

Transgression as Tragic Typology

O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra and Kushner's Angels in America

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The English playwright and critic Howard Brenton pinpoints the scholarly discussion of tragedy and the tragic in his review of Terry Eagleton's *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* from 2002: "the doomed search for the holy grail of literary criticism, a definition of tragedy" (Guardian, 2002)¹. Ever since the Greeks presented their tragedies at the annual Dionysos Festivals, the two concepts have been doomed to lead an ambiguous existence: Tragedy and the tragic bear an aura of aristocracy, the sublime, the noble, the elevated. But it is also, perhaps, the most controversial and debated literary genre of all. Literary critics, scholars and philosophers from both sides of the ideological spectre declared the genre *altmodisch* and *anachronistic* when God was declared dead by Nietzsche et al. The conservatives talked with great sadness of the death of tragedy:

"The difference is that conservative critics believe, along with Nietzsche, that tragedy has died since we no longer believe in fate and the gods. This they lament: a proper appreciation of the darkness of human hearts has "ruinously yielded in our time to chance, contingency, democracy, rationality, religious disenchantment and a callow progressivism". As Steiner puts it: "At the touch of Hume

and Voltaire the noble or hideous visitations which had haunted the mind since Agamemnon's blood cried out for vengeance disappeared altogether or took tawdry refuge among the gaslight of melodrama." (Brenton, 2002, *ibid.*)

Contrary to this we find the radicals, the left-wing liberals, who always had their problems and trouble with the tragic genre and *modus*:

The left usually favours an anti-tragic mode. Bakhtin, the guru of alternative radical theatre in the 1960s, is against premature harmonising, the tightening of the world into a metaphysical view. He believes truth lies in the open-ended, the "carnavalesque": a tragic plot expresses "the profound crime of all self-asserting individuality". (Brenton, 2002, *ibid.*)

So far, however, research traditions have not focused on the fundamental differences between the European-Greek definitions and the American dittos². This article suggests that the American tragic drama must be read and interpreted as a highly individual and original vision of tragedy and the tragic in two acclaimed works: *Mourning becomes Electra* (1931) by Eugene O'Neill and *Angels in America* (1992-1993) by Tony Kushner. Tragedy as a literary genre and the tragic as ontological terminology are per se a transgressive typology and *modus*. The main perspective is centered around the biblical apocalypse and the perspective is two-fold: First, I attempt to modify traditional scholarly readings on O'Neill's and Kushner's dramas as purely pessimistic. Second, I distillate an aesthetic vision of transgression that transcends the destruction and culminates in a reconstruction - structurally as well as thematically - that constitutes the exceptional American tragedy and the tragic.

THE APOCALYPSE AS TRAGIC-THEOLOGICAL MODUS AND MYTHOS: A TRANSGRESSIVE TERMINOLOGY OF TRUTH

The word 'apocalypse' refers to the books of the four great prophets in The Old Testament and The Revelation, the last book of The New Testament. The word is connected to the expectation of the great re-

demption, which its Greek etymology supports: "revelation". But the apocalypse has another, and much darker, meaning in the Latin version: "destruction", the nihilation of the sinful. Hitherto, the Latin version is the most applied, but I find that it levels out the original ambiguity of the word. Therefore, I maintain the dialectical meaning inherent in the term. In the following, the main characteristics of the American apocalypse are presented.

The apocalypse is a vision, a prophecy of the end of times, where God will punish the sinners, deliver the faithful and finally restore the original paradise. The four great prophets are Esaia, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Daniel, who are chosen to speak the voice and vision of God. Thus, the first characteristic of the apocalypse is the divine individual, who is chosen and isolated, unique and alone. The sacred subject is the tragedy's top priority and the primary element that drives the tragic plot.

