

On agony and apocalypse: A theological critique of “Absolute tragedy”¹

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Abstract

The essay gestures to a theological critique of “absolute tragedy”. It begins by articulating the oft-repeated claim that a definition of “tragedy” or “the tragic” has proved difficult and suggests that its relative scope and open texture are bound up with its reception history. This sets the context for my exposition of the idea of “absolute tragedy” as found in George Steiner, which I consider to be determined by an overly restrictive concept of tragedy, both in terms of its metaphysical and social imaginary. I then move on to Hans Urs von Balthasar, who does not succumb to the conceit of absolute tragedy, but who also exhibits something of a restrictive social dimension in his portrayal of the tragic. I then engage in a brief exposition of Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* as a riposte to Steiner, but also as a transition point towards the idea of *apocalypse*, where I frame the tragic as a habitation of *the middle*, between agony and apocalypse. To this end, I propose briefly three framing narratives or myths as a way of conceiving this middle, namely the agony of Christ in Gethsemane, the Pauline pericope on suffering creation in the Epistle to the Romans, and the myth of Holy Saturday.

Keywords

apocalyptic, tragedy, George Steiner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, metaphysics, suffering

...wouldn’t the apocalyptic be a transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience itself, of every mark or every trace? – Jacques Derrida²

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2 Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy.” *Oxford Literary Review* 6.2 (1984): 3–37 (p 27).

I

From early in the reception of Greek tragedy, there has been reflection on its nature, scope, and limits. Anyone who has dipped into the shallows of its history knows that theorising or generalising about the tragic is as old as Plato.³ What does or does not count as real “tragedy” or “the tragic” has been contestable – almost since its beginnings. The tropes of tragedy are well-known: protagonists of mixed virtue and their devastation; the interplay of destiny and will; knowledge and its belated or destructive arrival; irascible deities and their inscrutable intentions; the conflict of moral responsibilities, and so on. All these traits have been subject to contestation in the theory of tragedy. Aristotle’s account of *katharsis*, *peripeteia*, and *hamartia* have rich acceptance, but there are few today, for instance, who would defend strenuously the unities of dramatic action, as taken up by neoclassical theorists. The various attempts and failures at articulating the “essence” of tragic form and experience is a significant heritage of “the tragic” itself. It would be futile here to summarise the expanse of this tradition. Token elements include tragedy in medieval and post-Reformation moralising,⁴ or post-Kantian philosophies of the tragic sublime (e.g., Schiller), as well as idealist metaphysics of conflict and reconciliation (e.g., Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin). There are also popular reductions of ‘tragedy’ as a shorthand for any narrative that ends badly, or any undeserved suffering, amongst many. Semantic slippage is understandable here: it indicates shifting relays between descriptive and normative poles of discourse, a mimetic interplay between theatre, thought, and the everyday. But it also may intimate a theoretical exhaustion regarding any limning of the tragic form – as Terry Eagleton has argued.⁵

3 Simon Goldhill, “Generalising About Tragedy” in Rita Felski (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 45–65.

4 Carol Symes, “The Tragedy of the Middle Ages,” in Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Revermann (eds.), *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the Fourth Century BCE until the Middle Ages* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 335–369; Michael Lurie, “Facing Up to Tragedy: Toward an Intellectual History of Sophocles in Europe from Camerarius to Nietzsche,” in Kirk Ormand (ed.), *A Companion to Sophocles* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 440–461.

5 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Blackwell, 2003), 1–22.

In this regard, attempts to define and reduce tragedy to a cluster of essential characteristics have proven intractable. The problems involved, in many ways, are tied up with philosophical questions regarding the capacity of language to denote or refer to anything. At least since Gottlob Frege,⁶ the relation between the “sense” of semantic content and its corresponding “reference” has been a topic of philosophical query. Bertrand Russell’s theory of descriptions⁷ proposed a way of articulating how language denotes its referents. However, largely due to the impact of Wittgenstein and ordinary-language philosophy,⁸ attempts to secure reference via analytic dissections of propositional sense have not gained much traction. Meaning cannot be abstracted from intentionality or the forms of life in which referents are discerned contextually. One cannot abstract the denotive capacities of language from history, tradition, and culture. The theory of descriptions fails because, arguably, it trades upon a “stable” complex of aspects. Saul Kripke considered this unsustainable, and in response put forward his own idea of “rigid designation,”⁹ that is, a form of naming that acquires reference through placement in a chain of historical sequelae. Likewise, how we name anything as tragedy or tragic, whether this be in art, life or philosophy, appears to have a slippery range of denotation. To adopt Husserlian terms, a demarcation, reduction, and description of the “eidetic” content of tragedy may reveal overlap in tragic phenomena, but it might just as well reveal exceptions, divagations, and transformations of the tragic which may question previous accounts.

Taking a cue from Kripke, then, I would say that tragedy or the tragic might also function as something like rigid designators; as forms of contextually-located specification that do not denote unchanging content or experiences, but a style of figuration connected to particular traditions. Figures or motifs, like in music and literature, may exhibit something of a recognisable form or continuity, even as they are modulated and transformed through varying composition. If this is so, one might say that

6 Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference” and “Thought”, in A.P. Martinich and David Sosa (eds.), *Analytic Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 7–18; 19–31.

7 Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting.” *Mind* 14.56 (Oct 1905): 479–493.

