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The Tragic Novel

Historical Trauma and the Novelistic Form

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Introduction

"We come to tragedy by many roads," says Raymond Williams, "[i]t is an immediate experience, a body of literature, a conflict of theory, an academic problem" (33). Any study on tragedy cannot but open along this line, that is, with the recognition that the paths that lead to the modern dimension of this genre are numerous and varied, shaped and re-shaped by a long tradition of theatrical practice, literary analysis and philosophical speculation. However, in the attempt to propose a theorization of the tragic novel, this thesis finds its starting point in asking diametrically opposite questions: what roads *depart* from tragedy? And, in particular, how far can these roads extend *beyond* the concreteness of tragedy itself? The response to these inquiries unfolds against the backdrop of a growing interest in exploring the possibilities of tragedy outside the theatrical dimension, specifically of what "intangible" forms it can take and what meanings they can convey away from the stage. Interestingly, the investigation of those forms leads further than expected, and in case of the present analysis, even further than what is considered possible: to the domain of the novel. In fact, tragedy and the novelistic form are often considered incompatible, not to mention profoundly antithetical as indicated by the pervasive dichotomy death-life which habitually encloses them. Consequently, for this obstacle to be overcome and for the tragic novel to find its legitimacy, something must have happened "along the way." That something is the birth of the *tragic*. It is from this crucial event that the project of this thesis takes shape, undertaken with the ultimate goal of attributing the passage from tragedy to the tragic, and ultimately to the tragic novel to one specific road: the one that passes through German Idealism. As the first chapter of this thesis will delineate, the modern philosophical engagement with tragedy clarifies how this genre does not result from a perfect

hybridization of the novel with the antithetical generic domain of tragedy but with the tragic as a mode of thought that is abstracted from it at a specific temporal juncture and that acts as a force of historical problematization. In fact, "[s]ince the time of the French Revolution, the idea of tragedy can be seen as in different ways a response to a culture in conscious change and movement. The action of tragedy and the action of history have been consciously connected, and in the connection have been seen in new ways" (Williams, "Hegel's Conception" 88). Or better still, the connection between tragedy and history in the context of German modernity has created not only a new way of seeing them but also an altogether new instrument capable of problematizing, through a distillation of the essential characteristics of tragedy, different historical constellations. All of them, however, rooted in one distinct and unique characteristic: the perception of history as inherently traumatic, as a generator of unsolvable conflicts and irreconcilable contradictions which are recognized as increasingly impossible to assimilate. Indeed, theorizing the tragic novel and attempting to trace its origins means placing it, first of all, in the context of a shift in the perception of history which takes place specifically in modernity. In particular, modernity understood as a fractured, broken space, whose fragments begin to be meticulously gathered and processed by the form of the tragic novel starting from the second half of the 19th century. Crucially, however, the ultimate aim of this act of this "aesthetic" processing is not that of attempting to resolve the contradictions but that of exacerbating them, showing them in their utter irreparability. As Lambropoulos suggests, "[s]ince the French Revolution made palpable the ethical tensions of modern freedom, the tragic has come to represent the difficulties of resolution" (8). This is where another key word for the definition of the "autonomous" nature of the tragic and for the theorization of its presence in the novel comes into play: dialectics. Yet, to think of the space of the tragic novel as dialectical requires an important clarification: indeed, dialectics must be understood not so much in Hegelian terms but rather in Adornoian terms, as a negative process which does not project

itself towards the moment of resolution but rather highlights the moment of maximum laceration. The most suitable image to think about this type of dialectics is indeed that of a fracture, of a wound that cannot heal. In this sense, and especially in association with Adorno, the tragic novel becomes the symbolic form of a fractured perception of history whose pieces it collects and processes not with a synthetic intent but with a negative, open one. The result of this is an unprecedented challenge to the understanding of literary forms as "problem solving mechanism[s]" (Moretti, qtd. in Ercolino, *Novel-Essay* XVI) for the tragic novel does not trigger any kind of resolution but, quite contrarily, creates a negative space in which the very possibility of a solution is examined and challenged. This further demonstrates that the hybridization of the tragic with the novel is not simply a form of "borrowing" from tragedy but subordinated to the symbolic function of the genre, consisting in the need to problematize on an aesthetic level the irresolvable conflicts that are perceived on a macro historical plane. Also, the fact that the tragic is isolated form tragedy somehow "frees" it from the constraints of the dramatic form, especially from its supposed high contents and, more importantly, from considering the tragic hero a necessarily noble person. Just like, approximately from the turn of the 19th century, everyone earns "a right to the Novel" (Mazzoni 228), there is no limit to the right to the tragic either. The novels discussed in this thesis, and especially the range of characters that they contain, will demonstrate this perfectly. Also, they point out how the tragic mode is capable of accompanying the changes that the novel undergoes starting from the last decades of the 19th century, through the avant-gardes of the 20th century, even up until the new millennium. What this impressive longevity reveals is that the tragic remains a relevant tool to process historical contradictions that continue to be perceived as irresolvable, profoundly traumatic and impossible to assimilate. In particular, I will begin by briefly discussing the first examples of tragic novels in the second half of the 19th century, placing a focus especially on Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and Dostoevsky's *The*

Brothers Karamazov (1880). Then, starting from the second chapter, the vision will expand beyond Europe and Russia to include North America, in an attempt to show that the tragic novel is capable of giving voice to the contradictions triggered by modernity even in different national contexts.

The second chapter, in particular, will examine William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) as bearing the tragic signs of a contradiction already inherent in the reality of the Frontier, and thus in the mythic, quintessentially *modern*, birth of the United States: the one between a virtually limitless promise of freedom and the rise of the slave trade. More specifically, central to the definition of *The Sound and the Fury* as a tragic novel is Faulkner's unique perspective on the South and the declining planter elite, of which the Compson family serves as a fatal example. Trapped in an idea of an aristocratic and glorious past which no longer exists, they nevertheless cling to it, incapable of productively substituting with anything else and thus registering the utter impossibility of tragic characters to undergo any kind of development or movement forward. In a dramatic reversal of the Frontier myth, Quentin, in particular, proves how the past is not a constant source of opportunity but rather a form of entrapment that can be annulled only in the "nothingness" of suicide. This chapter will focus specifically on his section also for another important reason: indeed, it shows how the tragic mode interacts with the modernist aesthetic and symbolically broadens its space of action, or rather deepens the scope of its problematization, as historical contradictions are now felt internally and reflected in the very workings of a fractured conscience. Indeed, the tragic in this novel problematizes the decline of the South and its succumbing to a world of changing values, but it does so through the layers of Quentin's troubled consciousness as it hovers between the present and an overbearing past, between his utter loneliness and the incestuous love for his sister, between his deadly familial inheritance and his unwavering allegiance to it. Although Quentin's monologue is quite different from that of his brothers, Benjy and Jason, all three

eventually succumb to the tragic fate that is inherent in their very name and in their loyalty to a familial and national past that no longer exists. Not even the promise of redemption offered by Dilsey, the black family cook, can include the Compsons since nothing can change for them in their spiral towards ruin. Their story is, ultimately, one of redemption denied, doomed to remain agonizingly out of reach.

The third chapter will remain within the context of the United States but will perform a significant jump forward with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). In particular, the discussion of this novel settles a dispute between the supposed incompatibility of the tragic with the spirit of postmodernism. As a matter of fact, while the tragic is generally associated with seriousness and profundity, postmodernism is praised for its light and playful nature, for its great emphasis on the present and the rejection of metanarratives. However, postmodernism must be rethought as a moment which intensifies rather than rejects modernity's concerns and that, most importantly, does not lose all contacts with history. Proof of this is certainly Morrison's novel, which centers precisely on Sethe's conflictual relationship with the past while it tragically problematizes the contradictions of slavery and specifically the condition of motherhood within it. Indeed, this novel stages a tragic clash between the claim of the slave master and the claim of the mother, which culminates with Sethe's decision to commit infanticide. This action in turn creates other ruptures: firstly, between Sethe and her daughter, symbolically between the claim of the living and the claim of the dead as the haunting of Beloved comes to metaphorically represent all the victims of the Middle Passage; secondly, between Sethe and the community which reads her action as excessively proud and lacking any kind of remorse. Indeed, even as she slowly succumbs to Beloved's devouring presence, Sethe never repents and never admits that she would have acted differently. For her, infanticide was "simply" an act of love and protection which ensured, even though in death, her daughter's freedom from slavery. Even as the novel comes to a close through a symbolic reenactment of infanticide, and Beloved is

exorcised with the help of the community, resolution nevertheless remains dubious and tentative. It is precisely in this tentativeness that the tragic nature of this novel reveals itself: Sethe is now projected towards a future, towards a moment of synthesis that is proposed but not achieved since the wound left by slavery and the subsequent decision to commit infanticide will remain open, never fully healed.

Finally, the fourth chapter will focus on Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006) and therefore cross the threshold of yet another century. However, the entrance in this new dimension paradoxically occurs by looking back at one of the most traumatic historical events of the 20th century, the Second World War and the Nazi genocide against the Jews. Still, and one might say quite shockingly, at the center of this "return" there is not a victim but a perpetrator, Max Aue, a former SS officer who recounts, in a 1000-page memoir, his virtually omnipresent experience in the war and in the machinery of extermination. What renders his memoir particularly compelling, however, is the interweaving of his personal story as an incestuous brother and matricidal son with the collective history of the Holocaust through a mythical framework that refers especially to the figure of Orestes. In this sense, the myth does not simply provide key plot elements but serves as a tool of tragic problematization. In fact, the novel embraces the myth but challenges it at the same time, exploring themes of guilt, responsibility and allegiance, and ultimately questioning the very validity of Orestes' divine acquittal in the case of a Holocaust perpetrator. Yet, talking about the references to the *Oresteia* does not mean fully addressing the tragic nature of this novel, which extends to Aue's mode of testimony as increasingly subject to a tragic laceration between rational consensus and bodily dissensus. A laceration, however, that results not only in the description of nervous and extreme bodily functions but also in a progressively more extreme contact with the victim, who is capable of inflicting, reversing the "normal" direction of violence, a traumatic experience on the perpetrator. Paralyzed by this trauma, Aue begins to lose control of his body and even of

his hold on reality, which becomes gradually more contaminated by fantastic and absurd elements. The culmination of his loss of control is the act of matricide, which is covered up by a problematic memory whole, but also his pervasive, delirious fantasy of incest with his twin sister, a last desperate attempt to regain unity in a Germany that is about to fall. However, even though able to escape the Nuremberg trials and to forge a new identity for himself after the war, no form of reconciliation awaits Aue. Unlike the Orestes of the myth, for him there will only be an eternal persecution and a form of laceration that can never be made whole again.

All these authors, belonging to a rather remarkable temporal horizon, prove that the "road" of the tragic novel reaches quite far and links extremely significant products with profoundly traumatic historical constellations: from the problematic petty bourgeois condition in France, the divide between the countryside and the city in an increasingly modernized England, to the earthquake of Russian values in the second half of the 19th century; from the collapse of the South and the planter elite after the defeat in the American Civil War, to Sethe's tragic experience as a slave and mother, up to the severe trauma of Nazism and genocide in the 20th century. Considering the richness and remarkable diversity of this landscape, a few key question will serve as my guide as I begin to advance a theorization of the tragic novel, "What can account for this impressive trajectory? What exactly is the import of the term [tragic] that makes it deeply meaningful to so many directions of feeling and inquiry?" (Lambropoulos 8). The following chapters try to construct a response that strives to unravel this complexity by inscribing it in a unitary theoretical framework that seals the interaction of the tragic, history and the novelistic form.

Chapter 1

The Tragic Novel: A Theoretical Overview

1.1 The Death of Tragedy, the Rise of the (Tragic) Novel

Attempting to trace the history and theory a form like the *tragic novel*, and especially trying to arrive at a fairly unequivocal definition of its features, immediately requires liberating it from an inherent terminological ambiguity. The temptation to think that this genre is a fusion of *novel* and *tragedy* is in fact alluring but it is also the first one that must be overcome if we are to understand how this form works, what it does and why. Therefore, the first necessary step to advance a theorization of the tragic novel is to dispel the towering shadows cast by the two words that define it and especially the most "troublesome" one: *tragic*. While its definition might seem fairly straightforward, and often easily misunderstood, its nature actually turns out to be more problematic and intricate, immediately posing challenging questions such as: Does *tragic* refer to tragedy as a dramatic form or to something else? If so, what distinguishes *tragedy* from the *tragic*? And obviously, how and why should it be applied to the novel, whose generic domain is supposedly so distant from that of tragedy? These are only a few of the many lines of inquiry gravitating around this form, which has sparked a considerable amount of fascination and scholarly interest[1] and, yet, remains rather loosely defined. Indeed, as George Steiner observes, "'[t]ragedy' in reference to western literature is (...) an elusive branch of tangled ramifications" ("Tragedy Reconsidered" 1) and this complexity is the reason why the tragic

[1] To mention only a few contributions, listed in chronological order: Oates, *The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic Forms in Literature* (1972); Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of Tragic* (2003); K.M. Newton, *Modern Literature and the Tragic* (2008); McPherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (2010); Lempert, *Tragedy and the Modernist Novel* (2021).

novel has not been systematically un-tangled and lacks a clearly defined specificity. Actually, much of the existing criticism regarding the possible forms that the tragic novel takes feeds the ambiguity surrounding the distinction between *tragedy* and *tragic*, sometimes even considering the possibility that tragic novels are really tragedies written by modern tragedians[2]. While it remains necessary to investigate the relationship between the tragic and actual tragedies in the modern context, it can be asserted that the tragic novel is a genre whose legitimacy goes beyond just a form of reusing and borrowing. Yet, arriving at an understanding of the tragic novel would be considerably less problematic if the only challenge posed by this form was the terminological ambiguity surrounding the word *tragic*. Actually, this form must also emerge from a long, well-established tradition of critical skepticism. Indeed, when literary theory has turned its gaze to tragedy and the novel in an attempt to frame them within a single conceptual landscape, the fatalistic narrative that emerged generally revolved around the quasi simultaneity of the decline, or even death, of tragedy with the rise of the modern novel. What that gaze seemed to reveal was in fact that the two forms are mutually exclusive and the reason largely lies in the supposedly antithetical unfolding of their respective generic histories and critical traditions. Franco Moretti, in particular, has greatly stressed the fact that the two theories of tragedy and the novel inhabit completely different worlds ("Two Theories" 19) and that, "[a]s two extreme cases, (...) [they] help us delimit opposite dimensions of the aesthetic realm" ("Two Theories" 22). However, this statement raises a fundamental question of legitimacy for the new form: in fact, where can the tragic novel possibly stand in this account, especially if tragedy and the novel continue to be considered two diametrically *opposite*, unbridgeable, generic traditions? Indeed, if we were to follow the direction indicated by Moretti's argument, the form of the

[2] In *Tragedy and the Modernist Novel*, Manya Lempert gives an account of Virginia Woolf, Thomas Hardy, Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett as real writers of tragedies which "turned to the Greeks to rebel against ossified, lethal thought in their own time. Tragedy was, for them, a diagnostic tool. With it, they traced present-day sufferings to their political and existential sources" (1). Regarding Hardy, she defines *Tess d'Ubervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* as his "final two *tragedies*" (4).

tragic novel would encounter another serious obstacle, namely, George Steiner's well known, and quite fatal, diagnosis: tragedy is dead. As a matter of fact, he frames the history of tragedy and its legacy in the modern world as a progressive, but inevitable, distancing from "the utter uniqueness of 'high tragedy' as it was performed in fifth-century Athens" (*Foreword* X). The reason for this distancing is Steiner's extremely strict definition of tragedy as a "dramatic representation or, more precisely, the dramatic testing of a view of reality in which man is taken to be an unwelcome guest in the world" (XI) and which exists only "where substantive truth is assigned to the Sophoclean statement that 'it is best never to have been born'" (XI). This image of man as unwanted in life, according to Steiner's analysis, has arguably been "almost unendurable to human reason and sensibility. Hence the very few cases in which it has been rigorously professed" (XII). Crucial to his argument is especially the Romantic period, whose vision of life becomes essentially non-tragic because for the first time "[t]he misery and injustice of man's fate were not [considered to be] caused by a primal fall from grace. They were not the consequence of some tragic, immutable flaw in human nature. They arose from the absurdities and archaic inequalities built into the social fabric by generations of tyrants and exploiters" (*The Death of Tragedy* 125). Plunged into the stream of history and in a completely changed social world, the modern man is therefore the starting point of a permanent "evasion of tragedy" (*The Death of Tragedy* 135) which carries on even in the contemporary world. Steiner's vision therefore complements Moretti's argument that tragedy and the novel are utterly separate aesthetic realms and that they exchange their roles, although never meeting, at the threshold of modernity. In fact, Steiner contends that during the Romantic period "[o]ther literary forms were reaching an audience much greater than that drawn to the theatre. The history of the decline of serious drama is, in part, that of the rise of the novel" (*The Death of Tragedy* 118). Although the narrative that combines the death of tragedy with the rise of the novel appears rather simplistic, it would be wrong to deny this vision any kind of validity.