Also, an irreversible and predetermined movement from before to now to after is always present in an apocalyptic tragedy: An original idyllic space of Eden, which has been contaminated by the sins of the unfaithful. Consequently, the day of doom is predicted through an anticipatory language as "for the day of their calamity is at hand" (Revelation, 16:10); a cloudy day, as the word signifies, when the kingdom of the beast will be full of darkness and confusion and the consequences are pure terror: "And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name" (ibid., 12:14). But the degeneration and horrific destruction is necessary as a purging, a ritual cleansing. The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his lyrical essay "On the Tragic" from 1844: "Come bad chance, / And we add to it our strength, / And we teach it art and length, / Itself o'er us to advance" (Emerson, 1844)³.

The monumental culmination is another textual element that is recognizable, it is the thematic dénouement. After the destruction the tone of the text shifts significantly - I quote from the famous passage of Revelation's chapter 21:

And I saw a New Heaven and a New Earth: for the first Heaven and the first Earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

And I John saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven, prepared as a Bride adorned for her Husband.

And I heard a great voice out of Heaven saying, Behold, the Tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And He that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And He said unto me, Write: for these words are True and Faithful.

And He said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the Water of Life freely.

Cosmos has been restored - the apocalypse is a monumental transgression in a processual meeting between destruction and reconstruction, a dissolution of the dominating norms, values, morals and ethics, which are unhealthy and sinful for a (Christian) society's welfare and its citizens' correct development. The intention of this transgressive action is individual and collective invigoration. As a result the resurrection in the American translation becomes the fusion of the individual salvation beyond death and the great collective and national hope of the future kingdom. The legitimacy and validity of the apocalyptic mythology is found in the paradigmatic and ritual repetition, which offers an absolute clarification of human existence. The mythos, as the apocalypse, becomes a series of repetitious actions that culminates in an apocalyptic scenario - a scenario that nullifies all the painful human contradictions and tribulations. The apocalyptic myth articulates an unequivocal and authoritative meaning or truth, a harmonic vision of cosmos. In other words, the apocalypse offers a special sense of being and insight, in which human beings can reach ontological clarification. But how does the apocalyptic transgression of tragedy and the tragic manifest itself in American drama as represented by Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*?

First of all, the divine individual and his/her actions are prioritized in the American apocalypse and are the element that relentlessly drives the plot forward. This is a fundamental difference between the Aristotelian theory of tragedy in Aristotle's famous *Poetics*, in which the protagonist is secondary to the all-structuring and all-important plot - for instance Antigone, Oedipus, Orestes, Medusa and Electra, whose movements, actions, choices and dilemmas are structural elements decided by the tragic plot. This is clearly not the case in *Mourning becomes Electra* and *Angels in America*. O'Neill depicts the Mannon family after the American civil war ended in 1865 and the family patriarch Ezra returns to his unfaithful wife, Christine, and her lover, Adam Brant. The son Orin also returns, but he is haunted by war traumas, family secrets, and his incestuous relationship with his mother. The daughter Lavinia is the tragedy's divine individual. Her entrance in the play accentuates her special status: O'Neill presents her from below, in obedient worm's eye perspective: "Lavinia comes out to the top of the steps" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 897), She is "twenty-three", but looks "considerably older" - a hint of her old-age life experience. Physically, Lavinia is "thin, flat-chested and angular", "stiff and she carries herself with a wooden, square-shouldered, military bearing" (ibid.). She lives an ascetic life full of hatred and bitterness but also of longing and searching for the truth about the family past.

The second characteristic of the American apocalyptic tragedy is the irreversible and sacred mission of the divine individual. Lavinia embodies both a pietistic nun and a female savior who has dedicated herself fully to a predetermined mission towards insight, realisation and truth: The exorcism of the family sins and the hope of redeeming herself in order to be saved and ultimately regenerated. Lavinia is her own judge, prosecutor and defence lawyer in her holy search for redemption. This mission is also referred to in her name's etymology: 'Lavinia' refers to 'levin', which means 'enlightenment' and 'electricity', and it also refers back to the Latin 'lavare', which means 'to wash' or 'to cleanse and purge'. Lavinia is the apocalyptic apotheosis.