8 Cf. P.F. Strawson, “On Referring.” *Mind* 59.235 (Jul 1950): 320–344.

9 Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

a sense of the tragic is gleaned from the way it articulates a recognisable continuity with tradition, a historical identity-in-difference. Speaking of any phenomena as ‘tragic’ involves articulating how any instance of tragedy resembles or overlaps with the eidetic content of other tragedies. Inspired by Hans-Georg Gadamer,¹⁰ Simon Goldhill,¹¹ Larry Bouchard,¹² and Miriam Leonard,¹³ I would say, in sum, that there is a restive circulation between instances of “tragedy” and what has come to be called “the tragic”.¹⁴ Or to quote Raymond Williams, we might say that “Tragedy is...not a single and permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions”.¹⁵ This is not to deny a transhistorical import to tragedy, the way that it may connect to a multiplicity of contexts and traditions. Rather, it seeks to locate its contours within a historical field of sense that is flexible enough to allow a significant range of differences, but substantial enough to differentiate “the tragic” from other kinds of descriptors.

Now all of this, I hope, is not simply an exercise in ponderous “throat-clearing”. What I am aiming for in my argument touches on this purported range or exclusiveness of the tragic. What counts as real tragedy, or to whom tragic experience may be ascribed, lies at the centre of its contention. In particular, I will be addressing what has been called *absolute tragedy*. In the space allowed, I hope to discuss two thinkers: one who articulates this vision, namely George Steiner, and another, Hans Urs von Balthasar, who provides a metaphysical response to it, but who also requires supplementation. In doing so, I am heavily dependent on the penetrating account of Rowan Williams, even as I develop it differently.¹⁶ What is meant by the concept

10 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weisheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2nd rev. ed (London: Continuum, 1989), 119–130.

11 Simon Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 249–266.

12 Larry Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 243–251.

13 Miriam Leonard, *Tragic Modernities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 166.

14 Khegan M. Delpont, *On Tragedy and Transcendence: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 18–23.

15 Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Canada: Broadview Encore Editions, 2006), 69.

16 Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 82–107.

of “absolute tragedy” will hopefully become clearer as we go along, but initially I would like to make an analytic distinction between *absolute tragedy*, on the one side, and what has been called *the tragic absolute* on the other—adopting here the language of David Krell.¹⁷ While these concepts have intellectual kinship, I believe they target somewhat different foci. In short, while I see absolute tragedy as a transcendental framing of *the tragic*, I see the tragic absolute as a metaphysical qualification of the first principles or grounding reality of any “science”. Basically, the absolute is the most generic of principles, upon which all others are logically or ontologically dependent. Here, to speak of “the tragic absolute” is to ascribe a tragic quality—whatever that means—to the highest principle of any system (e.g., the Good, the One, the First Mover, God, Difference, the Principle of Identity, etc.). In recent times, it has been applied to the study of German Idealism, and especially to the systems of Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin. Here, there is an ascription of becoming, contingency, conflict, and scission into the Absolute or Principle of Identity. Theologically speaking, one can quite easily trace the influence of this paradigm in twentieth-century systematic theologies (e.g., Moltmann, Jüngel, Fiddes, etc.). However, that will not be my primary focus here. Rather, I aim to briefly articulate a critique of absolute tragedy, as chiefly exemplified in Steiner, but which also finds echoes in Balthasar.

II

George Steiner exhibited an encyclopaedic range of literary, philosophical, and theological acumen in his work. Besides his exquisite prose, rarely has there been a literary critic with such a range of recall and intertextual density. He first rose to academic fame through his book *The Death of Tragedy*, which had a significant reception amongst theorists of the tragic.¹⁸ The broad sweep of the argument is too textured to be recounted here in full, but the basic upshot of his claim seems to be something like this: the flowering of ancient tragedy was nurtured by the cultural and religious context of Attic Greece, and it was out of this ferment that the Golden

17 David Krell, *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005).

18 George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961).

Age of tragedy arose. Many of its cultural deposits, including its politics, rituals, and theology, were instrumental for the formation of the artform. However, particularly with the advent of Christianity and Judaism, the lambent glow of Greek tragedy begins to fade and recede with the ascent of a Christian occident. Steiner sees this as chiefly due to the redemptive trajectory of monotheistic faith, and especially Christian eschatology. In metanarratives that tend to amelioration, we no longer have conducive ground for a flourishing of the tragic, and with a decline in religion after the Enlightenment, the metaphysical backdrop for tragedy is stripped of its once lustrous patina, now an object of obsolescent glory. On this narrative, in a secular world in which everything is, in principle, negotiable and revisable, and where human freedom and promises of social meliorism expand, we no longer possess that sort of metaphysical density required for a tragic vision. The sheer contingency, the play of individual figures against their respective fates, is not sufficient for tragedy. It is unfortunate and sad, but it does not portend that ontological devastation characteristic of the tragic form.

Tragedy was indeed a recurrent motif in his later career.¹⁹ In his mature thought, despite qualifications, he never really retracted the basic contention of *The Death of Tragedy*. For him, secular modernity by and large does not open those chthonic regions of experience which animated tragic art, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – except in rare moments. In this later period, he developed a notion of absolute or high tragedy, a canonical measure by which he sifted the genuinely tragic from its tragicomic and melodramatic familiars.²⁰ Tragedy in purest rendition is a rarified phenomenon, attributable to a handful of texts in the Western canon. It unfolds the maxim ascribed to Theognis of Megara that it is best to have never been born, and second best to die young. Tragedy in its starkest iterations manifests a dark conceit of “original sin” and “ontological homelessness,”²¹ a “negative ontology” where humans are

19 George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Clarendon., 1984).

20 George Steiner, “A Note on Absolute Tragedy,” *Journal of Literature & Theology* 4 (1990): 147–156. “Tragedy, Pure and Simple” in M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 534– 546; “Tragedy, Reconsidered.” *New Literary History* 35 (2004): 1–15.

21 “Tragedy, Reconsidered,” 2.