Indeed, if we consider, like Moretti has done, tragedy and the novel in their respective generic histories and critical approaches, it is undeniable that an insurmountable abyss separates them. Tragedy, with its root in the Athenian past, is indeed a form that "has been exceptionally successful at resisting historical change" ("Two Theories" 19) and that "long dominated the literary field (...) but without ever changing the field itself: majestically towering above all other forms, it had left them free to pursue their less exalted aims" ("Two Theories" 19). On the contrary, the novel figures as the bearer of constant change, and as a form that, following Bakhtin's influential analysis, works in a new space "of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness" (11). If the perspective from which we look at tragedy and the novel remains dictated by these terms, the ground on which the tragic novel stands cannot but grow increasingly thinner. However, the fatalistic narrative that combines tragedy and the novel would assume an entirely new outlook if they were considered not as immutable and therefore condemned to be mutually exclusive, but as two forms that can meet, and have indeed done so, thanks to the intermediation of a third, crucial, discipline: philosophy. It is exactly in the interplay between different disciplines that we can find an enriching complexity which was denied by the belief that tragedy and the novel are utterly incompatible within the literary and theoretical realm. In particular, the key to tragedy's potential for hybridization finds its source in its *modern* engagement with philosophy. As Steiner points out, it is true that tragedy is a form that is characterized from the very start by a "perennial engagement" ("Tragedy Reconsidered" 4) with philosophical discourse, "an engagement more persistent and searching than that with any other aesthetic phenomenology" (4). Even Franco Moretti argues that "[b]eginning with Plato and Aristotle (...) philosophers have dominated the theory of tragedy" ("Two Theories" 16) and the root of this long-lasting "alliance" is, as Lukács puts it, tragedy's attempt to answer "the question of life and essence" (36). However, the engagement of tragedy with philosophy takes a new, fundamental, turn starting from German

Idealism, when philosophers like Schelling and Hegel started to hegemonize the theory of tragedy and "[took it] to be the ideal terrain for general issues like (…) the clash between liberty and the course of the world (…), [or] the struggle between the imperatives of the State and the bonds of the family (…). Under the weight of these questions, the analysis of a specific literary form that was the object of the *Poetics* was replaced by a philosophy of 'the tragic' as a self-standing entity" (Moretti, "Two Theories" 16). Consequently, what Steiner had defined as an "evasion of tragedy" (*The Death of Tragedy* 135) in the 19th century is actually a push towards a confrontation with the tragic as an idea, a tool to interpret various facets of the human experience. In this respect, any discussion on the tragic must confront one of the most important figures in the theorization of this "tragic turn" in philosophy, Peter Szondi, who famously declared: "Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Shelling there has been a philosophy of the tragic" (1). If on the one hand Aristotle focused on the rules and effects of tragedy with an exclusively empirical purpose, that is, he considered it as a peculiarity of the stage, on the other, the analysis of the modern age studies tragedy as a peculiarity of philosophy and as an element which extends its influence on the interpretation of life as a whole and capable of answering the questions of the present time (Szondi 1). This transformation in the discourse on tragedy is crucial because it reshapes our understanding of this form from a practiced literary genre into a more broadly defined "mode" (Szondi 56). Consequently, philosophy makes the nature of the tragic more abstract and universal, so that it cannot, starting from the modern dimension, correspond to a specific genre (Gentili and Garelli 130). This is why the passage of tragedy through philosophy is essential: it isolates the *tragic*, whose nature, however abstract and problematic, becomes versatile enough to overcome the incompatibility with the form of the novel. In fact, thanks to the new perspectives offered by philosophers, the 19th century "saw profound changes in the possibilities and the experience of the tragic" (Bényei 1), and, it might be argued, it is only through this process of "autonomization" (Lambropoulos 145) that the

tragic novel becomes one of those possibilities. Conversely, Franco Moretti asserts that "the 'tragic' (...) does not exist as a possible situation in human history, whether real or imaginary. Only *tragedy* exists - that is, a particular form of representing that history" (*Signs for Wonders* 55). However, stating that only tragedy exists once again ignores this genre's potential to transcend its own limits through the intervention of philosophy and to come in contact with another genre, the novel. A contact that, however, is the product of the *tragic* as a mode of thought definable on the basis of specific characteristics of the genre of tragedy but which is totally different from a perfect hybridization with tragedy. Looking back at the questions that opened this chapter, it therefore appears clear that the word *tragic* refers to something tied but simultaneously separated from the dramatic form itself, even though critics have had a prolonged debate about its nature as an entirely abstract, independent, concept. Also, the engagement with philosophy, despite being crucial, creates a long-lasting controversy regarding the precise definition of the tragic and especially its nature as a dialectical, conciliatory, concept. The rest of this chapter will attempt to give an overview of the breadth of these issues in order to arrive at an understanding of the tragic which might clarify and explain its role within the sphere the novel. This word also entails a particular meaning and refers to the huge transformations that the novel undergoes in the 19th century, when, as Guido Mazzoni points out in his *Theory of the Novel*, it establishes itself as the most appropriate way to talk about the modern world and the condition of man within it (226). Therefore, the *tragic novel*, combining the powerful meanings of the words that define it, is a form that has a significant, definitely not negligible, historical placement which will become integral in defining its nature as well as its features. In particular, that historical placement can be enclosed in one word that will also need clarification: modernity. What does it actually entail and how does it shape the emergence of the tragic novel? The rest of this chapter will focus on all the ingredients needed to answer these questions: the problematic definition of the tragic, its debated nature as a dialectical concept,

and finally in what form does this mode come to enter and revolutionize, with long-term effects, the "rising" genre of the novel. As a result, the simplistic narrative revolving around the death of tragedy and the rise of the novel will turn into an altogether new, more complex, and more interesting conceptualization: the (supposed) death of tragedy as the Greeks knew it, the birth of the tragic and the rise of the tragic novel.

1.2 The Flight of Icarus: Problematizing the Definition of the Tragic

As Szondi points out in his *Essay*, it is the Idealist philosophers that have created and permanently shaped the philosophy of the tragic and that is why they remain, even today, a necessary reference point for all discussions on this topic. However, it appears quite problematic to understand what the tragic actually is and what its function might be beyond the particularity of each philosophical inquiry. In fact, we only know how each philosopher envisions it, often in a rather mutable and unsystematic manner, and that is why it seems particularly difficult to focus on the implications and consequences of employing such a concept in a potentially larger framework. Also, among critics there appears to be no agreement whether the tragic actually exists as an independent and applicable concept which paradoxically detaches itself from its primary source or whether it actually does not exist as a self-standing entity and what we are dealing with is "simply" a long-lasting fascination of philosophy with tragedy as a dramatic form. For example, Julian Young, in *The Philosophy of Tragedy from Plato to Žižek* (2013), focuses on philosophers' fascination with tragedy as a genre which allows them to investigate, among other things, the goal of tragic drama, its effects, its ambiguous aesthetic value and its supposed high vocation. His opening statement is that "[t]ragedy has always fascinated philosophers" (1) and so what he attempts to do is "provide an account of what, over the past two and a half millennia, they have had to say about it" (1). Therefore, the

point is to offer an overview of the philosophy of *tragedy* from antiquity to the present and in this framework the tragic only surfaces as "the tragic effect" (83), that is, the capacity of tragedy to leave the spectator feeling healed and cleansed (83). In fact, according to Young, what has really interested philosophers across time is the possibility of art, and in particular high tragedy as its highest configuration, to "succeed in establishing the reality of freedom" (75). This line of argument entails that art, through aesthetic intuition, "will *show* what philosophy cannot *say*," which is that "freedom can survive the very worst that necessity, causal determinism, can throw at it" (75).

Peter Szondi, as a representative of the opposite line of criticism, actually theorizes the divorce between tragedy as a form subject to a *poetics,* and the tragic as a primary concern of *philosophy* (1). In his *Essay*, he begins by stating that "[t]he philosophy of the tragic rises like an island above Aristotle's powerful and monumental sphere of influence" (1) and becomes something altogether different from an empirical exploration of tragic poetry. However, his brief overview of twelve philosophers spanning from 1795 up to 1915, besides showing the more or less central role of the concept of the tragic in their systems of thought, seriously problematizes the definition of the tragic itself. As a matter of fact, Szondi states that,

> The history of the philosophy of the tragic is itself not free from the tragic. It resembles the flight of Icarus. The closer thought comes to the general concept, the less that the substantial, the source of thought's uplift, adheres to it. Reaching the height of insight into the structure of the tragic, thought collapses, powerless. (...) It therefore appears that philosophy cannot grasp the tragic - or that there is no such thing as *the* tragic (49).

This passage shows how the tragic is a concept that is hardly graspable and whose very existence appears questionable, if not even impossible. According to Szondi, Schelling has initiated the philosophy of the tragic and, yet, that very philosophy seems paradoxically unable to comprehend it in its essential nature. However, Szondi does not stop at this seeming

impossibility and still attempts to isolate, starting from his account of different philosophers, a unified and coherent meaning for the tragic. What he concludes is that there might be no such thing as *the* tragic as an unequivocally defined essence, but rather as a "mode, a particular manner of destruction that is threatening or already completed: the dialectical manner. There is only *one* tragic downfall: the one that results from the unity of opposites, from the sudden change into one's opposite, from self-division" (56). Therefore, in its most primal formulation, the tragic is a process that involves a confrontation between opposite sides which envisions, in the end, a form of reconciliation. Still, according to Szondi, the meaning of the tragic "must be determined always anew in the analysis of individual tragedies, while the definitions of the tragic since Schelling [have always been] guided by the particular meaning of the philosopher, by his metaphysical design" (56). What appears clear from Szondi's account is therefore that there is not really a philosophy of the tragic but rather *philosophies* of the tragic, different interpretations of the concept, which he has condensed "in view of the possibility of analyzing tragedies with their help" (3). As a result, Szondi's investigation has a much more concrete purpose, one of interpretation, because if we want the concept of the tragic to "[rise] out of the concrete situation of philosophical problems (...), it must sink down into the most concrete elements of tragedies if it is to be saved" (57). From this objective we can detect how there still is a complex interplay between tragedies and the tragic: if the tragic is something "essential" that rises above the concreteness of the form, it is also something that cannot endure as pure abstraction and must rather sink back into concrete tragedies in order to be "saved." As a result, the tragic becomes an interpretative tool which helps to recognize the dialectical conception on which tragedies themselves are built.

The idea that the tragic might not really function as a self-standing philosophical idea partly connects Szondi to another critic, Joshua Billings, who believes that "[t]he significance of idealist thought on tragedy is not (...) that it establishes "the tragic" as a philosophical concern

for an important (though limited) strand of German philosophy, but that (...) it establishes a possibility for Greek tragedy's meaning that did not exist before, which informs philosophical, literary, and historical discussions to this day" (8). His analysis finds in German Idealism not the birth of the tragic but a general rethinking about tragedy's meaning triggered by deeply grounded historical reasons. He argues that "concepts of the tragic around 1800 are fundamentally conditioned by reflections on history, and particularly by a questioning of the place of ancient literature in modernity" (4). That is why he critiques Szondi, pointing out that "the 'philosophy of the tragic' inaugurated by Schelling describes only one of many consequences of the broader shift in the understanding of tragedy at this moment" (8). By constructing a narrative around the absolute break of the philosophy of the tragic with what came before, Szondi "substantially misrepresents the causes of this shift and its continuity with earlier thought" (8). However, even Billings greatly emphasizes how German Idealism represented a hitherto unprecedented opportunity to explore the role of Greek tragedy, which "came to seem a way beyond the intellectual and artistic dilemmas of the time" (105). In particular, tragedy figured as a way to put the present in conversation with the past and, more importantly, as a way to interrogate the status of modern art. As a matter of fact, Billings states that "the challenge for modern artworks and thought on art [was] to incorporate elements of ancient practice, and to conceive of a possible union of what appear to be opposed principles" (105). In this context, the process of thinking about tragedy in the modern world becomes itself dialectical: it involves a mode of opposing antiquity and modernity in an attempt to reconcile their highest artistic impulses. In carrying out this attempt, "tragedy[,] in particular, appears to offer some kind of solution, a way of finding meaning in the apparent chaos of history" (132). This statement proves how Szondi and Billings ultimately become aligned in their belief that the discourse on tragedy, passing through Idealism, creates the possibility of new meanings, both historical and philosophical. Understood in this way, German modernity is therefore a

space of substantial rethinking and "tragedy (...) played a leading role in the project of understanding [it]" (Billings and Leonard 2).

However, what appears clear from Szondi's and Billings' critical contributions is also that "wasting" energy to define the tragic condemns anyone who comes close to an essential definition of the concept to suffer the same fate as Icarus. The ambition to arrive at a univocal definition, in fact, can only be met with an inherent difficulty, if not impossibility, as the instruments used melt like wax in the sun. Therefore, one essential conclusion has to be drawn from their analyses: the focus should not really be placed on what the tragic *is*, but rather on what is *does*. Indeed, Szondi repeatedly stressed that this concept cannot endure as pure abstraction and that it must sink back in the concreteness of the form if it is to be saved. Billings likewise argued that tragedy functions as a *tool* which allows Idealist philosophers to put the present in conversation with the past and to find "meaning in the apparent chaos of history" (132), particularly its modern dimension, when historical progression comes to be perceived as a problem requiring some kind of "solution." It is from the intersection of these two views that the tragic begins to acquire more transparent contours and a clearly marked role: that of *problematizing history*. Yet, what particular meanings does the tragic express in relation to that history? In order to answer this question, the following sections will take a step back and return to the historical and philosophical foundations of its birth. As Leonard points out, "it is only in modernity that tragedy becomes connected to life in [a] specific way, and it is in nineteenth-century Germany, in particular, that the question of tragedy becomes linked to the self-definition of modernity (3). In this respect, Breckman and Gordon define German Idealism as "the thought of modernity" (17) and even Lambropoulos points out how "[t]he tragic is abstracted from drama and its circumstances for the first time at a fascinating moment in history when moral, political and artistic demands converge in the German confrontation with modernity" (8). While the importance of German Idealism and modernity needs to be explicitly

acknowledged, it is equally important to consider what form does the "abstraction" of the tragic actually take and in response to what specific characteristics of the modern landscape. These questions are essential because they narrow the focus on another central feature of the tragic in its connection with history: dialectics. Lambropoulos points out that "[a]s first established by Idealism, the tragic signifies constitutive self-division" (11), that is, the split of a unity which will grant its conflicting elements a higher status. Indeed, it is starting from German Idealism that dialectics will remain a fundamental element for the understanding of the tragic in its "autonomous" nature. Actually, the tragic's birth at the core of German modernity often makes it equivalent not only to dialectics but to a largely *positive* form of this process which results from a widespread faith in a steady historical progression and a "radical openness in the future" (Billings and Leonard 2). The tragic therefore becomes a tool to investigate that openness but does the tragic novel really incorporate this conceptualization? This is where a symbolic connection can be drawn from Hegel, as the most exemplary representative of German Idealism, to another fundamental thinker, Theodor Adorno: if dialectics remains essential for thinking about the tragic and its function, its role in the novel is considerably closer to the Adornoian formulation than to the Hegelian one. Justifying this reversal into the "negative" demands a rethinking not only of dialectics but of modernity itself as a landscape that is not unitary but broken, fractured, and whose pieces will be collected and examined precisely by the tragic novel itself.