The divine individual in *Angels in America* is Prior Walter - a stigmatized, homosexual Christ-like character, who through dry and wry humour, extravagant rhetorics and tragic irony bears his symbolic cross: his HIV-diagnosis. Prior is a typical apocalyptic

prophet and Harper Lee sees that early on in one of Priors hallucinations:

HARPER: I see something else about you...

PRIOR: Oh?

HARPER: Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that.

PRIOR: Is that... That isn't true.

HARPER: Threshold of revelation.

Home.

(Kushner, 1995, p. 40)

The crowning of Prior as a postmodern crucible of prophet and Christ is incorporated in a bombastic and melodramatic - and quite funny - scene, where an angel bursts through the bedroom ceiling:

ANGEL (*With another gust of music*):

American Prophet tonight you become,

American Eye that pierceth Dark,

American Heart all Hot for Truth,

The True Great Vocalist, the Knowing Mind,

Tongue-of-the-land, Seer-Head!

(Kushner, 1995, p. 188)

Kushner's tragedy in two parts is a predetermined movement towards a purging of Prior himself and the corrupted, sinful American nation of the 1980s, the Ronald Reagan-years. Subsequently, Lavinia and Prior revitalize Arthur Miller's views on tragedy and the tragic in his essay from 1949, "Tragedy and the Common Man":

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were (...) enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations. (Miller, 1949)⁴

Furthermore, a revolutionary modus of action is typical of the American tragic heroine/hero - whether it is Lavinia's angered and painful mission towards unravelling her family secrets or it is Prior's reluctant mission of healing and forgiveness. Both in-

dividuals' holy missions structure and move the tragic plot forward. But the will to act and cross the boundaries (politically, ideologically, morally, ethically, emotionally) is not equivalent to committing the monumental Aristotelian 'flaw' - the hero's 'hamarthaia'. As Miller states, it is not necessarily a "weakness". American tragic heroines/heros move closely around the possibility of committing hubris, but in the end the heroine/hero is right and not wrong in her or his choices: O'Neill and Kushner let their protagonists be redeemed. The tragic in American tragedies are centered around the fact that it is the *right* decision that unleashes the tragic dénuement.

The unique position of Lavinia and Prior, though, does not come without a cost - Lavinia is stigmatized by her family's sins:

I'm afraid to wait. The dead coming between. I want a little happiness – in spite of all the dead! I've earned it! I've done enough! I want a moment of joy – of love – to make up for what's coming. I want it now! Can't you be simple and pure? Can't you forget sin and see that love is beautiful? (...) Take me in the house of the dead and love me! Our love will drive the dead away! It will shame them all back into death! (*then with a hopeless, dead finality*) Always the dead between! It's no use trying any more!
(O'Neill, 1988, p. 1052)

However, she is determined to wear the symbolic cross and break the otherwise predetermined family course towards the ultimate tragic explosion and destruction. Prior, as well, accepts his divine call, but not without suspicion and reluctance:

A VOICE (*It is an incredibly beautiful voice*): Look up!
PRIOR (*Looking up, not seeing anyone*): Hello?
A VOICE: Look up!
PRIOR: Who's that?
A VOICE: Prepare the way!
PRIOR: I don't see any...
(*There is a dramatic change in the lighting, from above*)
A VOICE: Look up, Look up,
prepare the way

the infinite descent
A breath in the air floating down
Glory to...
PRIOR: Hello? Is that it? Helooooo?
What the fuck...? (*He holds himself*)
Poor me. Poor poor me. Why me? Why poor me? Oh I
don't feel good right now. I really don't.
(Kushner, 1995, pp. 40-41)