“unhoused in being”.²² Pitched at an existential extremity that is “scarcely endurable”,²³ it cannot in any practical sense be “lived”.²⁴ Absolute tragedy does not “admit of the rationale or therapy of discourse” or “pragmatic amelioration”.²⁵ Because of this, it is fragmentary, a mutilated torso of expression.²⁶ It exhibits a metaphysic that is fundamentally “heretical”, a world of “Manichean dialectic” that is not “admissible for a Judeo-Christian teleology”. In its most stringent distillation, absolute tragedy is quite simply “the performative mode of despair”.²⁷ At this level, it is unsustainable for any extensive duration. Because of this, it presents an intensity of compaction that, in many ways, is not a token of the standard course of life. Human existence generally stands in contrast to a vision of absolute tragedy. The hybridity of the everyday, usually, is a mixture of the tragic and the comic, so that the unremitting bleakness of absolute tragedy does not touch the lot of humanity. But it is a vision which, occasionally, breaks through—routinely driving its protagonists to madness, suicide, or an aphasia of horror.

Having a hermeneutical cypher at hand, Steiner goes on to scour the history of art and literature and finds only a small sample to exhibit. The pickings are rather slim here. The extant majority of Greek tragedy, with exceptions, is seen as tipping over into melodrama rather than the authentically tragic. Since it is difficult to recover the emotional impact that the Attic tragedy had on its audience, caution is required here. Aristotle standardised the response to tragedy as provoking pity and fear, but we do not know how widely this was transmitted. The placement of tragedies within trilogies, where a third instalment provided relief to dramatic tension, pushes against a cumulative effect of the tragic ensemble being anything like unsparing nihilism. However, since a large swathe of the tragic corpus is lost, we do not know if all tragedies, including the standalone ones that have survived, were placed within trilogies. Nonetheless, from this

22 “A Note on Absolute Tragedy,” 147.

23 “A Note on Absolute Tragedy,” 147.

24 “Tragedy, Pure and Simple,” 536.

25 “A Note on Absolute Tragedy,” 147.

26 “A Note on Absolute Tragedy,” 148.

27 “A Note on Absolute Tragedy,” 155.

selection, Steiner believes that only a few exhibit absolute tragedy, a list that includes Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and Euripides's *The Trojan Women* and *The Bacchae*. The *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, as well as *Oedipus at Colonnus*, are excluded since their narratives climax in a tempering denouement. From more recent examples, Steiner includes Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, and maybe *King Lear*, as well as the plays of Racine. Modern exemplars include Shelley's *The Cenci*, Büchner's *Woyzeck*, as well as the minimalist *guignol* of Samuel Beckett. Of these, the model is *Timon of Athens*, where there is a drastic etiolation of speech, to the point that language itself is bidden to cease.

Looking into the future, Steiner does not dismiss the continued production of absolute tragedy, especially in light of the carnivalesque horrors of the twentieth century. But he largely believes that tragic affect is presently carried in other mediums, and so will only have a marginal presence in literary output. One aspect of tragedy that also underscores its marginality is the centrality of high-minded protagonists. There is an aristocracy of spirit that marks tragic characters: "tragedy is never politically value-free. Its decline was concomitant with the democratisation of western ideals, with the eclipse of imperative destiny in the power relations between mortals and the supernatural, between men and women and the state".²⁸ The poetics of tragedy reveals a "literacy of consciousness", an interior reflexivity, which in its "formal elevation, its prodigal economy, its metaphoric reach tell of a conflictual world, of an often fatal dialectic (dialogue) removed from the waste motions, from the hybrid tonalities, from the hit-and-miss unbending of the vulgate".²⁹ It is a world, in short, that is "socially hierarchic".³⁰ Barring exceptions—like Büchner's *Woyzeck*—the subject of literary tragedy is not the everyman. Like Judeo-Christian theology, in Steiner's estimate, egalitarian politics and secular messianism, whether this be liberal, socialist, or communist, spell the death of tragedy.

I will return to this, dare I say, "mandarin" summation of the tragic after my treatment of Balthasar, who I believe, for different reasons, exhibits

28 "Tragedy, Reconsidered," 9.

29 "Tragedy, Reconsidered," 10.

30 "Tragedy, Reconsidered," 11.

similar tendencies in his account of the tragic, and to which I presently turn.

III

Balthasar engaged extensively with tragedy across the volumes of his famous trilogy.³¹ He devotes an entire chapter of the fourth volume of *Herrlichkeit* to the topic³² and spends some time delineating different kinds of tragedy in the prolegomenon to his *Theodramatik*.³³ Balthasar not only believes in the continued relevance of tragedy, but—as is well-known—elevates drama to a metaphysically embracing category.³⁴ He considered tragedy as he acme of Greek art, and privileges the examples of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in his estimation of the tragic.³⁵ He explicitly rejects Steiner's thesis that Christianity is inherently inimical to the tragic,³⁶ and in fact sees tragedy as a vital paradigm for patristic theology—something confirmed recently by Paul Blowers, amongst others.³⁷ For him, “it is Greek tragedy, and not Greek philosophy, with which the Christians primarily entered into dialogue, that forms the great, valid cypher of the Christ event, central to human history, by enclosing and transcending all previous cyphers within itself”.³⁸ Following Albin Lesky, Balthasar distinguishes three kinds of tragedy, namely situational tragedy, the tragedy of transcendence, and closed tragedy—which in Balthasarian parlance is equated with “tragicism”

31 For what follows, see Kevin Taylor, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Question of Tragedy in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 9–56.

32 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans. Brian McNeil et al (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 101–154.

33 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I: Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 424–435.

34 “... it is a basic Christian requirement that existence should represent itself dramatically” (*Theo-Drama I*, 22).

35 *The Glory of the Lord IV*, 101; 131–133.

36 *Theo-Drama I*, 427–428.

