demolishing the “early” versus “late” cliché in his *Rimbaud*. It seems fair to consider the “quality” of Rimbaud’s writing in the context of a life’s work without appealing to moral judgments of the artistic value or supposed originality of his work vis-à-vis the canon of French poetry.

²³ Gregory Chaitin, *Meta Math! The Quest for Omega* (New York: Vintage, 2006), pp. v–vi.

poralization, and cannot dispense with all those sacred, precarious and defensive representations concerning the promise of a God who would come to cauterize the indifferent wound which the world inflicts on the Romantic trembling of the Open. On the other, an ontology of indifferent multiplicity that can withstand the disjunction and abasement brought about by Hegel; one that secularizes and disperses the infinite, grasps us humans in terms of this dispersion, and advances the prospect of a world evacuated of every tutelary figure of the One.²⁴

Each of these extracts is a broad methodological statement of its author's approach to thinking "randomness" and "ontology" respectively. What role is literary style performing here? Is the form and content of the statement in either case more or less characteristic of the kind of institutional iconoclasm or "open university" capable of tearing down the walls of academic specialization? Chaitin, whose mathematical ingenuity establishes that Turing halting is given by an algorithmically random and incomputable real number, is no less a defender than Badiou of the idea that mathematics is a thought; or, as Chaitin himself says of mathematical ideas: "what is useful varies as a function of time, while 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever' (Keats)."²⁵ Is it incumbent on the poet to lead the mathematician by the hand, as an enlightened Virgil lead a bewildered Dante, in order to shine a light into "the ethical pathos of finitude, which operates under the banner of death"? Or can the "compossibility" and cross-fertilization of mathematical and poetic truths be put down to the philosopher's prejudice of what constitutes the art of mathematical thinking?

As I have argued elsewhere,²⁶ a stubborn prejudice of contemporary philosophy consists in thinking the algorithm as intrinsically a question of technology and the technocratic society. An algorithm is the description, using logical (universal) rule-based symbols, of a behaviour. A "computer" is the one, whether it be a human person, persons or machine-apparatus, tasked with following the

²⁴ Alain Badiou, "Mathematics and Philosophy" in: *Theoretical Writings*, trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004).

²⁵ Chaitin, *Meta Math! The Quest for Omega*, p. vi.

²⁶ See Jason Barker, "Schizoanalytic Cartographies. On Maps and Models of Capitalism" in: *Filozofski Vestnik*, Vol. 38.3, 2017; "Slow Down. On Benjamin Noys' Critique of Accelerationism" in: *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 21.2, 2016; "Are We (Still) Living in a Computer Simulation? Althusser and Turing" in: "Other Althusserers." Special Issue of *diacritics. A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, Vol. 43.2, 2015.

rules and simulating the behaviour. There is nothing intrinsically “thoughtless” or totalitarian about algorithms. Indeed, they can be *invented* (such invention is a *work*) to describe the infinite complexity—the beauty?—of transcendental numbers. And, inasmuch as each algorithm corresponds to a *unique* behaviour or *practice* (producing or manipulating something from raw input or materials) they are not “abstract”. The danger lies in their overwhelmingly dubious and nefarious social applications or “apps”: the fetishism of technology.

Can we imagine a world indifferent to such abstract and technocratic narratives? All power to the tragic poet, whose task it is to attend the public festival and seize dramatic works in all their wildly incompressible and random forms. This poet—no less educator and theorist—is on a par with the people, not forgetting that in democratic Athens, Aeschylus was a citizen-soldier first, and a playwright second.

* * *

Fail Better: Politics and the Arts of Tragedy has been rather a long time in the making. I am grateful to my fellow contributors for not being able to go on but going on regardless, and to Jelica Šumič Riha and the editorial board and staff of *Filozofski Vestnik* for supporting its publication.