1.3 Defining the Tragic and the Contours of Modernity from Hegel to Adorno

1.3.1 A Triumphant Modernity: Rational Change and Historicist Thought

As has been repeatedly emphasized, giving an account of the birth of the concept of the tragic means placing it against a "specific" historical moment: modernity. Yet, it should be

noted that a term such as "modernity" is as semantically charged as it is empty and should not be used as if it was self-explanatory. That is why, as Osterhammel notes, attempting to determine its general outlook must always "pose priorities" (904); priorities whose aim is that of tracing the contours of a Weltanschauung if not in an objective, scientific fashion, at least as a site of *production* of meanings which then come alive in literary forms. German Idealism crucially discloses one of those priorities: in broad terms, understanding the 19th century as "an age of increased self-reflection (…) [where] grandiose attempts [are] made to grasp the whole of the contemporary world and to place it within the historical *longue durée*" (Osterhammel 902). However, modernity must acquire a much more specific face in order to make sense of the exploration of the tragic and how the result of that exploration comes to merge with the novel. In his *Critique of Modernity*, Alain Touraine points out that if we had to agree at least upon a general principle that defines modernity it would not be an abstract idea of rethinking or of change but of *rational* change, of rational scientific, technological, and administrative activity (9). As he explains more in detail, this founding idea of rationalization becomes profoundly connected to another key aspect of modernity: the birth of historicist thought and the faith in the idea of progress. In particular, historicist thought "identifies modernization with the development of the human spirit, and the triumph of reason with that of freedom, the formation of the nation or the final triumph of social justice" (62). In this sense,

> Historicism asserts that the internal workings of a society can be explained in terms of the developments that are taking it in the direction of modernity. In the last analysis, any social problem is a struggle between the past and the future. The sense [*sens*] of history refers to both the direction in which it is moving and its signification, History will lead to the triumph of modernity, and modernity means complexity, efficacy, differentiation and therefore rationalization. History is also the emergence of a consciousness that is synonymous with reason and will, and that consciousness will replace submission to the established order and to the heritage of the past (63).

Modernity is therefore associated with an idea of mastery and control, as well as with a strong sense of rupture with the past that makes it emerge as "triumphant" (Touraine 64) with respect to what came before it. That is why modernity is also profoundly linked with the concept of *revolution* understood as a process "which created the possibility of composing a 'new story' that deviated from all preexisting stories" (Leonard 14). As Touraine points out, the connection between these two terms acquires a central role particularly after the French Revolution, that is, when modernity symbolically establishes itself as "the struggle against an *ancien régime* that is an obstacle to modernization and the triumph of reason, and the assertion of a national will identified with modernization" (65). On the whole, it thus seems that modernity is synonymous with opportunity and, in particular, with an unprecedented opportunity to think historically about the present by placing it in conversation with a past from which it has finally liberated itself and emerged superior. In the context of German Idealism, these reflections shape not only the philosophical current itself and its concerns, but also the status of tragedy, which "acquired a philosophical importance different in kind from any envisioned previously" (2). In fact, starting from the 19th century, tragedy was no longer seen in rhetorical terms, as a means of evoking a particular emotional response, but rather in speculative terms, as a way of understanding the human world and one's place in its history (Billings 2). That history, in particular, had just witnessed the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period, all of which shaped the philosophers' interest in themes such as "self-consciousness, spontaneity, freedom, aesthetics, and the possibility of a progressive teleology of historical development" (Breckman and Gordon 17). Most of all, the "autonomization" of the concept of the tragic is connected to the early 19th century's "efforts to grapple with the question of human freedom, a problem of central importance to post-Kantian thought. Idealist thinkers understand Greek tragedy to represent a distinctive form of human freedom, and to crystallize issues of agency and subjectivity that are central to their own philosophical inquiries" (Billings 6). In order to explore

the concrete implications of the "triumphant" face of modernity, it is particularly useful to return to one of the most influential thinkers of Idealism, Hegel, whose philosophy in particular has become synonymous with dialectics and rational progress. It is through this figure that Szondi illuminates the tragic dialectical manner and through which Billings presents the importance of tragedy to modern thought. In his philosophical system, the tragic becomes a solution rather than a problem, a constructive process that explains the development of consciousness through history. That is why he stimulates some of the most significant questions regarding the tragic: first of all, whether its nature is inherently dialectic and positive; secondly, what might be the place of such a concept beyond the concreteness of Greek tragedies.

1.3.2 Hegelian Philosophy and the Question of Dialectics

Among the numerous philosophers of German Idealism, a primary focus will be placed on Hegel not only because of the "sostanziale affinità fra la [sua] dialettica (...) e il tema del tragico" ("substantial affinity between [his] dialectics (...) and the theme of the tragic"; Gentili and Garelli 133 my translation) but also because of his enduring and debated legacy in the modern and even postmodern world[3]. In particular, Hegel's conception of the tragic, even though not exempt from criticism and endless revisions, remains one of the most significant formulations of this idea and it keeps informing discussions on the tragic across disciplines to this day. For this reason, Hegel inevitably serves as a fundamental touchstone for any discussion on the tragic novel and its philosophical grounding.

In Hegel's system, dialectics registers a movement towards a higher truth determined by the union of opposed, static determinations which rational thought wrongly believed to be

[3] See Steward, *Hegel's Century*; Dahlstrom, "Hegel's Questionable Legacy."

rigidly separate. Its tripartite structure finds its central moment in the dialectical stage, for it describes the process through which each determination discovers itself to be unilateral and limited and therefore must be set "in motion", that is, put in relation with other determinations. This is what Hegel calls *aufheben*, a fundamental verb which details the action through "which the determination from the moment of understanding sublates itself, or both cancels and preserves itself, as it pushes on to or passes into its opposite" (Maybee, "Hegel's Dialectics"). The last, positively-rational moment consists in grasping the unity of the opposing determinations by realizing that they are unilateral aspects of a broader reality that actually includes and synthesizes them both. "Questa sintesi è di nuovo positiva, ma di una positività arricchita dalla negazione, in quanto contiene entro di sé l'originale carattere positivo" ("This synthesis is again positive, but of a positivity enriched by negation, since it contains within itself the original positive character."; Mure 153 my translation). Therefore, the tripartite structure necessarily involves a final positive moment of reconciliation which, if applied to Hegel's broader system, becomes the engine of a social and historical development "from the most basic sensory perceptions through self-consciousness to reason" (Billings 164). In fact, for Hegel the dialectical process is the ontological law at the basis of reality as well as the logical law for understanding it. In his own words, dialectics becomes "a speculative mode of cognition" (qtd. in Maybee, "Hegel's Dialectics") that rises to the status of a genuine science which is able to explain historical progression. This is because dialectics ultimately expresses the process through which the various determinations of reality lose their rigidity, since they would not be able to exist in their finiteness, and become fluid moments of a single, infinite idea of constant and relentless improvement which refines reality ethically, religiously and aesthetically. In particular, in the context of Hegel's account of the progression of the spirit in the *Phenomenology*, "tragedy is the process through which loss becomes constructive, furthering the development of consciousness in and beyond antiquity" (Billings 161). As a

product of the Greek world and therefore of an initial stage in the development of the spirit, for Hegel tragedy "is not simply a reflection or model of dialectical process, but dialectic's formative moment. In tragedy, spirit conceptualizes itself as a recollecting subject and for the first time grasps the truth of its own path" (Billings 188). However, Hegel does not provide an all-encompassing theory of the tragic and his understanding of it as a form of dialectics considerably varies from his early theological writings, his *Natural Law Essay* (1802), *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) to his Berlin *Lectures on Aesthetics*. What he does is actually provide a reading of individual Greek tragedies, particularly Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*, which allow him to isolate a tragic essence that "tells us something about human experience, human actions and the ethical-life of a community in which the actions are played out" (Finlayson 494). However, it is important to point out that "the discussion of tragedy is exemplary rather than interpretive (...): the dilemmas of tragedy are seen as meaningful only for a particular moment in time, demonstrating a transient stage of individual and social development" (Billings 166). The tragic therefore becomes the essential element that pushes the spirit onward, "the law of the world and a method of knowledge" (Szondi 21). It is not treated as an aesthetic principle regarding dramatic representation, but rather as a historical force that is able to rationally explain the progression of the spirit as a constant reformulation and self-understanding. In particular, in Hegel the tragic importantly figures as the dialectic of ethics, which he describes as "the mover of all human things" (qtd. in Szondi 18). More specifically, it might be said that the nature of the tragic is enclosed in one key word regarding the ethical sphere: unilaterality. He famously writes in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* that,

> (...) individual action will under certain circumstances realize an aim or a character that is one-sidedly isolated in its complete determinacy, and therefore, in the circumstances presupposed, will necessarily rouse against it the opposed "pathos" and, in this way, lead to inevitable conflicts. The original essence of the tragic consists then in the fact

> that within such a collision each of the opposite sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*; on the other hand, each side can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and infringing upon the equally justified power of the other. Therefore, each side - in its ethical life and because of it - is equally involved in *guilt* (qtd. in Szondi 18-19).

The tragic therefore finds its deepest essence in a dialectical conflict not between right and wrong but between principles that have the same legitimacy. What makes tragedy so fascinating is precisely that the characters inhabiting its world do not find themselves "involved in guilt" because they do something wrong but because they do the only thing that is right. In this respect, his use of *Antigone* has become particularly relevant since Sophocles' play embodies how "institutions and the corresponding duties come into conflict and [how] that conflict threatens to dissolve the entire ethical order" (Williams, "Hegel's Conception" 125). Antigone and Creon, as embodiments of the polis' division "between the realms of human and divine law, (...) between state and family" (Billings 170), therefore become a perfect example of how Hegel understands the tragic not simply as division but as "self-division and self-reconciliation of the ethical nature" (Szondi 16). In fact, representing a unified consciousness divided between two distinct spheres, they prove how "[t]he agent can only act in such a way as to realize one or another power of ethical substance, which it understands as a single law to be followed absolutely" (Billings 171). This form of self-other unknowability brings about a tragic transgression that, once recognized, makes a fatal awareness emerge: "ciò che inizialmente appariva estraneo alla coscienza, in un senso o nell'altro, non è che l'altra parte di una sostanza etica unitaria. Antigone e Creonte sono due essenze in un certo modo uguali opposte" ("what initially appeared alien to conscience is, in one sense or another, merely the other part of a unitary ethical substance. In a certain way, Antigone and Creon are two identical and opposite

essences"[4]; Gentili and Garelli 139 my translation). However, even though conflict is a crucial element of Hegel's theory of the tragic, it is not sufficient to understand it dialectically. In fact, tragedy "exhibits *both a division and conflict* within a social whole that threatens it with dissolution, *and a resolution* by which the right and social justice in that whole are maintained and preserved against disruptive forces" (Williams, "Hegel's Conception" 125). Therefore, conflict is unavoidable, but resolution is even more important since it "is necessary to conserve, maintain, and uphold the right and justice of the ethical order" (Williams, "Hegel's Conception" 125). However, as much as *Antigone* illustrates Hegel's dialectical process, it also makes it problematic. In fact, the ending of the play, rather than focusing on the preserved order, seems to question whether Antigone really acknowledges her error and reaches a self-understanding that reconciles her with Creon and Theban polis (Finlayson 511). What takes central stage at the end of the play is rather Creon's tragedy as a grieving parent and widower. As Billings points out, "[t]o complete the vindication of the unity of ethical substance, Creon must also be punished for his onesidedness" (174). For Hegel, their suffering is proof of error and it depicts "the inadequacy of the Greek ethical world forces" (Billings 175). However, while Szondi rightly states that in Hegel "the tragic and the dialectic coincide" (16), other critics have questioned his "conciliatory misconception of the tragic" (Finlayson 502). As a matter of fact, the very presence of reconciliation after conflict has been one of the most problematic and questioned elements of Hegel's philosophical legacy and, consequently, of the discourse on the tragic. The root of this questioning largely originates from a different, shifting, perception of

[4] This interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, centered on the tragic clash between the heroine and Creon, traverses Western culture and subjects this tragedy to an enduring critical reflection that, though often aligned with Hegel, simultaneously diverges from his perspective. As Mitrano suggests, "[l]e letture della tragedia successive a Hegel, quelle vicine al nostro tempo, aprono la strada oltre la dialettica polarizzantre di sangue e Stato, ci invitano a interrogarci proprio su questa sfida, su che cosa significhi la forma del politico" ("the interpretations of tragedy after Hegel, those close to our time, pave the way beyond the polarizing dialectic of blood and State, they invite us to address precisely this challenge, what the form of the political truly means"; *Antigone* 18 my translation). In particular, Mitrano adopts an increasingly influential critical approach that interprets Antigone as a pivotal figure in feminist thought but especially as a political thinker whose complexity cannot be enclosed in a perfect symmetry with Creon but, quite contrarily, in an a-symmetry rooted in language (see *Antigone* pp. 23- 34).

modernity which cannot simply be encapsulated by the adjective "triumphant" but, quite contrarily, reveals a much darker side.

1.3.3 A Fractured Modernity: Century of Progress or Century of Decline?

As Touraine notes, the "so-called century of progress has, at least in Europe, also been seen as a century of crisis, an often of decline and disaster" (99). Crucially, a fracture appears in the idea of modernity: as much as it was appealing to think about it as the cradle of freedom and rational thought, it also becomes a site of repression, catastrophe and, most of all, of anxiety as capitalist economy, the progress of the sciences and the rise of ir-rationalism "[lead] to extreme fragmentation" (Touraine 103). Furthermore, throughout the 19th century not only does the world in itself rapidly change but, most importantly, the way in which people see that world and perceive themselves as part of it undergoes a radical revision. Auerbach writes that the events after the Revolution create a sense of "temporal concentration" (*Mimesis* 459) which,

> (...) abrogates or renders powerless the entire social structure of orders and categories previously held valid; the tempo of the changes demands a perpetual and extremely difficult effort toward inner adaptation and produces intense concomitant crises. He who would account to himself for his real life and his place in human society is obliged to do so upon a far wider practical foundation and in a far larger context than before, and to be continually conscious that the social base upon which he lives is not constant for a moment but is perpetually changing through convulsions of the most various kinds (*Mimesis* 459).

The most significant conclusion which can be drawn from Auerbach's words is that the so-called triumphant modernity is actually a space that painfully witnesses "the dissociation between the order of change and the order of being" (Touraine 98). This means that the connection between the individual and the direction of history is irreparably cracked, guiding

them down opposite paths. Indeed, while history races forward, introducing perpetual change against the backdrop of a much "larger" context, the individual who wants to account for their life and place in human society struggles for "inner" adaptation, somehow falling behind the pace of change. Figuratively speaking, history is no longer a trusted "companion" but a cumbersome, oppositional presence which is difficult to reconcile with the private dimension. In particular, the failure of the 1848 revolutions, and along with it that of the bourgeoisie, symbolically brought about "the exhaustion of the initial liberation movement" (Touraine 94) which contributed to the perception that history had somehow come to a painful stasis and could no longer lend itself to a unifying, meaningful, narrative. Therefore, modernity can be understood in general terms as a space that discovers history and reason but that loses control over them at the same time. It is precisely this loss of control that creates a strong feeling of isolation and fragmentation, as well as of a limited power for action, which makes the Hegelian exploration of history seem problematic, if not even obsolete. It is precisely here that Adorno intervenes to re-problematize modernity and to re-evaluate its positive dialectical foundation. While for both Hegel and Adorno dialectics and, as an extension, the tragic is an instrument that serves to problematize history, it is only Adorno's investigation which gives them the meaning(s) that merge with the novel.