37 Paul Blowers, *Vision and Faces of the Tragic: The Mimesis of Tragedy and the Folly of Salvation in Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

38 *The Glory of the Lord IV*, 101.

or “pantragicism” (*Pantragismus*).³⁹ Playing with idealist categories of conflict and resolution, the first category refers to tragic dramas that enact reconciliation within the diegesis of the narrative, such as the redemptive sweep of the Oresteian trilogy. Here, there “remains a knot that cannot be loosed, where the solution cannot be sought beyond it, only within”.⁴⁰ The second category belongs to that tragedy in which reconciliation is not found within its confines, but gestures to a meta-level of reconciliation beyond its narrative strictures. The Oedipus cycle may be seen in this light, but it belongs more readily to a world of post-Christian tragedy. The third category is a totalised vision in which there is no resolution to the interior conflicts of tragedy, and what is more, the conflict is expanded into a closed perspective upon all reality. This is, more or less, *absolute tragedy* – as discussed in the previous section—but it also tips into the category of *the tragic absolute*. Balthasar explicitly rejects this form of tragic absolutization: as Balthasar says, “tragicism”, of this variety leads to “a self-abolition of the tragic, because a scale of virtues that is inwardly at war with itself (and lacking a governing highest value) makes the conflict seem meaningless, along with man, caught in its toils”.⁴¹ Balthasar sees this as characteristic of post-idealist philosophies and drama, and chiefly Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but we might apply it to certain absurdist or postmodern aesthetics as well. Of these three categories, Balthasar appears to be most invested in the second.

Overall, Balthasar’s theological interest in tragedy is positioned against an idealist collapse of plurality into identity or the absolute. Balthasar desires to sustain the element of dramatic interaction, of what Kevin Taylor has called “participative distance of humanity from God”⁴², in which there is “neither a dissolving unity with, nor a chasmic separation from, the Divine, but a proper, freeing, and enabling distance”.⁴³ It relates to a grammar of *creatio ex nihilo*, of a distinction between created and uncreated, in which “the creaturely ‘other-than-God’ is plunged into the uncreated ‘Other-

39 *Theo-Drama I*, 425–427; cf. Taylor, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Question of Tragedy*, 39–41.

40 *The Glory of the Lord IV*, 106.

41 *Theo-Drama I*, 426.

42 *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Question of Tragedy*, 12.

43 *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Question of Tragedy*, 19.

in-God’ *while maintaining* that fundamental ‘distance which alone makes love possible’”.⁴⁴ It is the manifestation of divine concealment and absence, a distance framed by glory, but also how “the divine presence is announced in heightened suffering”.⁴⁵ In terms of defining tragedy itself, he gives three broad themes. In tragedy, firstly, humans are caught up in a desire for the good within a transient world, where they are unable to perfect transcendent ends. Here, existence itself becomes tragic because “it is not possible to extend the lines of its essential being”, and so “good things” inevitably “withdraw themselves”.⁴⁶ Secondly, they are immured in conflicts of responsibilities, so that “the essential lines of existence are not only incapable of being perfected but cross over one another and make existence a contradiction”.⁴⁷ Thirdly, tragic figures are tainted with “an opaque guilt” that transcends “the individual alone, without thereby excusing him fully”.⁴⁸

Balthasar reads these gestures as inviting a theological upshot: a transcendent act of reconciliation. He does not shy away from reading ancient tragedy through Christology and Catholic liturgy. Drawing upon the ritualised and liturgical roots of tragic drama,⁴⁹ tragedies for Balthasar exhibit what he calls “the quality of sacramentality”, in which they “signify something but not that which is other” but rather “point to their own fullness and depth”. Tragedies “are not only symbolic, but also that which is symbolised”, gesturing “to something (which embraces a mode of absence), because they are at the same time full of an abundant presence”.⁵⁰ Anthropologically, it points towards something of that glory which appears

44 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 105. The quote here is from Jean-Luc Marion’s *The Idol and Distance*.

45 *The Glory of the Lord IV*, 106.

46 Balthasar, “Tragedy and the Christian Faith,” in *Explorations in Theology III: Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeill (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 393.

47 “Tragedy and the Christian Faith,” 393–394.

48 “Tragedy and the Christian Faith,” 394–395.

49 Cf. Gerald F. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*. Martin Classical Lectures, vol. 20 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1965); Walter Burkert, *Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual* [1966], in Wolfgang Rösler (ed.), *Kleine Schriften VII: Tragica et Historica* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 1–36.

50 *The Glory of the Lord IV*, 106.

in the suffering of humanity, “the glory of the agonised heart which finally prevails, of a heart which endures more than ever could be expected of it”.⁵¹ He compares this experience of exposure to the Eucharistic act, where

man is held up into the light and into the darkness of the gods in the same way as the Flesh and Blood of Christ are held up at the Consecration, so that all those who stand around ... may see it and so that the divine Father himself may turn his eye to it, then one suddenly sees, too, how exposed this act of disclosure itself is.⁵²

The tragic manifestation of glory is consummated for Balthasar in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It here reaches its apogee: “The absolute gravity of great tragedy, together with its understanding of glory, directly enters and is so subsumed by the drama of Christ that, after Christ, it cannot be repeated”.⁵³ Thereafter, there is “no possibility of creating and staging a tragedy in the highest sense after Christ, who has performed this role to its perfection”.⁵⁴

Balthasar’s mediation of tragedy maintains the pertinence of tragedy for Christian thought, while also reimagining Christ as the consummate tragic hero.⁵⁵ All tragedies after Christ should imitate or repeat non-identically the tragedy of the *Triduum*. On this reading, tragic suffering is elevated into the Christian imaginary, even as some forms of tragic representation or suffering are deemed insufficiently elevated to be classified as tragic. Comparable to Steiner’s coterie of tragic figures, Balthasar’s classicist and patrician tendencies lead him to discount some forms of tragedies or novels as not reaching the sublimities of high tragedy, and so therefore not really worthy of the epithet.⁵⁶ For him, tragic heroes are of a particular stature and mind, who encounter immense forces of opposition and resistance, who either maintain themselves in the face of the onslaught or are crushed

51 *The Glory of the Lord* IV, 107.