The divine prophet is the fusion of the individual and national hope of salvation. This hope is the tragedy's final goal, which is anticipated through a predetermined and irreversible plot movement and a repeated use of an anticipatory vocabulary - markers and elements anticipate the monumental culmination. This textual anticipation is the fourth characteristic of the American tragedy and the tragic, which can be found in *Mourning becomes Electra* and *Angels in America*. In O'Neills trilogy this is expressed through the stage directions that mark the return of Ezra and the fatal oath between Christine and Adam Brant: ("*The boom of a cannon sounds from the fort that guards the harbor*" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 926). Additionally, two external elements threaten the Mannons: Adam Brant by moving towards the otherwise closely sealed house of the Mannons and the town's people, whose gossip anticipates the tragic development of the trilogy: "pride goeth before a fall and that some day God would humble them in their sinful pride" (ibid., p. 953). The family is described as "queer" (ibid., p. 896) and "they don't want folks to guess their secrets" (ibid., p. 897), because "The Mannons got skeletons in their closets same as others! Worse ones" (ibid.). These secrets are connected to the family mansion, which is built on "extensive grounds" and likened to "the Greek temple type". But the house does not resonate harmony and beauty. Christine describes the house as "our tomb" (ibid., p. 903), "a temple of death" (ibid., p. 938) and "a sepulchre" (ibid.) filled with "puritan-grey ugliness" (ibid.) and "hatred" (ibid., p. 904). Small curses "the town's drunk" and calls it "This durned place!" (ibid., p. 1012), "this house bein' haunted", "there's been evil in that house since it was first built in hate - and it's kept growin' there ever since, as what's happened there has proved" (ibid., p. 1013). Even though the Greek temple is the ar-

chetype of architectural perfection, it is also a cold aesthetics that does not denote life and passion - the house is a dialectical symbol of fulfillment and death, perfection and stasis.

Anticipatory language is also dominant in Kushner's epic tragedy: The mentally unstable but also truth-telling prophet Harper Pitt - together with the course of the satan-parallel Roy Cohn - drives the plot towards its predetermined culmination. Harper's name refers to 1) 'Harper' as someone who plays the harp and to the iconic visualizations of angel's with harps and 2) 'Harpyr', which is a mighty and dirty creature with an angels face and a vulture's body. Her last name refers to 'pit', a hole in the ground, which in Christian mythology is parallel to hell. Harper predicts the destruction, the "collapsing" and, in the end, transgressive apocalypse:

People, who are lonely, people left alone, sit talking nonsense to the air, imagining... beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart... When you look at the ozone layer, from the outside, from a spaceship, it looks like a pale blue halo, a gentle, shimmering aureole encircling the atmosphere encircling the earth. Thirty miles above our heads, a thin layer of three atom oxygen molecules, product of photosynthesis, which explains the fussy vegetable preference for visible light, its rejection of darker rays and emanations. Danger from without. It's a kind of gift from God, the crowning touch to the creation of the world; guardian angels, hands linked, make a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself. But everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way... (Kushner, 1995, pp. 22-23)

Harper is the prophet of the apocalypse and when she leaves the city she preaches one last vision of a new American paradise:

HARPER: I dreamed we were there. The plane leapt the tropopause, the safe air, and attained the outer rim, the ozone, which was ragged and torn, patches of it threadbare as old as cheesecloth, and that was frightening...

But I saw something only I could see, because of my astonishing ability to see such things:

Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from plague, and they floated up, like skydivers in reverse, limbs all akimbo, wheeling and spinning.

And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired.

Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead.

At least I think that's so.

(Kushner, 1995, pp. 291-292)

All these text elements lead towards the transgressive praxis: The destruction and purging, which are followed by the regeneration and The New Jerusalem:

I Åb. 21-22 beskrives frelsens mål, dens *hvortil*, som en ny himmel og ny jord, som et nyt Jerusalem, der kommer ned fra himlen og som livets træ og flod fra paradiset have, der genoprettes i Det nye Jerusalem. I dette nye Jerusalem er der ingen død, sorg, plage, nat eller gudløse mennesker. Her lever de frelste af frugt fra livets træ og vand fra livets flod, og her lever de sammen med Jahve og Jesus. Her er tilstanden før syndefaldet åbenbart genoprettet, og derfor kan der i Det Nye Testamente tales om denne tilstand som en 'genoprettelse' (*apokatastisis* ApG 3, 21) eller en 'genfødselse', nemlig af verden (*palin-genesia*, Matt 19, 28) (Bilde, 2001, p. 226)