1.3.4 Adorno and Negative Dialectics: Modernity as the Eclipse of Reason

As Touraine points out, the period from the mid-19th century onwards "saw the fragmentation of the rationalist world, but not its replacement by another unifying principle or by a new a more complex model" (98). It is from this statement that the question of dialectics and the tragic will be settled, drawing a symbolic line from Hegel to Adorno. Indeed, their comparison perfectly encapsulates how modernity somehow turns into its opposite and is

"suddenly rebaptized 'the eclipse of reason' by Horkheimer (1947), Adorno and all those they influence far beyond the Frankfurt School itself" (Touraine 93). With regard to the concept of the tragic, Hegel's formulation nevertheless remains crucial but it must be reconsidered in its outcomes if the goal is to understand what the tragic does in the novel. For example, Goethe already opposed Hegel's conciliatory interpretation of this concept and wrote that "[a]s soon as a reconciliation sets in or becomes possible, the tragic disappears" (qtd. in Szondi 25). However, Goethe himself was not able to carry out such a drastic view and found "the irreconcilable that characterizes the purely tragic case (...) to be 'fully absurd'" (Szondi 25). So the question remains, should we think of the tragic as a dialectical concept, connected to a triumphant idea of modernity, or rather as an anti-dialectical one, expressing its darker side? An illuminating way out of this impasse can be found not by abandoning the dialectical element altogether but by understanding it *negatively*. The reference here is to Adorno's essay *Negative Dialectics* (1966) which opens with the following statement: "Negative dialectics is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation (...). This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy" (Preface XIX). In this sense, Adorno's negative dialectic clarifies and completes Szondi's definition of the tragic as a *particular* form of dialectics (55). According to Szondi, dialectics is in fact the only strategy, the only "mode" capable of grasping the tragic in the moment of maximum laceration rather than in the subsequent ones of defeat and reconciliation (Gentili and Garelli 201). He states that "only the demise of something that should not meet its demise, whose removal does not allow the wound to heal, is tragic. The tragic contradiction may not be sublated in a superordinate sphere, whether immanent or transcendent. If this is the case, then the object of destruction was something trivial, which as such excludes the tragic and offers itself to the comic" (55). If we take this formulation a step further and we make Adorno's dialectics permeate the tragic, it then becomes a mode of thought that "non mira a ordinare e

classificare, a stabilire connessioni causali che consentano di operare e di manipolare, ma piuttosto a mettere in risalto le crepe, le contraddizioni della realtà, l'inquietudine e l'instabilità che la rende precaria" ("does not aim to order and classify, to establish causal connections that allow to operate and manipulate, but rather to highlight the cracks, the contradictions of reality, the restlessness and instability that makes it precarious"; Petrucciani 125 my translation). This *particular* type of dialectics is thus inextricably linked with the idea of a crack, a *rupture*, a wound that cannot heal. Still, just like in Hegel's case, any discussion on Adorno and his negative dialectic lacks a fundamental meaning if we do not take into account the historical moment that gave birth to it. As Petrucciani points out, Adorno's philosophy "non si spiegherebbe senza il riferimento alle catastrofi del Novecento e allo sforzo di comprenderle, di misurarsi con esse attraverso gli strumenti della ragione" ("could not be explained without referencing the catastrophes of the twentieth century and the effort to understand them, to measure oneself against them using the instruments of reason"; 3 my translation). Those catastrophes obviously include the trauma of the advent of Nazism and the horror of the Holocaust which have led Adorno and Horkheimer to express, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the belief that Western rationality had somehow failed in its attempt to create a life without anxiety, a life that was not marked by a *fatal* form of dialectics. It would be out of the scope of this investigation to detail the foundations of Adorno's critique of dialectics from the very roots of civilization but it is important to point out that its fatality consists in the fact that it is a "processo bifronte, che per un verso è liberazione e conquista di autonomia, per altro verso è inestricabilmente legato a dominio e repressione" ("double-sided process, which on the one hand entails liberation and conquest of autonomy, but on the other it is inextricably linked to domination and repression"; Petrucciani 53 my translation). As Bernstein points out, "[t]he [Hegelian] reason that promised reconciliation was, despite itself, a form of domination and violence" (20). The central point of Adorno's argument is precisely

that Western reason, especially the modern, instrumental one of the Enlightenment, had not freed men from fear and, most of all, it had not given them any rational, steady, control over their lives. Actually, in a society that possesses, like no other that came before it, the instruments to dominate nature, the real control that individuals have over their lives is still extremely limited (Petrucciani 71). Consequently, negative dialectics is once again born as a way of grappling with the question of freedom and with the perception of living in a world that leaves no room for action. Yet, it would be equally wrong to ignore the utopian drive that is concealed even behind Adorno's negative conception of dialectics. In fact, it keeps open the awareness that a different reality is possible, and that the irreconcilable contradictions that make the given world antagonistic actually push towards it. It therefore appears that even this type of negative dialectics is incapable of totally embracing the nonidentical and rather hints at the possibility of another reality, another way of thinking. Yet, "la dialettica negativa non può essere già questo «altro pensiero»; ciò che può fare è soltanto evocarne in negativo la figura" ("negative dialectics cannot already be this 'other thought'; what it can do is only evoke its figure negatively"; Petrucciani 127 my translation). This perspective finally clarifies how it is not a matter of choosing whether dialectics has either a totally positive outcome *or* a totally negative one. Actually, dialectics, and along with it the concept of the tragic, always contains within itself the possibility of conciliation, at least on a speculative level. This does not mean, however, that a conciliation always occurs; it is actually quite the contrary. Sometimes we see only partial and incomplete forms of synthesis, which ultimately denounce precisely the impossibility of a true, full, synthesis. Negative dialectics therefore defines the space of action of the tragic as a mode of thought that triggers a confrontation with the contradictions left open by history and, in particular, a history whose roots can be found in a *fractured* modernity. But the time has come to ask: considering the fractured panorama of modernity, what is the place of the tragic novel? What symbolic function does the tragic take in it?

1.4 The Tragic Novel as a Symbolic Form

Navigating the complexities of literary forms becomes the most meaningful when we consider them, following Moretti's example, as "problem solving mechanism[s]" (qtd. in Ercolino, *Novel-Essay* XVI) which develop in an effort to aesthetically confront the challenges and needs posed by a particular historical constellation. As for the tragic novel, the historical moment it captures, responds to and supposedly attempts to *solve* is modernity's double nature as a space synonymous with freedom and yet also with the agony of being torn apart by the impossibility of choice; a space characterized by the problematic reconciliation of progress and stasis in an increasingly cumbersome social reality. As Rita Felski points out,

> (...) modern history extends the promise of self-actualization to an ever-widening circle of persons, thereby multiplying the opportunities for human agency, miscalculation, and error, while simultaneously underscoring the painful schism between incandescent dreams and insurmountable social circumstance. Even as modernity lays out its enticing promises of progress, freedom, and amelioration of injustice, the often spectacular failures of such promises throw a melancholy over much of the literature and art of the modern era (XI).

Based on these premises, the tragic novel becomes the symbolic form of the *fractures* of modernity, of its inherent contradictions and failures. However, rather than *solving* them, it creates an open space where the very possibility of a solution is examined and challenged. It might be even said that the tragic novel is not really a problem-*solving* mechanism but, quite contrarily, the proof of the inadequacy and weakness of such an understanding of literary products. As the symbolic form of a fracture its function is not that of attempting to mend it, but rather of exacerbating it, showing it in its utter irreparability. This makes it even clearer that the entry of the tragic into the narrative is not simply the result of an overlapping of characteristics with tragedy as a dramatic form but is actually subordinated to the fundamental symbolic function of the genre, consisting in the need to openly problematize on an aesthetic

level the irresolvable conflicts that are perceived on a macro historical level. The novel becomes a fertile ground for this problematization and its combination with the tragic gives life to a form which symbolically embodies a rupture that is looked at and processed not with a synthetic intent but rather with a negative, open one. As a form linked to rupture and negative thinking, the tragic novel is also a form profoundly linked to *isolation*. It is as if it emerged from the void left by the triumphal idea of modernity as faith in autonomy and change and instead created a space in which a sense of necessity, inevitability and separation is exponentially magnified. In this "empty" space, the speed of history is actually reduced, rendered inaccessible, thus giving life to figures that embody the laceration caused by the clash of opposing forces: movement and stasis. As Maffesoli points out, "in the tragic sensibility, time comes to a halt, or at least it slows down[, while s]peed in its diverse forms characterize[s] the drama of modernity" (134). However, who and what occupies this "static" space? The following sections will attempt to answer this question by delving deeper into the emergence of the tragic novel, focusing on why, how and when this literary form developed.

1.5 Tracing the Emergence of the Tragic Novel

So far, an attempt has been made to clarify the complex philosophical and historical dimensions which confer meaning to the word *tragic*, but the aspect of the *novel* demands consideration as well. Or better, it is now necessary to account for their union and to explain how the basic characteristics of the tragic and the novel merge towards a higher, more complex, symbolic function. In doing so, the aim is to to frame the tragic novel as an original instrument of meaning which establishes itself as a new, significant, form of communication within the multifaceted complexity of the novelistic form.

1.5.1 Entering the Ecosystem of the Novel: Overcoming a Narrative of Incompatibility

After German Idealism, apart from some isolated cases, the concept of the tragic has not undergone a thorough examination in the philosophical realm which, as Szondi claimed, found the engagement with it extremely productive but ultimately limited. Also, in a world diagnosed with the "death of tragedy," or at least in which this form inevitably suffers from a diminished stature, it appears equally reductive to follow Szondi's objective and use the tragic to keep analyzing ancient and modern tragedies (3). As a matter of fact, tragedy undoubtedly keeps being fascinating but its practice has often turned into a hopeless longing to restore it to the glory of a past that no longer exists. However, precisely because of a long-lasting narrative of incompatibility, it seems like the tragic's new expressive form cannot be the novel. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, this obstacle is largely the result of an attempt to conciliate a purist outlook on tragedy's dramatic realization with the much different genre of the novel, whose form and contents appear irreconcilable with that of tragedy. As Terry Eagleton points out,

> What rules now is less fate than human agency, less codes of honour than social conventions. Work and home, not court, church and state, become the primary settings, and high politics yields to the intrigues of everyday life. (...) The public realm of tragedy, with its high-pitched rhetoric and fateful economy, is abandoned for the privately consumed, more expansive, ironic, everyday language of prose fiction. And this, for some, is certainly a loss (178).

This passage demonstrates how between tragedy and novel there is not only a form of supposed incompatibility but a real imbalance that sees tragedy as clearly superior. This view, sustained by centuries of criticism, has reinforced the belief that "there is something inherently untragic about the novel-form" (Eagleton 180), which has supposedly *lost* the high contents of tragedy. According to this perspective,

> Whereas tragic drama (...) distils some pure moment of crisis from the ruck of life around it, the novel is a species of imaginative sociology which returns such intense, isolated moments to the flow and counter-flow of history, patiently unravelling the rather less exotic, workaday forces which went into their making, and in doing so relativizing judgements which in their dramatic form can seem a good deal more stark and intractable. (...) The novel on this view is a matter of *chronos*, of the gradual passage of historical time, whereas tragedy is a question of *kairos*, of time charged, crisis-racked, pregnant with some momentous truth (Eagleton 181).

Certainly, there is no shortage of arguments to support the differences between tragedy and novel and it would be wrong to completely deny their validity. However, considering tragedy in its eternal and untouchable immutability is ultimately what made it obsolete in the modern period, unable to keep up with what the function of art forms really is: responding to specific symbolic needs that are motivated by different historical constellations. Also, this view crucially ignores the process of autonomization that the tragic has undergone at the threshold of modernity which has rendered questions such as "Is tragic insight better expressed by non-theatrical arts?" (Lambropoulos 145) possible. The expression "non-theatrical *arts*" opens up a world of opportunities but what is relevant for the present analysis is why did the *novel* become the cradle of the tragic in a precise moment of its generic evolution and what are the motives behind this hybridization. In order to understand those motives, Guido Mazzoni's *Theory of the Novel* figures as a particularly illuminating analysis for it explains how the novel, starting from the 19th century, undergoes two crucial and interconnected changes that will ultimately allow it to accommodate, and collaborate with, the concept of the tragic. On a macroscopic level, the conquest of history, and on a microscopic level, borrowing Hegel's words, the conquest of the "world of prose and everyday" (qtd. in Mazzoni 224). Clearly, no attempt is being made to generalize the complex history of the novel or to ignore the obvious national differences which condition the development of this form, but those two elements encapsulate a logic of change

that is nevertheless transnational and extremely significant in the process of understanding the emergence of the tragic novel. Starting from the former, Mazzoni points out how the novel succeeded in conquering the foreground of the literary realm precisely because it was able to find "a specific mimetic mode that did not exist before (...) and that became a deciding factor for the representation of the modern world" (Mazzoni 226). This specific mimetic mode is founded on the discovery of history and consequently the conquest of new contents that take on decisive importance for the readers of the new era. While authors up to the 18th century "move[d] in a conceptual ether made of ahistorical notions (...) that presuppose[d] a fixist conception of characters and manners" (Mazzoni 203), 19th century novels began to navigate new complexities because they were "largely composed of notions endowed with a sense of historical dynamics" (Mazzoni 204). Auerbach defines the new mimetic mode specific to the novel as "modern tragic realism based on the contemporary" (*Mimesis* 458). Here the word *tragic* crucially emerges in connection with realism and, even more importantly, in connection with history. As Jukić points out, "[w]hat realism captures as tragic (...) seems to be a radical, overwhelming historicity of the world" (25). The expression "modern tragic realism" therefore encapsulates how the tragic and the novel powerfully converge with the aim of adequately representing the modern world in all its inherent historical complexities, if not even disasters. "History," Auerbach writes, "is manifested through catastrophic events and ruptures" ("Realism in Europe" 193). Once again, the term *rupture* powerfully surfaces with respect to the perception of history in the modern world and now even with respect to the representation of that history. Still, modern historical progression is not portrayed absolutely but finds its literary dimension only as intertwined with the second great conquest of the novel: "the world of prose and everyday." Hegel coins this expression by comparing the past of the epic to the space of the novel, "a form in which the space for heroic action and adventure has been narrowed and people exist as isolated and situated individuals, provided with a date of birth, a

place of birth, a job, and a family status" (Mazzoni 225). In a world so strongly conditioned by historical dynamics and the overbearing power of civil society, "individual paths are conditioned by suprapersonal forces: to tell the story of a private matter also means telling about the collective circumstances surrounding it" (Mazzoni 225). Actually, in the case of the tragic novel history is not only perceived as something that conditions individuals but that *nails them down* in a way that leaves space for no development, no way out whatsoever. As for the question "why the novel," it now appears clear that it is a form which allows for a *time* that is perfectly suited to the complexity of modern life and its representation. In fact, it is only the novelistic space and the depth offered by it which can accommodate the vastness of the unresolved contradictions of modern man and the world in which he lives in. Sidney Zink (1958) was among the first ones to propose that the novel becomes the real vehicle of modern tragedy, suggesting that all those who have attempted to find tragic figures in modern drama have actually been looking in the wrong place (170). She argues that to present what she calls "a modern hero in disbelief[,] the artist requires special devices. These devices belong not to the stage drama but to the novel" (170). Zink compares the novel with tragic drama, or better, considers the novel as the heir of modern tragedy. This formulation deviates from my understanding of the tragic novel as a form that has an independent life, indeed completely separate from modern attempts at tragic theatrical expressions. Still, the premises of her argument are not wrong: while not explicitly isolating the concept of the tragic, she points the attention to the devices offered by the novel which allow it to hybridize not tragedy altogether but a distillation of it, the tragic mode.

1.5.2 Tragedy and the Tragic Mode: Fowler and Genre Theory

In his account of genre theory, Alastair Fowler discusses the relevance of modes, which he describes as key elements in the process of evolution of generic repertoires. The reason for

their importance largely lies in their inherent versatility which is motivated by two main reasons: firstly, they "never imply a complete external form" (107) and secondly, they are also "less historically circumscribed" (111), thus allowing them to be applied to a variety of genres. However, despite their elusiveness, Fowler points out that modes cannot exist on their own, as separate entities, but they consist of the representative features of an antecedent kind[5], such as tragedy or comedy, and must be analyzed in relation to it. In particular, he writes that,

> (...) even after the adaptive possibilities of the "fixed" kind have been played out, its corresponding mode may remain lively. The mode, with its selection of constituents, is less dependent on external forms. It is as if the kind were limited by its structural carapace, so that it reached the end of its evolutionary possibilities. But its modal equivalent is more versatile, being able to enter into new commixtures and to continue in combination with kinds still evolving. (...) [For example,] [t]ragedy was very nearly extinct in the nineteenth century, but Hardy wrote some fine tragic novels (167).

As this passage shows, Fowler sees in a mode's belonging to an earlier kind its most important characteristic and, at the same time, its potential "to continue in combination with kinds still evolving." That is because modes appear to be distillations of "of the permanently valuable features [of their antecedent kinds]. Thus, they have achieved independence of contingent embodiments and may continue to all ages, incorporated in almost any external form, long after the antecedent kind has passed away" (111). This formulation, strongly reminiscent of Szondi's argument, fits well with the idea of an independent tragic mode which cannot be entirely traced back to the genre of tragedy and which can therefore be applied to a variety of other genres. On the basis of Fowler's theory, the tragic novel would thus be a case of "modal transformation (...) in keeping with the general tendency of literature away from ritually determined forms and syntagmatically prescribed genres, and toward looser and more flexible conventions" (Fowler

[5] Fowler uses the term "kind" as "equivalent to 'historical genre," or the unhappily named "fixed genre." (56). As he explains, "[t]he kinds, however elusive, objectively exist. Their boundaries may not be hard-edged, but they can nonetheless exclude" (73).

167). Actually, Fowler himself mentions the tragic mode and finds one of its applications in the novel, particularly Hardy's. However, his argument about the tragic mode lacks a clarity and specificity that this concept actually possesses. He repeatedly stresses how modes are intrinsically elusive and difficult to contextualize historically, but while it is true that the tragic mode poses quite a few problems of definition, if it is considered historically, it actually becomes quite concrete. In fact, an effort has been made to highlight how the concept of the tragic has a specific date of birth in the Idealist period and how it is that formulation which becomes the root of this concept's significance for the modern novel. Ultimately, what the novel hybridizes is the tragic mode as a tool that is deemed appropriate to describe the present in its inherent contradictions. As Glenn W. Most argues, genres become a way for readers and writers to "understand, not only their books, but also their lives" (32) and therefore the tragic, when applied to the novel, does not really conceptualize, as Fowler would have it, the bond with the original genre of tragedy but rather the "exquisitely modern predicament of human existence" (32). This brings us to one last question: When exactly does the tragic merge with the novel?