52 “Tragedy and the Christian Faith,” 395–396.

53 *The Glory of the Lord* IV, 101.

54 *The Glory of the Lord* IV, 104.

55 Kevin Taylor, “Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero,” in Kevin Taylor & Giles Waller (eds.), *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory* (Great Britain: Ashgate, 2011), 133–147.

56 Cf. *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Question of Tragedy*, 39–56.

by its weight. Even though he does not agree with the death-of-tragedy school, exemplified by Steiner, he nonetheless believes that great tragedy, more or less, came to an end in the Baroque period. He sees this as mainly due to the modern decline in religious devotion and the voiding of the transcendent. It is this that, according to Taylor, underwrites his “his predilection for aristocratic, classic tragedy that resists modernity, the novel, prosaic reality, and ignoble suffering”.⁵⁷

IV

One way to trace my argument here is that both Steiner and Balthasar, in different ways, engage in a *transcendental foreclosure* of the tragic. The import of ‘transcendental’ is of course wide-ranging, but my sense is akin to Kant’s *a priori* deduction of categories, and so by ‘foreclosing’ I am suggesting that they conceptualize tragedy in ways that may overdetermine what constitutes real or genuine tragedy. I believe this is more so in the case of Steiner than Balthasar. Steiner exhibits philosophically pessimist tendencies in his account of absolute tragedy,⁵⁸ something which cannot be said for Balthasar, who explicitly rejects “pantragicism”. However, in his own way, Balthasar’s ‘patrician’ hermeneutic implies that some tragic suffering—whether this be experienced or aesthetically represented—may not be sufficiently ennobled to be classified as tragedy. Both exhibit something of that “mandarin” tendency of tragic theory that Eagleton has spoken about.⁵⁹ However, in another sense also, Balthasar is not Steinerian, for explicitly theological reasons. Steiner has written that the “summit of tragedy in English literature is Faustus’s intuition, via Marlowe’s speculative and philosophic genius, that a deity capable of forgiving Faustus would be a false god”.⁶⁰ The implication is that any meliorating action by a deity would lead to a contamination, a breaking of the ontological chasm between heaven and earth. It asserts any promise of divine reconciliation as fatal to the tragic. But as Rowan Williams says—here going back to purported ancient

57 Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Question of Tragedy, 56.

58 Cf. John C. McDowell, “Silenus’ Wisdom and the ‘Crime of Being’: The Problem of Hope in George Steiner’s Tragic Vision.” *Literature & Theology* 14.4. (2000): 385–398.

59 Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 16.

60 “Tragedy, Reconsidered,” 5.

forms of “absolute tragedy”, such as *Medea*, *Antigone*, *The Bacchae* – to simply read Greek tragedy “as stating a final, cosmic deficit in reconciliation is to reduce them radically as *drama*”.⁶¹ The attempt to formulate a conceit of “absolute tragedy” is to read these tales as essentially *textual* phenomena abstracted from their liturgical and political ramification in the city state.⁶² Against Steiner’s long-held suspicion of “theory”⁶³ and preference “not to work with any formulaic, legislative definition” of tragedy,⁶⁴ there is an overdetermination here. By minimising the dramatic portent of tragedy, he delimits how tragic suffering is capable of representational discourse, how it is shareable and exposible to human and divine response. It is this element of “theodramatic” exposure within ontological ‘distance’ that differentiates Balthasar from Steiner.

I would also like to return to the question of the patrician selectivity in Steiner and Balthasar’s account of tragedy. The question of who may or not be the subject of authentically *tragic* experience is, as we have seen, a live one within both of their work. One of the modern exceptions to this trajectory, which Steiner recognises, is Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*. The reason it counts as tragedy, despite its plebian and atheistic bent, is that its apparent lack of a transcendent horizon acts precisely as a brute hinterland to the play’s narrative. Through brutality and unfeeling, *Woyzeck* is provoked to the act of killing Marie, his lover. For Steiner, the bleak turpitude of the drama enacts a vertigo of “absence” that now substitutes “the sacred canopy”.⁶⁵ This is a universe that is not even God-haunted, for it “transpires in a world of which God, if ever He was, is unaware”. There is here no “intimation of a *deus absconditus*, of the ‘God-abandoned.’” In an atheistic guise, it is a “potent negative theology itself metaphoric of the tragic.” In this “zero-world”, as Steiner puts it, we have a figure who “totters to extinction”,

61 *The Tragic Imagination*, 86.

62 *The Tragic Imagination*, 85.

63 Cf. George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 5–7.

64 “Tragedy, Reconsidered,” 2.

65 “What matters is that this world, consciously drained of moral depth, has something of the same non-negotiable character as the sacred canopy of older societies: the very absence of the sacred is so insistently presented that it becomes a sort of reversed image of the traditional moral universe” (*The Tragic Imagination*, 88).

and “in which his deranged tormentors strut, in which children play in a raucous emptiness”, and in which he is “end-stopped at every point.” The atmosphere of the play is an “aggregate of suffocation made the more hermetic by the macabre superstitions to which its agents are prey”. In this world, “the God-question does not and cannot arise”. Nonetheless, despite all this, he says that the “logic of tragic annihilation, of the blank guilt of existence, is coherent and formidably moving”.⁶⁶