Lavinia survives as the only one in the family. Symbolically, she isolates herself in the house as an analogy to Jesus Christ, whose body is taken to the cave - only to be resurrected:

Don't be afraid. I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's none left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of

justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed so that no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! (*with a strange cruel smile of gloating over the years of self-torture*) I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born! (...) You go now and close the shutters and nail them tight. And tell Hannah to throw out all the flowers. (...) *She ascends to the portico – and then turns and stands for a while, stiff and square shouldered, staring into the sunlight with frozen eyes. Seth leans out the window at the right of the door and pulls the shutters closed with a decisive bang. As if this were a word of command, Lavinia pivots sharply on her heel and marches woodenly into the house, closing the door behind her.* (O'Neill, 1988, pp. 1053-1054)

Prior Walter makes his closing speech in front of the cleansing Angel of Bethesda Fountain and he is elevated to the salvation's "more life". The American tragedy and the tragic move towards the timely culmination of the apocalyptic-transgressive process, which Ralph Waldo Emerson defines in characteristically apocalyptic rhetorics:

Time the consoler, Time the rich carrier of all changes, dries the freshest tears by obtruding new figures, new costumes, new roads, on our eye, new voices on our ear. As the west wind lifts up again the heads of the wheat which were bent down and lodged in the storm, and combs out the matted and dishevelled grass as it lay in night locks on the ground, so we let in Time as a drying wind into the seed field of thoughts which are dark and wet and low bent. Time restores to them temper and elasticity. How fast we forget the blow that threatened to cripple us. Nature will not sit still; the faculties will do somewhat; new hopes spring, new affections twine, and the broken is whole again. (Emerson, 1844)⁵

Despite the fact that Arthur Miller writes his thoughts on tragedy and the tragic much later than Emerson, it is possible to find parallels between his and Emerson's reflections on regeneration:

There is a misconception of tragedy with which I have been struck in review after review, and in many conversations with writers and readers alike. It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. Even the dictionary says nothing more about the word than that it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending. This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinion of the human animal. (...) For, if it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity. (...) The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy. (Miller, 1949)⁶

As described earlier, the apocalypse culminates in a monumental subversion. The next chapter investigates this culmination as another special American feature, which separates the American tragedy from its European origins.

AMERICAN TRAGEDY AND THE TRAGIC AS A PROCESSUAL-SOTERIOLOGICAL MEETING BETWEEN THE VERTICAL AND THE HORIZONTAL

Through descriptive and normative reflections on the production of aesthetics Aristotle treats tragedy as formal structure and the emotional effect of his key term "catharsis". But the idea of the tragic is of no interest to Aristotle. Instead, we must turn to his European colleagues, G.W.F. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, as the most influential philosophers of the tragic as a philosophical-ontological concept. Common to these otherwise very different thinkers is the transgressive collision as the essence of the tragic.

Hegel's favorite tragedy is *Antigone* by Sophocles. In his famous interpretation the Hegelian idea of the tragic unfolds as a collision

between two legal and equal rights, which in the denial of the other position is transformed into evils. The only solution to the tragic collision is the heroine's fall in order to restore cosmic harmony - the Hegelian tragic is that night, where the spirit is betrayed and transformed into a subject, the famous depopulation of heaven. Kierkegaard, too, writes of a collision, but in more religious terms: Between the Augustinian predetermination of original sin and the Pelegian antithesis of free will. Kierkegaard also uses *Antigone* as his analysis, but with another aim, and thus, Kierkegaard calls for a "Middelvei" between the two. Accordingly, the "sande Tragiske" is articulated as a middle course between guilty action and innocent suffering. Lastly, according to Nietzsche, the tragic collision is between the chilly, plastic Apollinian and the ecstatic, life-giving and transgressive Dionysian. Via his theory of tragedy Nietzsche criticizes and accuses the contemporary society of solely relying on reason and rationality and ignoring the Dionysian aspects of life. As shown, the European discussions of the tragic focus on the transgressive collision as terminal or final, which is an oppositional modus compared to the American version.