1.5.3 Tragic Realism: The Watershed of the Mid-Century

The previous sections have given a general account of modernity as a fractured time, but when does the tragic novel emerge to dramatize that fracture? A particular conception of history and modernity is what led philosophers like Hegel to formulate the tragic in its positive character, but it is also what rendered that view questionable. In fact, while "the political revolution in France had made German idealism attractive, the industrial revolution that accompanied it quickly made it seem obsolete. Absolute longing had been the watchword for the Romantic generation, but (...) the watchword for the post-1850 generation was realism" (Breckman and Gordon 39). With the rise of new restrictive social forces and the failure of the

1848 revolutions, what realism demanded was a new focus on the ordinary and the unidealized which could depict life through a new interpretative key. In this respect, the tragic is no longer simply an instrument of philosophical inquiry but a force that enters the life of people, a mode that shapes their literary production, a lens through which to express the enormity of the social, economic and moral issues they faced. Those issues had no attainable resolution and, for the first time, it was the idea of a dialectical, affirmative, view of reality to become "fully absurd." In this respect, it is not a coincidence that Fowler mentions Hardy's novels. In fact, they epitomize how the hybridization of the novel with the tragic occurred in the second half of the 19th century, a moment when society itself, in its collision with the individual, becomes the source of the most tragic form of irreparability. Indeed, it has been pointed out how the tragic mode problematizes, even renders impossible an affirmative solution, but, unlike tragedy itself, whose aesthetic value rooted in negativity has been debated for centuries, the bleak view offered by the tragic novel now finds its legitimacy in the fact that it becomes a form of realism[6]. Late modern "heroes" become the proof that men cannot but fail in all their attempts at happiness and success because, in Hardy's words, there is something that eternally tells them "You shan't!" (274). In fact, in the late 19th century the tragic concretely takes the form of "the discontinuity between human purposes (...) and that which transcend[s] or [is] indifferent or alien to these human purposes and values" (Newton 64). A crucial explanation of this new perception of reality comes not only from history but also from the advancements of science, in particular the appearance of Darwin's evolutionary theory. As Manya Lempert points out,

> Darwin's explanation of evolution (...) introduces a tragic conception of natural history into modern thought. In the mid-nineteenth century, Darwin recognized chance, not design, as the engine of all life. Darwin heretically argued that random variation among

[6] In his analysis of Dostoevsky, Ivanov writes: "La tragedia, in ultima analisi (...) è possibile soltanto sul terreno di una concezione del mondo profondamente realistica. La lotta tragica può essere combattuta solo tra realtà sostanziali ed attuali." ("Ultimately, tragedy (...) is only possible on the basis of a profoundly realistic conception of the world. The tragic conflict can only be fought between substantial and present realities."; 62 my translation).

> creatures – the unpredictable, good or ill luck – underwrote the existence of species. A core tenet of tragedy, long resisted, became a core tenet of the modern life sciences: chance, the contingent, the unforeseeable, what the Greeks called *tuchē* (3).

Portraying a world which can no longer be governed by an overarching reason, the tragic novel therefore results as an exploration of themes such as that of responsibility, the limits of individual agency and guilt. What makes the tragic novel an anti-dialectical form or at least an open one in the Adornoian sense is precisely the fact that the exploration of all these themes does not offer a solution, not even an occasion to adapt to the external changes brought about by the progression of history, but a fatal stasis. Paradoxically, then, the tragic novel is a form triggered by the contradictions brought about by the speed of historical change but which remains totally immobile with respect to them. There is no possibility of renewal, only for living with a cumbersome, limiting, *tragic* history. However, in order to understand what form the engagement with historical thought takes in the tragic novel, it is time to turn to the practical dimension and to give an account of the tragic novel's first concrete products. It is only by examining specific works of fiction that we can understand what form the tragic actually takes and how it gives voice to the complexities of a fractured modern era.

1.6 From Theory to the Text: First Cases of Tragic Novels

It has been argued that the tragic novel's birth has a specific historical placement but no mention of the *where* has been provided. The history being referenced is clearly rooted in Europe but it is important to demonstrate how the conditions for the emergence of the tragic novel may adapt to the circumstances triggered by modernity even in different national contexts. Therefore, three examples of the 19th century "season" of the tragic novel will be briefly discussed: *Madame Bovary* (1856), *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and *The Brothers*

Karamazov (1880). These works are crucial not only because they figure among the first examples of this genre but especially because they already show how the tragic is capable of adapting to the changes undergone by the novel as it slowly paves the way for its twentieth century life. Also, they prove how the tragic mode figures as a force that shapes the texture and plot of the novels through similarities but also obvious differences. As Szondi had pointed out before his survey of specific tragedies, reminiscent of the fact that an essential definition of the tragic is admittedly impossible, its meaning must be discovered "always anew" (56) in the analysis of individual novels. What remains constant, however, is tragic mode's role in problematizing historical contradictions by processing them with an inquisitive gaze but ultimately non-solutional.

In particular, the tragic initially figures as something that changes the ecosystem of the realist novel and, more specifically, it enters the realm of literature when realist writers try to interpret the widely felt clash between society and the individual by writing novels of adultery. For example, starting from France, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) can be considered one of the first examples of tragic novels as it stages the impossible confrontation between individual aspirations to happiness and social duties. As the center of this conflict, Emma Bovary indeed embodies the impossible reconciliation between her pretense at great feeling with the reality of being a wife and mother living in an uneventful provincial town. By presenting her story, Flaubert outlines a disenchanted and corrosive vision of every myth, particularly that of romantic illusions, which are substituted by a vision of the world characterized by lucidity and pessimism. In this context, adultery is wrongfully perceived as a potential vehicle for happiness and Emma is sure that by committing it she will finally live a life of passion and emotions. However, Flaubert makes it clear that adultery is not something that can actually fulfill your desires but only temporarily distract from boredom. Despite painfully realizing this at her own expense, Emma keeps being internally lacerated by an

unbridgeable gap between reality and imagination which will stain her perception of the world around her until the very end of the novel. In fact, it seems like, despite some isolated moments of self-recognition, she is totally incapable of acting in any other way. That is why her life amounts to a depressing series of disappointments which culminate in her disastrous attempt at suicide that decrees her tragic, un-affirmative, fate. For her, as well as her family, there is no future and no prospect of reconciliation. Even as Homais triumphs in his mediocrity and is awarded the Legion of Honor, the social world depicted by Flaubert is the proof that nothing can truly change for the better. On the whole, in this novel the tragic takes the form of a problematization of the condition of the petite bourgeoisie, particularly of their stupidity and emptiness. The presentation of Emma's story also becomes an investigation of a feeling of necessity, of inevitability, which stems from the perceptions of individuals to be caged in a reality that shatters their dreams and gives them no space to improve their social condition.

Moving to England, Thomas Hardy's novels work within a similar framework. In particular, *Jude the Obscure* (1895) was defined by Hardy himself as a story of "unfulfilled aims" (Preface 5) for it presents the life of Jude, a dreamer and strong believer in the possibility for self-realization, who will actually have to deal with countless defeats and disappointments motivated by his social status. Much like *Madame Bovary*, this novel "relentlessly exposes the failure of any of Jude's ideals to have any correspondence with reality" (Newton 72) and additionally uncovers the dark side of progress, especially Darwin's evolutionary theory, which "undermines the deep-seated desire for order and significance that Hardy sees as governing human thought about life and its meaning" (Newton 68). In particular, Hardy uses Jude's experience to harshly criticize the problem of the access to university education and most of all to attack the institution of marriage. A university degree is perceived as the greatest possibility that can ever exist and there is a strong faith that it can guarantee a better life which, however, is painfully denied in Jude's case. Marriage, on the other hand, is defined as a "lifelong [and

irreversible] penalty" (Hardy 58) that leads to the destruction of the individualities involved in it, a perspective emphasized by Jude's marriage with Arabella and especially with Sue. As cousins, they should belong to the unity of the same family but they actually represent the clash between two individualities who are fatally unable to coexist. In this respect, the tragic takes the form of a transgenerational curse[7] that haunts the characters and guides them towards their inevitable destiny of marital, and personal, ruin. Jude is too poor to enter in the environment of university life and will be excluded from any form of social association, while Sue finds herself living in a world that is not yet ready for her ideas and will thus force her to adhere to the ruling principles. In fact, Jude dies alone and ignored by everyone and Sue condemns herself to a destiny of unhappiness with a man she does not love. Ultimately, the tragic nature of this novel serves also to problematize, to surpass in a way, the type of representation that had been offered by the genre of the Bildungsroman. Indeed, *Jude the Obscure* follows the life of its title character from boyhood up to his death and from the very beginning it depicts Jude's dreams of self-determination and socialization[8]. However, his story comes a long way from the Bildungsroman understood as a form condensed in the "'youthful' attributes of mobility and inner restlessness" (Moretti, *The Way* 5). Actually, Jude's countless failures do not "*accentuate* modernity's dynamism, and instability" (Moretti, *The Way* 5), but rather *reject* the idea that any form of dynamism can exist at all. The complexity of history has reached a point of no return: no movement (onward or upward) is allowed, only immobility.

Even in the much different conditions of Russia, Dostoevsky can be considered a writer of tragic novels. In particular, it is worth mentioning *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) as a novel that epitomizes the complex interplay between realism and the tragic mode in the Russian

[7] The nature of the transgenerational curse is revealed at the very beginning of the novel: "The boy is crazy for books, that he is. It runs in our family rather. His cousin Sue is just the same – so I've heard. (…) Jude, my child, don't you ever marry. 'Tisn't for the Fawleys to take that step anymore" (Hardy 13).

[8] I am here referring to Franco Moretti's reading of the Bildungsroman as an inherently contradictory form which registers "a dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization" (*The Way* 15).

context of the late 19th century. As a matter of fact, Dostoevsky himself stated that his realism needed to go deeper than simply inserting the characters in a clearly determined social context: "They call me a psychologist: it's not true, I am a realist in a higher sense, that is, I depict all the depths of the human soul" (qtd. in Ercolino, "Realism and Dialectics" 154). This deeper, but paradoxically higher, realism ends up taking, in the case of *The Brothers Karamazov* and therefore of modernizing Russia, the form of the tragic novel. In fact, being Russians really meant living in a tragic universe that contemplated principles that seemed to be impossible to reconcile, namely, the modern ideas coming from Europe and Russia's strong religious tradition. This tragic clash is inevitably incorporated by Dostoevsky's characters and in particular by Ivan Karamazov, who perfectly reflects the unease and inconsistencies of living under new rules and principles while the world they have known slowly collapses. Actually, the irreconcilable nature of his ideas concerning faith and atheism will even bring him to a tragic duplication. He would like to reverse the path of the Grand Inquisitor; he would like to abandon his position of refusal in order to grow an oak tree of faith (Dostoevsky 543), but he *cannot*. His destiny is to remain the last of Dostoevsky's nihilists, "sentenced to walk a quadrillion kilometres in the dark" (541) without ever being able to see the gates of heaven and experience even only "two seconds of joy"[9] (Dostoevsky 577) for which he would give his life. The character of Ivan proves how Dostoevsky, along with Flaubert and Hardy, is characterized by the lucidity with which he depicts a particular moment of social and cultural development but in his novels the tragic mode, just like his realism, takes a "deeper" form. In fact, the clash that he portrays is not only between individual desires and societal conventions but between

[9] This is a reference to the legend of the "thinker and philosopher" (Dostoevsky 541). The man "on earth 'rejected everything, (…) and, above all, the future life.' Indignant at finding himself living such a future life after his death, he protested and was punished by being told he would1 have to walk a quadrillion kilometers before reaching the gates of heaven and being forgiven. (…) Reaching his goal at last, the philosopher had not been there for two seconds (…) when 'he cried out that those two seconds were worth walking not a quadrillion kilometers but a quadrillion of quadrillions, raised to the quadrillionth power.'" (Frank 680). This anecdote also reflects Ivan's deep longing for faith.

absolute voices and ideas that fight with one another. In this sense, Ercolino suggests that the tragic is "the detonator that triggers the polyphonic explosion in Dostoevsky's works. It supplies the primary distonic impulse that prevents the opposing voices that compose Dostoevsky's dissonant choruses from merging. The irreducible character of tragic conflict guarantees that they remain separate, it avoids their dialectical synthesis" (*Novel-Essay* 69). The reference point is the following passage from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetic* in which he states that,

> A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event (6).

Following Ercolino's impulse, the tragic therefore functions as the precursor of polyphony understood as a chorus of "unmerged voices" which collide in their tragic one-sidedness. This description also links back to Hegel's understanding of the tragic as a clash between "fully valid" voices that have "equal rights" and which divide a form of unity, in this case the same family. Still, it might be argued that the authors that have been considered so far, especially Dostoevsky, ultimately refuse to employ the concept of the tragic in its anti-dialectical formulation and rather give voice to a more positive, conciliatory, view. In particular, the character of Alexei in *The Brothers Karamazov* seems to guarantee a form of reconciliation that will be ensured by religious faith and absolute values. As a matter of fact, his spiritual journey and his function as a moral compass in the novel illuminate Dostoevsky's belief in the possibility of goodness and positive change through actions and beliefs. With this character he actually completes the investigation he had begun with Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* – that of "tracciare in modo approssimativo il tipo positivo nel senso suindicato, il tipo dell'uomo che

realizza nella vita, nonostante la legge della vita che separa e isola gli uomini, il principio di una generale comunanza e unità" ("roughly [tracing] the positive type (...), the type of man who, despite the rule of life that separates and isolates men, embodies the principle of a general commonality and unity"; Ivanov 99 my translation). However, despite seeing in this type of character the answer to the negative side represented by Ivan and the other brothers, Dostoevsky still asks himself a very significant question – "will it be answer *enough*?"[10]. In one of his letters he states: "What does it matter to me that I am convinced that reason will triumph, that things will improve in the future, if fate has ordained me to be a witness to the triumph of chance, unreason and brute force?"[11]. As a matter of fact, Myshkin and Alexei should embody a perfect form of sanctity that miraculously overcomes the limitations of the human condition but instead they turn out to be tragicomic figures, idiots, outcasts. Ultimately, they cannot save anyone. As modernity challenged traditional notions of spiritual redemption, Dostoevsky represents one of the last attempts to ensure the validity of a spiritual quest which no longer has a place in the modern, increasingly secularized, world. Ultimately, Alexei promises a reconciliation that is only contemplated, evoked negatively, but that will not come as Russia will not actually be sanctified in Christ. In the complex architecture of the novel, he should be the hero but he goes practically unnoticed while his brothers' tragic path, particularly Ivan's, remains indelible. In fact, it is his struggle, rather than Alexei's hopeful message, which will become the most important legacy for the literary production to come. Indeed, Ivanov states that Dostoevsky,

> (…) più dei suoi contemporanei si è fatto iniziatore di quella complessità spirituale e psichica che ha predeterminato in modo essenziale l'odierna autocoscienza; egli se ne è fatto iniziatore grazie ad un inusuale approfondimento ed inasprimento psicologico e ontologico delle contraddizioni del suo secolo, nonché all'azione originale delle forze

[10] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. "No. 817. To Konstantin Pobedonoscev." *The Brothers Karamazov* , W. W. Norton, 2011, p. 662.
[11] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. "Letter to V. P. Botkin ." *The Brothers Karamazov*, W. W. Norton, 2011, p. 649.

> di fermentazione da lui introdotte che hanno sconvolto le profondità del subcosciente e dell'ultracosciente nell'essere umano. Egli ha (come Turner la nebbia di Londra) scoperto, rilevato, sollevato a reale esistenza, la molteplicità ancora ignota dei piani di significato e complessità dell'uomo moderno - dell'uomo eterno nella sua più nuova rivelazione.
>
> ("(...) more than any other of his contemporaries, became the initiator of that spiritual and psychic complexity which essentially predetermined today's self-awareness; he became its initiator thanks to an unusual psychological and ontological deepening and exacerbation of the contradictions of his century, as well as the original action of the fermenting forces he introduced which disrupted the depths of the subconscious and the ultraconscious in the human being. He has (like Turner in the fog of London) discovered, detected, raised to real existence, the still unknown multiplicity of the layers of meaning and complexity of the modern man - of the eternal man in his newest revelation"; 33-34 my translation).