Two things come to mind: firstly, if *Woyzeck* is, principally, capable of a tragic reflexivity, as Steiner contends, then it pushes against tragedy being, at essence, one of ennobling transcendence. It gives pause to a tendency to see the tragic hero as achieving dignity through a sublime reconciliation of freedom and necessity. To quote Terry Eagleton, if “tragedy ennoble suffering, then it edifies only at the cost of the truth, since most real-life suffering is not in fact ennobling”.⁶⁷ But it also qualifies Steiner and Balthasar’s tendency to refuse the freight of tragedy to prosaic characters, because we precisely have here a pathetic figure who nonetheless manifests a tragic pathos. It should be said that Balthasar does address Büchner’s work repeatedly within his *Theodramatik*, and places his vision in the third option of a closed tragic perspective.⁶⁸ Balthasar refers to *Woyzeck* as an example of “social misery and limitation, where no escape is possible”.⁶⁹ He sees *Woyzeck* as an example of modern drama where “the vault of heaven is present” but is “an obscured, distorted, ultimately powerless, annihilated heaven, misinterpreted as man’s demonic antagonist”, in which they have “to cut a path through the impenetrable undergrowth of a hostile existence that is too much for them”.⁷⁰ However, this pushes against claims that *Woyzeck* is not a God-haunted narrative. *Woyzeck*, in the words of Marie, is a man “haunted by everything”.⁷¹ Here, the statement recorded in Caroline Schulz’s diary entry of Büchner death-bed statement is worth remembering: “It’s not that we have too much pain: we have too little, for it is

66 “Tragedy, Reconsidered,” 7–8.

67 *Sweet Violence*, 29.

68 *Theo-Drama I*, 73, 75

69 *Theo-Drama I*, 355.

70 *Theo-Drama I*, 422–423.

71 Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck*, Scene 2. Translation in *Georg Büchner: The Complete Plays*, edited by Michael Patterson (London: Methuen, 1987), 182.

through pain that we go to God”.⁷² Moreover, there are several instances in the narrative where biblical and Christian themes are explicitly mentioned or hinted at.⁷³ I focus on two scenes briefly: in Scene Nineteen, Woyzeck is going through the items in his waistcoat, when he discovers a crucifix:

The cross belongs to my sister, so does the ring. I've got a holy picture somewhere too, a pair of twined hearts – my mother used to keep it in her Bible. There's a motto: Christ, as your heart was red and wounded, so let mine be cleft and sundered. She's no feeling left, my mother, only when the sun shines on h'r hands.

–Doesn't matter.⁷⁴

There are also two apocalyptic allusions in the play. Near the beginning, in Scene Two, Woyzeck alludes to the nightmarish destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:28, and the imagery of Revelation 9:2 where the land is reduced to a smoking pit, like an oven.⁷⁵ This apocalyptic register is carried over into Scene 12 where Woyzeck sees Marie and a drum-major dancing together, setting in motion a jealousy that will end up in murderous denouement.

On and on. On and on and on! ...

Forever! ...

Turn, Turn. Go on, turning, dancing! – Why don't you blow out the sun,

God? – Let everything fall over itself in lewdness.

Flesh, filth, man, woman, human, animal. They all do it in the open day, do it on the back of a hand like flies.

Slut!! – She's hot, hot!⁷⁶

To be sure, there is little redemptive arc within *Woyzeck*, and the turpitude of its anti-hero is hardly diminished by its sweep. But it seems wrong to say that it is not a theologically haunted narrative, that there is no sense of a *deus*

72 Quoted in *Theo-Drama* V, 498.

73 See the notes of the translator John Mackendrick; cf. *The Complete Plays*, 216–224.

74 *Woyzeck*, Scene 19, (p. 206).

75 *Woyzeck*, Scene 2 (p. 181).

76 *Woyzeck*, Scene 12 (p. 201).

absconditus hovering at its edges. Indeed, there is no dignified suffering or reconciliation in this play. Here, there is someone who undergoes a series of humiliations that provoke an unconscionable act, without any narrative repair. Of course, it is a fragmentary play, interrupted by its author's own death. But if we are to take Schulz's testimony as reliable, then it gives something of a context to Büchner's state of mind as he entered his own long night. In the story, there are repeated biblical motifs and allusions. The figure of Jesus appears in the story of the crucifix and the picture of the sacred heart. These Catholic symbols are juxtaposed with an insensate decay of flesh, even as imagery of light retains its modicum of respite. In the second scene, the irruption of misogynist jealousy is linked to an apocalyptic register of God blowing out the sun, possibly in evocation of apocalyptic literature where the sun is darkened in ominous portent (Rev. 6.12; 8.12; 9:2). One could say that the figures of Christ and apocalypse play at its diegetic fringes.

V

In closing, I can only outline something that requires more development, stressing a 'dramatic' tone hinted at throughout. I take to heart Balthasar's underscoring of "distance", the distinction of created and uncreated, as ground of a theodramatic exposure to love. It is a space between presence and absence, identity and difference, the arena of love's manifestation. In this distance, I situate a Christian account of tragedy, an existence *in-between* cross and resurrection, *agony* and *apocalypse*. In doing so, I am drawing upon registers of the *αἰών* and *ἀποκάλυψις*. The *agōn* invokes a scale of overtones, the ordeal of suffering, conflict, the play of *dramatis personae*. Apocalyptic speech, of course, relates to domains of manifestation, revelation, or unveiling—chiefly invoked in the New Testament. The language of 'in-between' is redolent, but I am thinking of *metaxic* space, a middle or lived mixture, an oscillation between extremities. The pole of *agony*, on the one side, intimates how there is no abstraction from the hybridity of situation, the dialectic of pain, the existence of the *broken* middle.⁷⁷ On the other hand, the pole of *apocalypse* gestures to

77 Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

the elsewhere of revelation, unexpected openings of depth-structure, the self-giving of the Trinity.⁷⁸ To live in-between agony and apocalypse is to say there is no standing location above the fray, no pristine existence outside the contiguities of relation, the interplay of identity and othering. Our lives are one of exposure and ontological risk.⁷⁹ This is elemental to the tragic. The *in-between* can indeed be imagined differently, but for my ends, very briefly, I adopt two guiding “myths” as well as a gospel scene for orientation: the story of Jesus in Gethsemane, a piece of Pauline cosmology, and the myth of Holy Saturday.⁸⁰ I will not exegete any of them much. Each would require much longer treatment, but they articulate something of the ambience that I have been speaking about.