O'Neill transports his divine individual and savior Lavinia Mannon to the necessary but non-final collision: Because of the family sins Lavinia moves irreversibly towards the symbolic and monumental transgression. Like Jesus in the cave she will resurrect, be ready for salvation and wander into the New Jerusalem. Thus, Lavinia breaks the family's tradition of vertical power relations and original sin, and she is able to reach the horizontally motivated vision of the new Eden.

This transgressive and apocalyptic vision is repeated in *Angels in America*. Kushner's martyr, stigmatized victim and reluctant savior, Prior Walter, moves towards a full dedication to "more life" that marks the necessary purging of sin and corruption. Instead, more love, more democracy and more empathy in America are needed. Conclusively, it is not the typical European finality that characterizes the American vision of tragedy and the tragic. Instead, the texts offer a dialectic process and exchange between destruction and the reconstruction. The three-step processual culmination is basically a fulfillment of before, now and after. This trilogy of textual-transgressive elements can be compared to the idea of the Christian soteriology:

Soteriologi betegner de forestillinger, som bestemte religiøse grupper gør sig om frelsens *hvorfra*, *hvortil* og *hvorledes*. Frelsens *hvorfra* refererer til den aktuelle, negativt bestemte situation, som den pågældende gruppe oplever som udtryk for gudsforladthed eller som udtryk for det (den) ondes herredømme. Frelsens *hvortil* henviser til den eskatologiske ophævelse af denne negative tilstand og til oprettelsen af et utopisk samfund, et messiansk rige, en fornyet jord, et Paradis eller en himmel, dvs. det sted, hvor guddommelig vilje og dermed per definition retfærdighed hersker uindskrænket. Frelsens *hvorledes* betegner den eller de måder hvorpå den første tilstand overvindes og erstattes med den sidste. Der refereres til guddommelige indgreb, især i form af sendelse af en fra himmelen udgået åbenbarer - og/eller frelserskikkelse og i form af en guddommeligt udvirket fjernelse af de gudfjendtlige magter. (Bilde, 2001, p. 216)

The words processual-organic must be accentuated, in that the transgressive modus of the apocalypse is a mythological process: A ritual predetermination and repetitious irreversibility that separates the American idea of the tragic from its European-Greek counterpart. The final chapter of the article will analyze the final difference between the two continents' expressions of tragedy and the tragic: The interpretation of the key term catharsis.

THE DIDACTIC INTENTION OF AMERICAN TRAGEDY AND THE TRAGIC: THE POSTHUMOUS EXPRESSION OF MORALITY AND ONTOLOGICAL REALIZATION

This is where the American dramatists come most closely to adopting the Aristotelian key terminology of catharsis. The term refers to the pity and fear that must be invoked in the audience and, ultimately, this pity and fear cleanses and purges. The Danish scholar Maj Skibstrup defines Aristotle's typology of catharsis:

(...) den erkendelse, der opstår af en stærk og lidelsesfuld oplevelse. Men det er ikke en hvilken som helst form for stærk sansoplevelse, der skaber erkendelse. Det er den lidelsesfulde oplevelse, som skaber nydelse. Gennem sit

fuldkomne dramatiske forløb, hvor alle dele har en funktion i forhold til enheden ligesom i 'en enkelt levende organisme', skaber tragedien erkendelse af den indre og sandsynlige sammenhæng i de agerendes handlinger – og renser dermed publikums følelse af frygt og medlidenhed'. Det er den rensede oplevelse af, at det kunne ske for enhver – af det almene i de konkrete menneskers handlinger – der både skaber den afklarede og nydelsesfulde følelse af frygt og medlidenhed hos publikum. (Skibstrup, 2004, p. 167)