Unraveling a complexity that was alien to early 19th century writing, Dostoevsky thus figures as a crucial step towards a different understanding of the human being which will be cemented by the entrance in the 20th century. In fact, his "art of preserving shadows and inconsistencies" (Mazzoni 311) will make him one of the precursors of the changes brought about by modernism and the discovery of psychoanalysis, which will make the individual the center of an altogether new type of investigation and representation.

Dostoevsky's novels, and in many respects even Flaubert's and Hardy's, crucially prepare the entry into the new century for stylistic and narratorial reasons but they also secure the main characteristics of the tragic novel, which will find new dimensions in the 20th century. However, what will remain constant is its nature as a response, and failed battle against, the complexities of history; in particular, a history which continues to spark a debate about necessity, inevitability and human beings' space for agency in a reality that refuses to conform to their aspirations and which appears to be troublingly devoid of any teleological significance. Therefore, what Emma Bovary, Jude Fawley and the brothers Karamazov say about tragic

characters is that they embody the impossibility of change in a world that is constantly transforming and leaving them behind. Far from being active agents of history, they rather epitomize the ambiguity deriving from a reality of shifting values to which they are tragically unable to adapt, leading to their inevitable defeat. This sense of instability continues well into the 20th century, whose enormous historical legacy continues to give new life to tragic novels, which will also come to embrace the technical innovations pioneered in the modernist and postmodernist period.

The aim of the following chapters will be exactly to explore the shape that the tragic novel takes in the 20th and even 21st century with the final objective to create a narrative of continuity, as well as difference, in the history and theory of this genre. In particular, the focus will shift to the context of the United States with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and then come back to Europe, even though much later, with the Jewish American author Johnathan Littell and his novel *The Kindly Ones* (2006), published in France. This movement towards an extra-European dimension will necessarily entail a discussion on the legitimacy and existence of the tragic outside Europe's borders. Also, it will require an analysis of the forms that the tragic novel takes in response to the various literary movements of the 20th century. While much has been said about Hardy, Dostoevsky and even Faulkner as tragic authors, the possibilities of the tragic after modernism are largely left unexplored. However, my aim is to prove that the tragic remains a powerful tool whose strength lies in its ability to question resolution and to create story worlds that mirror the perception of history as contradictory, oppositional and, most of all, incredibly overpowering.

Chapter 2

Moving Forward, Looking Backwards: The Tragic Cage of History and the Collapse of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

2.1 American Modernity and the Tragic: An Excess of Triumph?

> (...) in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier.
>
> - Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier In American History* (38)

> (...) I was (…) hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; (...) I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it (...) and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.
>
> - William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (63)

As this chapter delves into the complex task of accounting for the tragic novel within the American context, it seems particularly evocative to begin this undertaking with the help of two powerful images: a description of the foundational, quintessentially American, space of the Frontier by Frederick Jackson Turner and Jason Compson's words to his son Quentin reported at the outset of the second section of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Putting these two materials side by side might seem rather odd, if not even an unnecessary fabrication, but they

set the stage for an exploration of how the possibility for the tragic novel is not only legitimate in the American context but woven into the very fabric of American life. Actually, one might think that the point of presenting these two images is that of explaining the insurmountable abyss that separates them, stimulating the search for an answer to questions such as: what happened to the authentic American character? What went wrong in the long time that separates the Frontier experience from the decline of the Compsons? However, the argument should be redirected towards a different type of inquiry: Are the root causes of Jason Compson's words actually entwined with the advancement of the American settlement, detectable even between the lines of Tuner's account? This statement might appear rather bold but it serves to draw a meaningful line between the mythic birth of the United States and its subsequent tragic literary production. Even though this chapter will place a specific focus on Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* as an example of tragic novel and therefore on a specific literary period, modernism, it is worthwhile to establish a broader framework which might grant this discussion a deeper historical grounding. As a matter of fact, in the previous chapter an attempt was made to highlight how important history is and especially how the tragic novel figures as the symbolic form of a *fractured* perception of it, as a form that specifically registers the ruptures of the modern landscape. Focusing on the American context means confronting modernity once again or, it might be argued, even modernity in its *purest* form. As Wagner points out, Europeans indeed perceived America as "the uncontaminated realization of the modernist principles of *autonomy* and *rationality*. America was *pure modernity*" (42). In fact, on the one hand America championed individualism and declared that "there are no ties between the human beings except for those that they themselves create" (Wagner 41); on the other, it was highly rationalist in the sense that "it [knew] no norms and values except the increase of instrumental mastery, the striving to efficiently use whatever is at hand to reach one's purposes" (Wagner 41). Most importantly, however, it seemed like America *lacked history* and was a country without

tradition which is what rendered Americans "free of all the fetters that prevented Europeans from becoming the *absolute masters over themselves as well as over nature*" (Wagner 38). Recalling Touraine's analysis, it therefore seems that America realizes the quintessential meaning of modernity as triumphant, as a series of successes that culminate in the birth of the United States "in and through revolution itself" (Wagner 37). In Europe, modernity was accompanied by a *shift* in the perception of history and the perceived pace of its progression, but it was a history that had already accumulated centuries of complexities and contributions. America, however, seemed to have found a quintessentially modern beginning "from nothingness" (Wagner 38). This extreme polarization is certainly an abstraction but it is useful to connect, through similarities and differences, the American context to the European one whose features have been already outlined. Indeed, from this comparison an important question naturally arises: if the tragic novel is a form deeply connected to historical pressure and its complexity, how can it exist in a nation supposedly born without history? While this question expresses a legitimate doubt, this chapter will attempt to prove how the tragic novel undeniably exists in the American context. Actually, it rises as a form because the contradictions embedded in the very foundation of the United States are so powerful as to provide the perfect preconditions for the emergence of the tragic novel. In the case of the "young" United States, those conditions symbolically trace back to the Frontier, and especially to its inherent contradictions as "the oldest and most durable of American national myths" (Slotkin 1). Its durability is ensured by the fact that, as a justification and mythologization of national development, the myth of the Frontier crucially "answers the perennial question, 'What is an American?' by creating a virtual genealogy – Americans are the descendants (by blood or acculturation) of those heroes who discovered, conquered, and settled the virgin land of the wild frontier" (Slotkin 1). What it attempts to create is therefore a narrative of continuity but also the picture of a total break with the past, specifically past histories of national development.

As Turner points out, "[t]he peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people – to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life" (2). Conceptualized in this way, American life therefore finds its deepest core in the steady westward advancement of the line of civilization, resulting in a constant sense of freshness, impatience to lessen all kinds of restraints, and confidence in the possibilities offered by the future. The unique combination of these elements rendered America, in Turner's own words, "another name for opportunity" (Turner 37), a land of boundless optimism and enthusiasm where each individual could potentially forge their own destiny. In its original formulation, the American hero is therefore a conqueror whose characteristics, even intellectual, are entirely owed to the space of the Frontier: "[t]hat coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; (...) that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" (Turner 37). Crucially, this dynamic spirit of self-creation is grounded precisely in the unprecedented feeling of freedom the new land granted and on which the United States were subsequently built as a nation. In fact, this concept was fostered by the myth of the Frontier but it later found a permanent place in the nation's history thanks to the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence and the drafting of the Constitution. As Eric Foner points out, "[n]o idea is more central to American identity—that is, Americans' conception of themselves as a people and a nation—than freedom" (9). For example, the Declaration of Independence famously reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (US 1776). If we were to stop at these words, one could rightly point out that they leave no space for the

existence of anything that could be connected to a tragic sensibility. Indeed, Robert Heilman observes that in the western world "[t]here is an excess of triumph. One is tempted to say, indeed, that western materials are simply defective of the tragic component, that they are too exclusively a melodrama of victory" (9). Yet, this is precisely where Jason Compson's words suggest a different outcome to this story: as the heir of the "*the great nation* of futurity" (O' Sullivan 426), how can he say that victory is just an illusion, that time is not an endless promise but a source of despair? It is with his words in mind that the birth of the United States should be revisited as a moment that witnessed not only victorious endeavors but a problematic success rooted in unsolvable tensions. Starting from the most dramatic one, it should be noted how from the very start the narrative of the Frontier is irreparably tarnished by a reality of subjugation and social violence: "at least half of the land seized from the Indians before 1850 was exploited by means of African slave labor" (Slotkin 2). Even Turner himself points out that "the slavery struggle (...) occupies its important place in American history because of its relation to westward expansion" (3). What the advancement of the Frontier did, in fact, was create a national myth that functioned as the highest expression of freedom but in reality founded on the drastic ontological exclusion of an *other*, an enemy. As Slotkin points out, from the very beginning the settler state defined itself against "who is seen as savage, close to nature, non-Christian, non-white, anarchically free in lifestyle" (2). Consequently, the Frontier was a strongly polarized space that, far from being simply a source of constant opportunities, was actually built on the interdependence of Indian losses and African exploitation. This uneasy coexistence of opportunity and loss actually led historians like Kenneth Davis to declare that "America was conceived in liberty and born in shackles" (76). Morgan even goes as far as to argue that "slavery and oppression were the dominant features of American history and that efforts to advance liberty and equality were the exception, indeed no more than a device to divert the masses while their chains were being fastened" (5). Therefore, at the heart of

American history there is what he calls a "central paradox" (6) embodied by the simultaneous rise of liberty and equality and the rise of the slave trade (5). This statement goes a long way from Turner's conceptualization of the Frontier as the experience which allowed the United States to become a "democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds" (32). However, the meaning of that individual liberty immediately turned out to be quite controversial and incomplete, giving rise to tensions that inevitably conditioned the development of the United States as a nation. As Kenneth Davis points out, "[s]lavery was present at the nation's birth and was essential to the foundation of the political and economic power that built the country in the early nineteenth century" (76). Therefore, it becomes evident this is precisely where the American tragic sensibility might find its original root: the contradiction without synthesis between being the first modern democracy and, at the same time, a large-scale slave nation, starting from the revered founding fathers. As Morgan observes, "Virginia produced the most eloquent spokesmen for freedom and equality in the entire United States: George Washington, James Madison, and above all, Thomas Jefferson [but t]hey were all slaveholders and remained so throughout their lives" (6). Even when the founding fathers gathered to draft the Constitution "[t]he resulting document omitted the unsettling language of bondage; in fact, the word slave did not appear in the U.S. Constitution until ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment" (Herron 308). The glorious birth of the United States is thus based on a mythology that found its strength in the "complete erasure of the role of African Americans and slavery" (Davis, "The American Contradiction" 79). Therefore, the question of slavery has undoubtedly played a crucial role in the image of the nation as a whole but it has also produced the internal dichotomy North-South, which led the country towards the Civil War. In fact, "[t]he political and economic power that slavery endowed upon the slaveholding states (…) constituted the fault line in nineteenth-century America that brought

the nation to war" (Davis, "The American Contradiction" 80). This kind of internal fracture is particularly relevant in approaching Faulkner's tragic rendering of the decline of the Compsons which proves how "[t]he abolition of slavery after the Civil War did not end the stark divisions that plague[d] the United States" (Davis, "The American Contradiction" 81). Turner had pointed out how the Frontier furnished "a gate of escape from the bondage of the past" (38) but Faulkner's tragic novel comes as a reminder that there is no escape from the past, especially from *this* past, the one founded on the dichotomy bondage-freedom. This will become evident when discussing *The Sound and the Fury* but a powerful image is already provided by the Compson house: a "square, paintless house with its rotting portico" (*The Sound* 253), surrounded by a fence, a symbolic Frontier that regresses rather than advances; that does not furnish "a gate of escape from the bondage of the past" (Turner 38), but rather motivates the Compsons' entrapment in it. The Frontier had embodied the quintessentially modern idea of a constant movement forward but, as we have seen, the tragic novel registers the utter impossibility of any development. What stops the Compsons in a world that moves forward?

2.2 "Blood, I says, governors and generals"[1]: Faulkner, the South and Modernism

2.2.1 The Death of the South, the Rise of…

My discussion of Faulkner can only begin with the admission that there is certainly no shortage of interpretations of his works as somehow *tragic*, if not as outright tragedies[2]. Perhaps even more numerous are the interventions that connect him to a more or less problematic idea

[1] Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. Vintage, 1995, p. 195.
[2] An emblematic case is, I believe, Warwick Wadlington's *Reading Faulknerian Tragedy* (2019).

of modernity in the dimension of the American South[3]. While agreeing with both visions, my aim is to clarify why American modernity lends itself to the tragic mode and to present *The Sound and the Fury* as a tragic novel that exercises the symbolic function of problematizing the ruptures within the declining planter elite. Interestingly, those ruptures are presented by Faulkner against the backdrop of an imaginary county in Mississippi that he calls Yoknapatawpha which serves to amplify even more "the sense of the importance of region and history in shaping the lives of individuals" (Matthews 3). This idea is particularly applicable in the case of the American South which Matthews describes as a "past-obsessed region" (3) which cannot free itself from the Civil War defeat. In fact, in the years that separate the end of the war from the 1920s, the period in which Faulkner comes of age as a writer, "[t]he South (…) had been locked into a succession of mythologies that exalted the antebellum ideal of plantation life, the kindness of Southern slavery, the nobility of the Confederate cause, the "natural" hierarchies of race and gender, and the honoring of regional pride over class conflict" (Matthews 4). Even Faulkner himself points out that the South finds refuge in a myth but it is actually "dead, killed by the Civil War. There is a thing known whimsically as the New South to be sure, but it is not the south" (*Essays* Ch. VIII). Therefore, the South immediately presents itself as a space that lives on the edge of an irreparable fracture between the distant image of "an aristocratic society organized in quasi-feudal fashion and blessed with remarkable stability and cohesion" (Singal 7) and the reality of being "[l]eft behind by the dynamo of commercial, industrial, and technological progress centered in the modern city" (Matthews 10). The Compsons, in particular, are the quintessential product of this rupture. Throughout the novel they desperately try to cling to the past that had made them governors, generals and rich plantation owners, that had given them stability, but find it impossible to adapt to a present which has "forgotten" about that past, which has moved on from them. Therefore, even the

[3] See Matthews, *William Faulkner: Seeing through the South*; Moreland, "Faulkner and Modernism." (pp. 17–30); Singal, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*; Watson, *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity*.

"recent" American history has been able to nurture the ideal conditions for the tragic novel, more specifically, "the dissociation between the order of change and the order of being" (Touraine 98). However, what is uniquely *tragic* is how the Compsons respond to this dissociation: unable to keep up with the pace of change, especially with a myth of the South that is no longer valid, they *cannot* replace it with anything else. The dissociation between a rapidly changing world and a static sense of being part of that world leads to no reconciliation. Matthews points out that the destruction of the myth of the South is meant to be something positive because it frees the region from racist behavior, anti-intellectualism and poverty (10), but at the same time it leaves a void that is difficult, arguably impossible, to fill. It is precisely this void that traps the Compsons and which creates the preconditions for the tragic conflict to explode; a conflict that, in its most general formulation, plays out between a glorious past and a present that does not live up to it. In fact, with *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner creates a tragic world of confusion and ambivalence in which the "old" life must give way to the new, but miserably fails to do so. That is why this novel has been frequently described as a "masterpiece about the agony of change" (Matthews 77) but it would be more appropriate, at least in the case of the Compsons, to present it as a masterpiece about the *agony of wanting to stay the same*. In fact, their struggle finds its root in the fact that they do not know how to condense historical progression, which is something that inherently moves forward, into a single moment that might be stopped and give them back the glory and respectability that they have irreparably lost. Ultimately, the contradictions in their past, which are both familial and national, urge them to want to perceive history as static moment of glory but that, as they realize at their own expense, is inherently impossible. Actually, the contradictions that the Compson brothers perceive as governing their lives are so strong that they take the form of a real *curse* rooted in their *blood* and family lineage which strongly problematizes both their space for action and their idea of self. Faulkner himself believed that "the inauthentic, myth-laden model of

identity handed down to succeeding generations of southerners by the antebellum planter class" (Singal 18) was somehow the root cause that led the Compson to develop a "faulty" idea of self. It therefore becomes evident that the American tragic character is not the one who proudly conquers the wilderness but the one who struggles to act in a world whose contradictions grant him an incomplete form of freedom. Actually, the tragic sensibility expresses itself precisely in the ambiguities of a world that preaches universal freedom and values it above everything else, but which does not fully approve of it or, at least, not for everyone. So far, the discussion has centered on the extraliterary factors that give foundation to the tragic conflict, but other important questions need to find an answer: where does that conflict actually reside? What literary form(s) does it take?