Futility and apocalyptic irony: Beginning with the earliest text, Paul articulates in Romans that the sufferings of the present moment are of no worth in light of the coming glory to be revealed (8:18, τὴν μέλλουσαν δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι).⁸¹ Here, Paul envisions creatures as awaiting in eager expectation (ἀποκαραδοκία) for the revelation (τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν) of the sons of God (8:19). In the meantime, creation is subordinated to “pointlessness”

78 Jean-Luc Marion, *Revelation Comes From Elsewhere: A Contribution to a Critical History and a Phenomenal Concept of Revelation*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis and Stephanie Rumpza (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024). By adopting the tenor of apocalyptic, and some categories of Cyril O'Regan, I place myself somewhere between the “pleromatic” accounts of apocalypse, which assert richly speculative accounts of trinitarian theology, and more “metaxic” accounts which are more mediating on this score—though I would probably lean to the former, as O'Regan himself does. On this, see Cyril O'Regan, *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009).

79 “Tragedy arises because we become mindful that there are rupturing others that inescapably disrupt and destroy any sense of ontological self-sufficiency that human beings might feel or claim on behalf of their own being. We are metaphysical beings in the measure that the tragic breaks through, in the measure that we know our being to be one that loses itself, that loses its way. We know that our way of being is unavoidably a way of loss. Being at a loss is a more deeply constitutive dimension to being human than might initially be suspected”; William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy* (New York: SUNY, 1995), 32–33.

80 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 148–188.

81 For a detailed exegesis of the pericope, see Annette Potgieter, *Contested Body: Metaphors of Dominion in Romans 5–8* (Durbanville: AOSIS, 2020), 189–201. The whole passage is, of course, redolent with apocalyptic terminology.

or “futility” (ματαιότητι),⁸² awaiting in hope for a liberation from decay (8:20, φθοράς). In invoking this, I want to enforce such imagery: to wit, a presence of sheer immiseration and wastefulness in the commonweal of beings. That certain lives, in this interregnum and vale of tears, are really subjected to perpetual frustration of ends, that the withdrawal of goods may really be a fixture for some. The instauration of meaning or any ennobling of suffering may really, in some cases, be absent. But this factor does not, *a priori*, exclude their narratives from tragic descriptors. The prodigal desperation and tawdriness of some lives, like Woyzeck, does not exclude them willy-nilly from tragic narration. Certainly, not just any suffering or happenstance should be counted as tragic. That is something contextually discerned—as Reinhold Bernhardt has emphasised.⁸³ But I would not want to predetermine this through elitist hermeneutics. Likewise, I would not want to foreclose in any tragic scenario the possibility of apocalyptic *irony* – here adapting terms of Rowan Williams. He sees tragedy as always existing in a *narrative* context in which suffering is located, so that it acquires *cultural* sense. Suffering is embodied, represented, and communicated between cultural agents. That pain is articulated as an agenda for interpersonal interaction may lead to the ambiguities of engagement. Tragedy opens upon irony, to how continuing narration may alter perceptions. We cannot foreclose in advance the cultural meaning this suffering may acquire, or the way future events may refract the past. All of this militates against “pantragicism” or “pessimism”.⁸⁴ It leaves open certain revelational avenues, the “unprethinkable fact” (*unvordenkliche Tatsache*) to use the jargon of Schelling,⁸⁵ or what Jean-Louis Chretien has called *the unhoped for*.⁸⁶

Sleep and Watchfulness: The apparent linkages between the Pauline text and the story of Gethsemane should not be passed over. In the pericope

82 The intertextual echoes with LXX Ecclesiastes have been noted by commentators; cf. Potgieter, *Contested Body*, 193n.718.

83 Reinhold Bernhardt, “Die Erfahrung des Tragischen als Herausforderung für Theologie. Versuch zur Theodizee.” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 59 (2003): 248–270.

84 *The Tragic Imagination*, 132

85 F.W.J. Schelling, *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung: Band 1* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1992), 33.18 (p. 238).

86 Jean-Louis Chretien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 99–118.

referred to, creation is pictured as groaning and, through the Spirit, as participant in Christ's naming of the Father (Rom. 8.15–16). In the Gospel, Jesus beseeches the one whom he calls "Abba" to remove the cup of suffering. The story of Gethsemane is the story of Christ's own placement in-between, the agony of anticipation: "My soul is deeply grieved, even to death" (Περίλυπός ἐστιν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἕως θανάτου, Mark 14.34). Christ is here abandoned, while his friends sleep and depart. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Repeatedly, Jesus tells them to stay awake and pray. Obviously, this was an important element for the gospel writers in their respective settings – in light of its repetition in the other synoptics. The Markan emphasis on the disciples repeated failure to perceive, their spiritual blindness, is something hinted at in other parts of the gospel (cf. Mark 8:14–21; 22–26). Extrapolating this logic to the present, one could arguably say that this story is not over. Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world, as Pascal says.⁸⁷ The wounds of Christ continue to stretch and expand. Today, Christ continues to be handed over: in word, sacrament, and tradition, but also in betrayal. Our commitments fail repeatedly, and we sleep through Christ's agony. Drawing some connections here, I think that tragedy also concerns something like attention and watchfulness. In the world of Attic tragedy, certain realities become exposed and staged for the *polis*.⁸⁸ Through a narrating and retelling of mythical and heroic tales, in changing inflections, we are being challenged to acquire new levels of sensitivity. Where we locate our dangers might no longer be where our dangers now really lie. On the stage, the conflicts of common life are manifested, teased out, and ramified. Stories are told and retold. Narratives we thought we had a grip on are wrenched from us. Here, watchfulness is enjoined. Senses are routinely dulled, and soporifics abound. Sometimes eyes are seared, and we go blind. There are truths we would rather not know.⁸⁹ Can one live by that dictum of Silouan the Athonite: "Keep your mind in hell, and despair not"? That is a space between agony and apocalypse. It is a sober picture, one often barely endurable, but it is different from a vision of absolute tragedy. Absolute tragedy bids that language should cease and that no amount of insight or attentiveness can alter our doomed lot. Our

87 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), 313.