The Europeans believe in a general and collective experience based on that fear, which stems from the minor status of human beings in the universe as compared to the gods - the vertical relation between gods and humans. By contrast, the Americans tend to believe in a more horizontal and dialectic relation between God and his divinely chosen people. The American purging is not restricted or reduced to the psychological, philosophical or ontological aspect. The American cleansing must conform to a religious-ideologic catharsis that will take America towards a fulfillment of the prophecy of a New Jerusalem. Naturally, an enormous fear and anxiety will arise during the movement toward this transgressive-apocalyptic culmination, but the fear is always secondary to the longing for and belief in the prophecy. This longing is the *raison d'être* and *dénouement* of the American tragedy and the tragic.

The main argument is that the final difference between the European-Greek and American typology and modus can be located in the morality and didactic intention of the tragedy: The tragic realization or insight of the heroine/hero happens *before* death - for instance: Oedipus realizes his tragic mistakes before he dies. According to the Aristotelian aesthetics, the painful suffering of the heroine/hero and following cleansing of the audience does not make sense if it is placed after the death of the protagonist. How else can the state and its citizens learn from the morality of the tragedy? By watching and learning from the Aristotelian tragedy the audience is confirmed - through pity and fear - in their dedication to the state, and thus the European-Greek tragedy is and must be edifying and didactic.

In toto: The American dramatists' take on tragedy and the tragic is fundamental different. In the American vision the didactics appear *after* the physical or symbolic death of the heroine/hero. The moral intention of the tragedy unfolds in the resurrection. Despite Lavinia's angry dreams of revenge and Prior Walter's repeated denial of his chosenness, the readers/audience are never in doubt: The tragic plot and the response of the audience are controlled towards the transgressive collision and the regenerative salvation. The didactics can only be reached through this individual and collective regeneration. Additionally, this is closely related to the American use of hamartha, 'flaw'. The Greek heroine/hero of the tragedies commit hubris and releases 'nemesis' the causal chain of reactions, and the Aristotelian hamartha is naturally defined as sinful and wrong. The consequence is simple: moral and ethical denunciation and condemnation of the sinner(s) by the gods, the other characters in the play, and from the audience. But according to the Americans it is their correct and right decisions that catapult them into the predetermined and irreversible movement towards destruction: The processual-soteriological collision of the American idea of the tragic is unleashed from the confirmation of the American nation, people and cosmos. Subsequently, there is a potentially greater and more omnipotent pain, suffering and despair caused by the thought of the potential atomization and destruction of the entire universe. The American tragedy shows the possibility of both splintering and recreating cosmic harmony through the transgressive apocalyptic tragedy and the tragic.

NOTES

- ¹ http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/sep/21/highereducation.news#article_continue
- ² Currently, there is two works, to my knowledge, that attempt to discuss a distinct American tragedy: *The Closed Frontier: Studies in American Tragedy* from 1970 by Harold P. Simonsons and *The Three Masks of American Tragedy* from 1974 by Dan Vogel. Simonson is a literary and cultural critic, and he compares the idea of Frederic Jackson Turner's 'frontier' to a concept of American tragedy. However, Simonson exemplifies his otherwise in-

teresting analysis on novels by Mark Twain and Nathaniel West. Additionally, Simonson talks of tragedy as a theme, not as a specific literary or theatrical form. Vogel is specifically arguing that tragedy is a distinct American drama discourse, but he also exemplifies his thesis on the three literary genres: Novels, drama and poetry.

³ <http://www.emersoncentral.com/tragic.htm>

⁴ <http://vccslitonline.cc.va.us/tragedy/milleressay.htm>

⁵ <http://www.emersoncentral.com/tragic.htm>

⁶ <http://vccslitonline.cc.va.us/tragedy/milleressay.htm>

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