2.2.2 Faulkner's Tragic Modernism

With *The Sound and the Fury*, we are dealing with a modernist novel par excellence and therefore with the employment of particular devices as well as with a particular understanding of selfhood and psychic life. However, how Faulkner came to be a modernist appears particularly interesting and deserving of consideration in light of the present analysis. Singal explains how Faulkner was born and raised in rural Mississippi and therefore initially immersed in Victorian ethos and moralism (2). In particular, what his upbringing taught him was the "belief in a predictable universe presided over by a benevolent God and governed by immutable natural laws, [and] a corresponding conviction that humankind was capable of arriving at a unified and fixed set of truths about all aspects of life" (Singal 3). However, Faulkner's world is then turned upside down by the new ideas coming from Europe starting from the 1920s which fueled a new understanding of the world as,

> an unpredictable universe where nothing is ever stable and where human beings accordingly must be satisfied with knowledge that is partial and transient at best. Nor is it possible in this situation to devise a fixed system of morality; moral values must remain in flux, shifting continuously in response to changing historical circumstances (Singal 12).

An idea of movement and flux therefore replaces one of stability and fixed truths. Still, saying "replaced" would be wrong for "[a]ll his life Faulkner would struggle to reconcile (…) the Victorian urge toward unity and stability he had inherited as a child of the southern rural gentry, and the Modernist drive for multiplicity and change that he absorbed very early in his career as a self-identifying member of the international artistic avant-garde" (Singal 15). Therefore, his modernism appears as a unique mixture of regional concerns, in particular the struggle for respectability, honor and predictability, and the new modernist understanding of the fluidity of reality, specifically in the dimension of time and the self. As a matter of fact, countless critics have noted how *The Sound and the Fury* is a novel that was greatly influenced by Bergsonian ideas on time, consciousness and the problematic dividing line between past and present. In this respect, these lines from Bergson's *Mind-Energy* (1920) are particularly illuminating: "However you try, you cannot draw a line between the past and the present, nor consequently between memory and consciousness. . .There is no exact moment when the present becomes the past, nor consequently when perception becomes recollection" (69). Also, the rise of psychoanalysis and Freud's work in particular contributed to a new understanding of selfhood as a dynamic, and often conflicting, interaction between different parts of the psyche which struggle to find a balance. The self was thus no longer understood as "a distinct, immutable entity that could be pinpointed inside the mind of each individual" (Singal 14), but rather as something fluid and no longer unitary. These are only two examples which make up the significant, and much richer, panorama of renewal that encompasses the turn of the century, but they serve to explain a crucial change in modernist literary production: the "inward turn"

(Mazzoni 314). As Mazzoni explains, "[t]his transformation overturns relations between the public and private, between what is happening in the outside world and what matters for the private worlds of individuals" (316). Time and individual perceptions thus become the fundamental starting points for modernist writing which ventures down the path of an extreme attempt at mimesis. In a literary landscape that has undergone such dramatic changes, what is the space of the tragic novel? Is there any? The previous chapter has pointed out how the tragic mode initially enters the ecosystem of the realist novel and works to problematize particular historical constellations and social conditions. In this sense, modernism does not betray the realist project but actually brings it to its extreme consequences in an attempt to faithfully represent the complexity of consciousness and its perception of time. Therefore, modernist innovations do not weaken the nature of the tragic novel and certainly do not make it impossible but, quite contrarily, broaden its space of action. As a matter of fact, historical contradictions are now expressed not only externally but rather *felt* internally, mirrored in the very workings of consciousness. The tragic mode can thus go deeper and invade territories that were previously left unexplored. In the case of *The Sound and the Fury,* the modernist context at the basis of its composition allows for an important shift: the historical concerns of this work, despite being fundamental, emerge only in profile, as a peripheral glimpse that rises out of introspective realities so complex as to remain elusive, even indecipherable. It is in those realities that the tragic conflict resides, in a form of isolation even more extreme than that suffered by Emma Bovary and Jude Fawley. The Compson brothers live in a world that preaches movement and welcomes the changing of values but, for them, no real possibility of change is allowed. Trapped in their own consciousnesses, they can do nothing but live under the crushing weight of the interference of the past and their obsessions. In this sense, Faulkner's unique, double-faced, modernism perfectly complements the definition of *The Sound and the Fury* as a tragic novel: it mimics the flow of the mind but paradoxically dooms that flow to a

complete *stasis*[4]. For the Compsons no development is allowed, no way out of the contradictions that curse their family. The figure of Quentin, in particular, encapsulates the idea that for the Compsons there is no alternative. In this respect, Sartre's analysis of the novel and of Quentin's suicide seems particularly fitting,

> As to Faulkner's heroes, they never look ahead. They face backwards as the car carries them along. The coming suicide which casts its shadow over Quentin's last day is not a human possibility; not for a second does Quentin envisage the possibility of *not* killing himself. This suicide is an immobile wall, a *thing* which he approaches backwards, and which he neither wants to nor can conceive. (…) It is not an *undertaking*, but a fatality. In losing its element of possibility it ceases to exist in the future. It is already present, and Faulkner's entire art aims at suggesting to us that Quentin's monologues and his last walk *are already* his suicide (90-91).

The modernist idea on movement therefore crashes into an "immobile wall." *The Sound and the Fury* thus expresses an idea of flux, that, however, already contains in itself its own dissolution. That is why Faulkner's novel is not only modernist but a tragic one. With this idea in mind, the rest of the discussion will be focused precisely on Quentin and the second section of *The Sound and the Fury*. Not surprisingly, "Quentin has been the primary focus for discussing the novel's tragic dimensions" (Wadlington 68) but the nature of those dimensions will be reassessed by clarifying how they stem from one root cause: the "dungeon" (*The Sound* 146) of the Compson name and the deadly inheritance of familial and national contradictions. Inheriting those contradictions is what makes Quentin a tragic character, nailed down to a past that no longer exists, forever incapable of "shifting (…) in response to changing historical circumstances" (Singal 12).

[4] Similarly, Matthews points out that "[t]he power of Faulkner's work of imagination in *The Sound and the Fury* involves subjecting his doomed characters to a radically innovative and modern treatment" (107).

2.3 The Tragic Dimensions of Quentin Compson

2.3.1 "The mausoleum of all hope and desire"[5]: On Time and Inheritance

The undisputed protagonist of any critical discussion about Quentin is the phenomenon of time. After all, the incipit of his section leaves no room for doubt,

> When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools (63).

As this passage immediately makes clear, Quentin is indeed hyper-aware of time, knowing that it is "between seven and eight o'clock" just by looking at the shadow of a sash projected on his curtains. However, this passage also clarifies how Quentin's obsession with time is subordinate to, or rather emanates from, another fundamental aspect, that of inheritance. In fact, while the treatment of time in the novel, and especially in this section, could easily be discussed on its own because of its profound philosophical implications, it acquires a truly tragic meaning only when understood in connection with the irreconcilable contradictions of the Compson inheritance. As a matter of fact, right after waking up Quentin "enters" time not only by looking at the space around him but by "hearing" *the* watch. Crucially, the reference is not to any watch but to his grandfather's, which is here presented as a family heirloom that becomes the symbol of the worst of curses: "possessing" time while being utterly unable to control it, to participate

[5] Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. Vintage, 1995, p. 63.

in its incessant flow. The opening of the section therefore forges a significant link between the phenomenon of time and the question of inheritance; a link reinforced even by Quentin's attempt to break the watch by "twist[ing] the hands off" (*The Sound* 67) of it. While Sartre suggests that "Quentin's gesture of breaking his watch (…) gives [him] access to a time without clocks[, t]he time of Benjy, the idiot, who does not know how to tell time" (85), this kind of "clockless" time does not really exist for Quentin. Instead, his gesture might be interpreted as a desperate attempt to "break free of the Compson past" (Singal 126) but in a frustratingly incomplete way. Indeed, after breaking the crystal and prying off the hands, "[t]he watch tick[s] on (…), the blank dial with little wheels clicking and clicking behind it, not knowing any better" (*The Sound* 67). As Singal points out, "the watch keeps running relentlessly, (…) reflecting the way the family ethos continues to rule over the innermost core of his being" (126). This is where the real *tragic*, openly conflictual, nature of Quentin's predicament becomes evident: in coming after his father, he inherits from him both the watch, the controller of time, and a crippling sense of immobility rooted in a no longer applicable idea of family honor. As Bleikasten explains,

> (…) because he comes *after* his father, Quentin is inevitably caught up in a test of fidelity. Through his father, he is heir to the southern tradition, to its aristocratic code of honor and its puritanical ethic. When this pattern of values is passed on, however, it has already lost its authority, the more so in this case as its appointed transmitter is an inveterate skeptic. Quentin clings to it with desperate obstinacy because to him it is the only available recourse against absurdity, and because its very rigidity seems a safeguard of order and integrity (84).

The myth of the aristocratic South, along with its empty code of honor, loses its authority but nothing concrete replaces it. Quentin nevertheless tries to cling to it "with desperate obstinacy" but, in doing so, he takes root in a past that has disappeared and that cannot grant him the order and integrity he longs for. As Singal points out, "through the agency of his parents history bears down on him relentlessly, leaving him no room to maneuver, no space to achieve authenticity

as a person" (118); but how exactly does that history show itself? As it has been previously mentioned, in this section of the novel we are dealing with a monologue that takes place almost entirely within Quentin's consciousness so that historical realities become peripheral glimpses that rise out of his introspection. This, however, does not mean that they have a weaker hold on him; quite contrarily, it shows how much he has internalized them and how much that internalization has limited his personal freedom and agency. More concretely, Quentin's monologue contains countless instances of the expression "father said," which highlight the fatal care with which he has absorbed his father's teachings and the history that produced them. The first and most emblematic one being: "Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools" (*The Sound* 63). Actually, Bleikasten even suggests that the entire section might be interpreted as "an imaginary conversation between Quentin and Mr. Compson, a running debate between father and son" (83). However, it would be more appropriate to define it not really as a real debate but rather as a one-way conversation, an accumulation of cynical sentences that irreparably condition the way Quentin sees life: impoverished, absurd, despairing. What Quentin inherits form his father is in fact "a knowledge of death" (Bleikasten 84) that locks his gaze backwards and inevitably projects him towards an utmost certainty, what Sartre had called the "immobile wall" of suicide (90). Even more than his brothers, Benjy the idiot and Jason the "businessman," Quentin's sharp intellectual awareness makes him succumb to the pressure of a time that has no future, of a world that is irreparably falling apart but that he knows all too well he cannot abandon. Actually, Quentin's perception of time, besides lacking a projection into the future, is also hardly grounded in a *present*. As Sartre points out,

> The past takes on a sort of super-reality; its contours are hard and clear, unchangeable. The present, nameless and fleeting, is helpless before it. It is full of gaps, and, through these gaps, things of the past, fixed, motionless and silent as judges or glances, come to invade it. Faulkner's monologues remind one of aeroplane trips full of air-pockets. At

> each pocket, the hero's consciousness "sinks back into the past" and rises only to sink back again. The present is not; it becomes. Everything *was* (87).

If the present *is not* and everything *was*, placing a focus on Quentin's perception of *time* appears rather paradoxical. In fact, while the Oxford English Dictionary defines time as a "finite extent or stretch of continued existence" ("Time"), Quentin experiences it in a way that seems hardly *continuous*. Or rather, time as "continuous" constitutes only one side of Quentin's dilemma: while clock time looks ahead in its relentless continuity, the time of his consciousness strives to run backwards. Caught between these two radically opposed forces, Quentin remains immobile, incapable of progressing as much as stopping the invasion of the past. As Bleikasten clarifies, throughout his monologue "nothing suggests the continuous flow and felt direction of a *durée*. Quentin's present is a line, but a dotted one. Moments swirl up out of an opaque emptiness and vanish again, following one another without merging into a continuity" (94). This interpretation seems to contradict the Bergsonian idea of duration, which is usually "the standard by which Faulkner is evaluated" (Messerli 20). However, even though Sartre "assume[s] the Bergsonian idea of time" (Messerli 21), his description of the contours of the past as "hard and clear" already seems to defy an idea of time's duration as something that "eludes measurement because we cannot stipulate a unit or locate a point where changes stop" (Allen 23). In this sense, his conceptualization of Faulkner's monologues as a "aeroplane trips full of air-pockets" does not speak of a homogeneous continuity, but rather of an interruption, a "dotted line." Owing to the delicate balance between time as running forward and backwards, "in Quentin's monologue *arrested* time [therefore] seems to be the very medium of experience" (Bleikasten 95 emphasis mine), and not a smooth idea of duration. With no possibility of a future and a present that is "nameless and fleeting," helpless before the pressure of the past, Quentin is indeed stuck in a space that is neither the present nor the past that he so desperately wants to bring back. For him, time has no inherent movement forward; it is, as Sartre notes,

"decapitated"[6] (90). Still, Bergson's ideas on the equation of consciousness with memory remain absolutely relevant within the novel's framework: "All consciousness, then, is memory,— conservation and accumulation of the past in the present" (Bergson 8). Bleikasten indeed points out that "Quentin does not *have* a memory; to a large extent, he *is* his memory" (95) but that memory, Quentin's lacerated being, "bewitches all time into a turbulent stasis" (95). That is why his experience of time can be best understood not as duration but as an *accumulation*: each "invasion" of the past, each air-pocket creates a fracture that remains open and leads to the accumulation of past events into the fabric of the present to the point that his consciousness can no longer adhere to the *now*. At a deeper and more metaphorical level, for Quentin time is also an accumulation of the failures of the Compsons that came before him as well as the collapse of a whole culture. As Matthews points out, "Quentin arrives in Cambridge a hundred years removed from his frontier ancestor, feeling the pressure of expiring fortune" (93); an expiring fortune symbolized by the selling off of the last parcel of Compson's land, Benjy's pasture, which has now become a golf course. That is why Quentin's "most redoubtable antagonist" (Bleikasten 85) is not really time itself but his "pioneering ancestor, the long-dead founder of the family line; the decisive contest opposes the last of the Compsons to the first, four generations apart, and it is in the "something" that happened between them that we are asked to seek the deeper causes of Quentin's failure" (Bleikasten 85). The idea of time as a destructive accumulation is also perfectly reflected in the stylistic variations within Quentin's

[6] Sartre conceptualizes Faulkner's "metaphysics of time" (85) in an extremely significant way, especially in light of the present analysis, but it should not be ignored that his "decapitated" time is ultimately viewed negatively. He states,

> Consciousness can "exist within time" only on condition that it becomes time as a result of the very movement by which it becomes consciousness. It must become "temporalized," as Heidegger says. We can no longer arrest man at each present and define him as "the sum of what he has." The nature of consciousness implies, on the contrary, that it project itself into the future. We can understand what it is only through what it will be. (…) Man is not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have, of what he might have. And if we steep ourselves thus in the future, is not the formless brutality of the present thereby attenuated?" (92).

However, for Faulkner's characters, and especially Quentin, such an attenuation is impossible.

monologue which ranges "from clear narrative prose to opaque stream of consciousness" (Bleikasten 72). While the events of the present, June 2nd, 1910, benefit from a relatively clear prose, the interference of the past renders the narrative extremely complex and elusive, even delirious. In fact, as the section progresses and the past becomes increasingly hard to handle, "[h]is speech drags us into a space corroded by absence, (…) collapsing rather than elapsing, in which the self is shattered by the reciprocal exclusion of being and having been" (Bleikasten 74). In this respect, it seems particularly fitting to think of Quentin's monologue not as *elapsing* but as *collapsing* under the pressure of an unbearable accumulation of past events that he can no longer manage but neither abandon. That is why time becomes for him "the mausoleum of all hope and desire" (*The Sound* 63); a time that can be neither conquered, nor, despite his father's words, forgotten. The past, in fact, quite literally follows him like a shadow:

> The shadow of the bridge, the tiers of railing, my shadow leaning flat upon the water, so easily had I tricked it that would not quit me. At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned, the shadow of the package like two shoes wrapped up lying on the water (*The Sound* 75).

This is one of the first mentions of Quentin's shadow, which will resurface multiple times throughout the section. From this passage, however, it becomes immediately clear that Quentin has a conflictual and antagonistic relationship with it; a relationship that is charged with a highly metaphorical character. In particular, the significance of the shadow is here enriched by the fact that he perceives it almost as something external, detached from his body, as something that he has to "trick." Ross and Polk propose that the tricking of the shadow by placing it in the water "suggests that his shadow is that part of himself which wants to live in this world, and Quentin must trick it in order to carry out his planned suicide by drowning" (65). Even Bleikasten argues that while a man's shadow is usually a symbol of the immaterial, to Quentin it becomes a reminder of his mortal bodily self, specifically of the darkness of sex, sin and guilt (92).