88 *The Tragic Imagination*, 4–29.

89 *The Tragic Imagination*, 31–55

homelessness and fallenness are irrevocable. But tragedy, I suggest, does not imply such necessity or pessimism: to quote Williams, “we are not simply passive in the face of terror and suffering, because we can *imagine* it, narrate it, make pictures of it that make it an agenda for others and for ourselves”,⁹⁰ because “tragedy in a fuller and more historically nuanced sense refuses this despair of finitude by the mere fact of narration, *following on* from the record of horror and failure”.⁹¹

The Broken Middle of Holy Saturday: Holy Saturday is that “duration” between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the mythological *descensus*, Christ’s identification with the way of all flesh. It is, as Balthasar put it, “the solidarity of the Crucified with all the human dead”⁹² Besides a couple of hints and gestures at the fringes of scripture, not much is said about this dark passage. The assumption appears to have been that if there is an ascension of divine humanity into the heavens, then there is also a countermovement of Christ into the depths, the realm of Sheol. What is not assumed is not healed. Holy Saturday is where hope is extinguished, where God lies dead. Here Christ dwells in tenebrous meridian, enduring the night of the world. The expectations of the disciples have, seemingly, come to nought, and the hopes of Israel have been excruciated. Here we approach that zero-point of meaning, “gathering all blackness to it”, to echo George Steiner.⁹³ The habitation of Holy Saturday, Christ’s solidarity with the dead, is something, however, that we are, surprisingly encouraged to enter as well. In Gregory Nazianzen’s Oration 45 (*On the Holy Pascha*), he invites the audience to imagine that “if [Christ] descends into Hades, go down with him,” and thereby “Know also the mysteries of Christ”.⁹⁴ In some sense for Nazianzen, we can enter Christ’s descent into “hell”, into the broken middle of Holy Saturday. I think the pertinent mystery here is the sacrament of baptism, the entwining of death and birth, a death by which death is reconfigured. An interlacing of cross and resurrection

90 *The Tragic Imagination*, 1–2.

91 *The Tragic Imagination*, 132.

92 *Mysterium Paschale*, 160.

93 Steiner, *A Note on Absolute Tragedy*, 148.

94 Gregory Nazianzen, Oratio 45.24. Translation in *St Gregory of Nazianzus: Festal Orations*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008).: “Ἄν εἰς ἄδου κατή, συγκάτελθε. Γινώθι καὶ τὰ ἐκεῖσε τοῦ Χριστοῦ μυστήρια” (PG 657A.14)

ensigns Christian existence, that *chiasmus* – to adapt a metaphor from Merleau-Ponty⁹⁵ – that marks our long Holy Saturday. But Christ is this midpoint, this crossing-over, in which we see the crucifix in light of resurrection. Balthasar even states in *Mysterium Paschale*, that it is through Christ's resurrection that hell is retroactively produced. We only sense the deprivation and bleakness of “damnation” from a vantage of redemption.⁹⁶ It is in a manifestation of transcendent value that the scope of tragic loss is revealed, since it is only with this hinterland that we have “the awareness of absolute violation of being”, to quote Walter Stein.⁹⁷ Absolute tragedy, by contrast, limits the scope of tragic perception. It pictures a world leeched of any value that is non-negotiable, in which all values are conflictual. I would contend, however, that it is in light of the apocalypse of *the good* that we perceive the depths of agony, the ontological state of fallenness. It is through the transvaluation of Easter that we know the bleak silence of Holy Saturday.

Steiner himself hints at something like this: in his autobiographical text *Errata*, he expresses a penchant for original sin, that there is a real sense in which we are fallen beings. But it seems, for Steiner, that it is only through an inkling of the ideal of love that we perceive a sense of fallenness.⁹⁸ Steiner thus echoes Balthasar—though in a decidedly less ‘orthodox’ register. However, I believe there is something of this retroactive logic is present in the New Testament as well, though this would require more space to spell out. As a gesture towards this, I will close with a Johannine-inspired thought: it is only those who dwell in love who know that they have passed over death (1 John 3.14). It is in “the spectral light of love”,⁹⁹ to adopt a phrasing of Marion, that we can *perceive* a depth of tragic loss. Those who dwell in death do not *see* this fallenness. Such persistent misrecognition is

95 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–155.

96 “Hell is a *product* of the Redemption, a product which henceforth must be ‘contemplated’ in its own ‘for itself by the Redeemer, so as to become, in its state of sheer reprobation that which exists ‘for him’: that over which, in his Resurrection, he receives the power and the keys” (*Mysterium Paschale*, 174).

97 Walter Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 224.

98 *Errata*, 170–190.

99 *Revelation Comes from Elsewhere*, 119.

indeed tragic. But it is not a hopeless lot, even for those who fail to see it. And for those who remain among the dead, we nonetheless remember the One who entered the sleep of the damned, that Blessed Sabbath when he himself rested in death: a dead God among the dead. *Let all mortal flesh keep silence.*

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