However, the tricking of the shadow might be interpreted as a subtle act of rebellion on Quentin's part: the shadow in fact represents the impossibility of escaping his crushing past, and his wish to "blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned," actually suggests that the shadow is not what prevents him from killing himself but what prevents him from living freely. The fact that the shadow does not "quit" him reinforces the idea that it stands for the haunting pressure of the past and that it objectively represents his impending tragic fate, one from which he cannot escape, just like from his own shadow. In this sense, Quentin's section also contains strong Shakespearean echoes which can be linked back to the title itself: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more" (*Macbeth* 5.5.24-26). As Bleikasten suggests, Quentin's role is precisely that of the "'poor player,' trying out various parts, none of which he is able to appropriate and sustain. His quest for selfhood amounts to little more than a desperate search for models to imitate" (74), first of all, that of the southern gentleman. Not knowing any alternative, it is a role that he assumes as a guarantor of respectability, stability and order, without realizing that clinging to it is what creates the preconditions for his inner dis-order. In this sense, holding on to the Cavalier identity is not ennobling but rather a source of entrapment, a non-identity which prevents him from achieving any kind of personal authenticity.

2.3.2 "Only you and me"[7]: The Scandal of Incest

If the past is so cumbersome and rooted in a particular familial and national history, why do the intrusions of the past in the present in this section always concern Quentin's sister, Caddy? As the shadow represents Quentin's tragic internalization of the Southern aristocratic

[7] Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. Vintage, 1995, p. 98.

way of life, that internalization results in an obsession with the honor of the family and more specifically with his sister's virginity. This projection of meanings onto Caddy proves how the tragic forces its way not only into the internal lacerations of Quentin's conscience but also into the relationship with his sister. Indeed, an irreparable fracture exists between them: while Caddy is the epitome of dynamism and becoming, which is symbolized by her passage from virginity to an active sexual life, Quentin is trapped in a stasis that leads him to develop an obsession with changelessness, specifically Caddy's. It is precisely in claiming his sister's purity that Quentin paradoxically tries to retrieve something that is not granted to him: the possibility to change, to break the rules. At the beginning of the section, Quentin remembers this conversation with his father,

> In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it. Because it means less to women, Father said. He said it was men invented virginity not women. Father said it's like death: only a state in which the others are left and I said, But to believe it doesn't matter and he said, That's what's so sad about anything: not only virginity, and I said, Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin and he said, That's why that's sad too; nothing is even worth the changing of it, and Shreve said if he's got better sense than to chase after the little dirty sluts and I said Did you ever have a sister? Did you? Did you? (*The Sound* 65)

This passage shows, once again, the substantial interconnection between the question of inheritance and the obsession with virginity. Because he was raised in the South, Quentin has internalized an empty idea of gender roles which should coincide with male sexual prowess and female purity. Not even his father's cynic remark that virginity is merely a "state" makes him change his mind. Therefore, it is primarily for a question of honor and respectability that he says: "Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin." However, this question clearly betrays deeper dimensions: first of all, it shows the extent to which the devotion for his siter's purity goes since he would be ready to take on her "dishonor"; yet, it also makes evident

how the preoccupation with virginity is partly self-directed. In a sense, Quentin's "nostalgia for lost innocence is above all the dream of a sexless life" (Bleikasten 76). Quentin indeed recalls a story he heard from Versh about a man that castrated himself and remarks: "But that's not it. It's not not having them. It's never to have had them then I could say O That That's Chinese I don't know Chinese" (*The Sound* 97). Through these words Quentin "wishes not merely that he could be emasculated (…) but that he could never have known about sex, that sex never existed in his world or his psyche" (Noah and Polk 100), just like a foreign language. Yet, he still expresses a desire that it was him and not Caddy who was "unvirgin." Thus, a complex interplay emerges between Quentin's apparent goal to arrive at a "radical extinction of sexual desire itself" (Bleikasten 77) and his commitment to his sister's purity, his will to shed her, as well as himself, from the darker side of womanhood. "And Father said (…): don't you see? Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said you don't know. You can't know and he said Yes" (*The Sound* 97). Purity might be contrary to Nature but Quentin values it above everything else for one crucial reason: "what matters to him is not so much the preservation of sexual innocence, whether his own or Caddy's, as the safekeeping at any cost of the absolute mutuality of a dual relationship" (Bleikasten 80). Purity, taken to the extreme of the complete cancellation of sexual desire, is for Quentin a shelter, a certainty that he and his sister will always be isolated, protected somehow, from the outside world. That is why he would do anything to push away her lovers; "no price seems too high, and he is willing to pay even that of sin provided that the sin committed is a common sin calling for common punishment" (Bleikasten 80). Indeed, throughout the section Quentin incrementally returns on the idea of committing incest not really because of the nature of the act itself but especially because of the consequences that would result from it,

> Because if it were just to hell; if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. *I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames* (*The Sound* 66).
>
> *If it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have only me then only me then the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame* (*The Sound* 98).
>
> (…) *I'll tell you how it was I'll tell Father then it'll have to be because you love Father then we'll have to go away amid the pointing and the horror the clean flame I'll make you say we did I'm stronger than you I'll make you know we did you thought it was them but it was me listen I fooled you all the time it was me you thought I was in the house where that damn honeysuckle trying not to think the swing the cedars the secret surges the breathing locked drinking the wild breath the yes Yes Yes yes* (*The Sound* 125).

These three passages, taken from three different moments of Quentin's monologue, perfectly illustrate the *collapse* of his speech as he approaches the moment of suicide. The immersion in the past is increasingly deeper and Quentin faces its return with a significantly decreasing narrative control. From the very beginning, however, what he hopes for is that "things just finished themselves," that he might reach a state where he is not torn apart by the forces of time and inheritance, where he is not running "backwards" towards a destiny that is already written. In this sense, incest becomes a way to think of that alternative, a crime so dreadful that it would send him and Caddy directly into the flames of hell. In particular, Quentin imagines a "clean" flame and "[n]obody else there but her and me," which suggests the close interplay between his idea of possession and his view of common sin as a form of freedom. In repeating "*I fooled you all the time it was me*," Quentin indeed reveals that his "deepest fantasy is to have been all of Caddy's lovers, to have been the first and only possessor of her body" (Noah and Polk 127). However, in insisting to confess the incest directly to his father, Quentin also tries to prove that he *can* find a space of action, even if it is outside what is normally thought acceptable. In fact,

"[He] rationalizes that if he could convince his father of the incest then he could, in effect, deny Caddy's other lovers" (Noah and Polk 150), and receive a punishment that would allow him and Caddy to restore "the absolute mutuality of [their] dual relationship" (Bleikasten 80). Yet, the project of reclaiming his sister, as well as his agency, through incest is also a failure. Mr. Compson, in particular, never belied that it could have been otherwise: "i think you are too serious to give me any cause for alarm (…) did you try to make her do it and i i was afraid to i was afraid she might and then it wouldnt have done any good but if i could tell you we did it would have been so and then the others wouldnt be so and then the world would roar away" (*The Sound* 150). This passage clarifies how Quentin simply "[contents] himself with the thought and the word of [incest], afraid of committing the act" (Bleikasten 89). Faulkner himself addresses Quentin's inability to act in the Appendix and he confirms that he "loved not the idea of the incest which he would not commit, but some presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment: he, not God, could by that means cast himself and his sister both into hell, where he could guard her forever and keep her forevermore intact amid the eternal fires" (207-208). Therefore, the goal behind incest is that of reclaiming his sister for himself but its ultimate meaning must be realized in the fact that it has to be confessed to his father. Indeed, "what Quentin secretly intends by confessing it to him is to challenge paternal authority, to provoke Mr. Compson into acting at last as the interdicting and punishing father" (Bleikasten 87). However, he perfectly knows that Quentin would have never felt the need to confess incest to him if he had actually committed it. He thus remains virtually unbothered, philosophizing about how everything will pass, including his despair over Caddy and his lovers. Actually, Quentin's hatred towards them is indeed rooted in the fact that "in their ability to seduce and dominate, their sexual potency, physical strength, and sporting prowess (…), they embody alike the ideal of *mastery* which Quentin pretends to despise because it is out of his reach" (Bleikasten 83). In fact, Quentin cannot convince anyone with words, let alone with actions. In this respect,

Caddy's loss of virginity marks a broader idea of change to which Quentin cannot access even after his "dancing sitting down" (*The Sound* 113) with Natalie. In fact, what Caddy was able to do was flee from "the stereotyped identity of the southern lady, an act of rejection that shapes her whole life. Sensing how the Victorian ethos has disfigured her mother's personality, she adamantly refuses to suppress her emotions for the sake of propriety" (Singal 131). Instead of breaking with an empty tradition like his sister has done, Quentin fills the void left by it with a paralyzing obsession for Caddy's act of rejection; an obsession that borders even in a desire to kill her. In this sense, Quentin's lengthy report of the scene with Caddy by the branch appears particularly significant and worthy to be quoted at length,

> do you remember the day damuddy died when you sat down in the water in your drawers
> yes
> I held the point of the knife at her throat it wont take but a second just a second then I can do mine
> I can do mine then
> all right can you do yours by yourself
> yes the blades long enough Benjys in bed by now
> yes
> it wont take but a second Ill try not to hurt
> all right
> will you close your eyes
> no like this you'll have to push it harder
> touch your hand to it
> but she didnt move her eyes were wide open looking past my head at the sky
> Caddy do you remember how Dilsey fussed at you because your drawers were muddy
> dont cry
> Im not crying Caddy
> push it are you going to
> do you want me to
> yes push it
> touch your hand to it

> dont cry poor Quentin
> but I couldnt stop she held my head against her damp hard breast I could hear her heart going firm and slow now not hammering and the water gurgling among the willows in the dark and waves of honeysuckle coming up the air my arm and shoulder were twisted under me
> what is it what are you doing
> her muscles gathered I sat up
> its my knife I dropped it (*The Sound* 128-129).

The scene opens with Quentin mentioning the day of Damuddy's funeral and how he and his brothers saw Caddy's muddy drawers as she was climbing a tree to spy what was going on inside the house. Faulkner himself explains the centrality of this scene in the architecture of the novel by saying that the brothers look up at Caddy as she climbs the tree "without then realising the symbology of the soiled drawers, for here again hers was the courage which was to face later with honor the shame which she was to engender, which Quentin and Jason could not face" (*Essays* Ch. VIII). The muddy drawers are therefore recalled here as a symbol of Caddy's courage to take action as well as a sign of her doomed sexuality. Quentin envies and despises both to the point that he sees only one way out: death, or rather, their "mutual" death. However, his attempt to kill Caddy appears rather hesitant and clumsy as proven by her remarks: "all right can you do yours by yourself," "no like this you'll have to push it harder," "push it are you going to." These interventions demonstrate how Caddy is actually the governing figure in this interaction, how she "seems to accept Quentin's threat to kill her and then himself as a mother might indulge a child's fantasy[, even asking] whether he can "do" his suicide by himself" (Noah and Polk 130). Also, while Quentin cannot stop crying, Caddy's heart is "going firm and slow now not hammering," which suggests Quentin's impotence to affect his sister, who is not at all moved by his threats. This image of impotence is enclosed in the last line, "its my knife I dropped it," which is "a perfect objective correlative for Quentin's sexual and emotional impotence" (Noah and Polk 131). Bleikasten similarly notes that his "dreams of revenge and

murder are only dreams, and whenever it is really a matter of action, Quentin falters—or faints" (89). His hesitation actually leads to the opposite effect, to an increased distance between him and Caddy which is symbolized by the arrival of Dalton Ames and the image of his and Caddy's shadow as "one shadow" (*The Sound* 130). This kind of paralysis does not seem to affect Caddy and this has led critics like Messerli to believe that she is actually the real character of time in the novel, embodying "dynamism itself" (37). A dynamism that, however, still has no future. What adds to the tragic dimension of the novel is precisely the fact that Caddy, despite having the courage to actually break with a Southern idea of femininity, "can discover no suitable identity to replace the one she rejects" (Singal 131). The Compson name creates a void that leaves no escape for her either. In fact, she seems to experience her sexuality not so much as a choice but as an imposition. Even though we never have a direct access to Caddy's consciousness, Quentin reports her words: "*There was something terrible in me sometimes at night I could see it grinning at me I could see it through them grinning at me through their faces it's gone now and I'm sick*" (*The Sound* 94). Also, to Quentin's repeated question whether she actually loved her sexual partners, she once responds "*When they touched me I died*" (*The Sound* 125). Though we can never be sure as to how reliable Quentin's report is, Caddy describes her sexual desire as something dreadful, nightmarish, "grinning" at her and making her feel like she "died." Going back to their confrontation by the branch, Caddy states: "dont cry Im bad anyway you cant help it" (*The Sound* 133), and Quentin responds, "theres a curse on us its not our fault" (*The Sound* 133). Once again, the idea of the family curse serves to justify their impossibility to make any real change and to substitute their deadly legacy with anything else. In this sense, incest acquires its most tragic dimension as a way for Quentin to attempt the impossible: writing a different story for the Compsons. Bleikasten points out that,

> Quentin would do anything to turn the clock back and revive the sheltered world of childhood. As he conceives of it, consummated incest would fold his family back on

> itself and seal it off against the troublesome outsiders. (…) His is a *morale du pire*: the incest once committed, the honor of the Compsons would be rescued through the very excess of disgrace, and evil exorcised by the very enormity of his sin (87-88).

However, incest remains a fantasy, only a word, and the Compson name is not cleansed. What should have been for Quentin a way to save the exclusivity of his relationship with his sister "against troublesome outsiders" is instead proof that nothing can change the course of the Compson's decline, not even the "enormity" of incest. This is because the contradictions that propel the collapse remain open, unsolvable, magnified in an unbearable solitude. Indeed, the tragic novel is a form profoundly connected to a sense of isolation; here the voices of the family members are striking precisely because of their total inability to harmonize. Each of the brothers tries to exorcise this loneliness by holding on to something that they believe is exclusively and rightfully theirs: it is the case of Jason's greed, and Benjy and Quentin's claims on "their" Caddy (Wadlington 74). Although this compensation goes as far as contemplating incest as a *solution*, none of the brothers can really manage to escape from their isolation, from the emptiness created by their obsessions. Once again, the root cause of this impossibility can be attributed to the Compson name and in particular to the complete absence of loving, supporting parents. While Quentin, Caddy, Jason and Benjy inherit from their father the obsolete values of the southern tradition, their mother also represents "the worst aspects of late Victorian culture as it had taken hold in the South" (Singal 125). Concerned only with appearances and respectability, she completely fails "to be a source of maternal affection for her children" (Noah and Polk 70). Her failure creates a deep sense of isolation and abandonment which in Quentin's monologue is perfectly encapsulated by his remembrance of a picture depicting "a dark place into which a single weak ray of light came slanting upon two faces lifted out of the shadow" (*The Sound* 146). The picture was torn out because he constantly looked at it: "I'd have to turn back to it until the dungeon was Mother herself she and Father upward into weak light holding hands and us lost somewhere below even them without even a ray of light" (*The Sound* 146).

This passage crucially shows how Quentin imagines his family situation as "scene of darkness and confinement" (Bleikasten 75), as a space that has failed them and contributed to their impossibility to see the "light." The image of the Mother and Father holding hands indeed represents the fatal mixture of lovelessness and inheritance which has pressed their children into an empty darkness, confined them to a life whose contours have already been outlined, limiting their personal space for agency. While Quentin's monologue is studded with the expression "father said," the mother's failure works on an even deeper level: "*if I'd just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother*" (*The Sound* 145). This isolated mention of the Mother clarifies how Quentin's life has been profoundly debilitated and damaged by her absence. "The cold, egotistical Mrs. Compson has become a lightless prison-womb to her children, keeping them captive (…) through what she denied them" (Bleikasten 75). Quentin even uses the metaphor of poison: "*Done in Mother's mind though. Finished. Finished. Then we were all poisoned*" (*The Sound* 85). Even though mother love should be the guarantor of a healthy beginning, it is actually what finishes, poisons the Compson siblings from the early stages of their lives. "For this poison there is no antidote; from this darkness, there is no escape. None of the Compson children will ever succeed in fleeing from it, whatever their individual responses to the original trauma" (Bleikasten 75). Many critics have indeed noted how Quentin seems to respond to the original trauma of the absence of the mother by displacing her role onto Caddy in a desperate attempt to find the love that was denied to him (Bleikasten 75; Singal 124). Yet, even Caddy is unable to give him her undivided attention, to accommodate his need for a solid and exclusive relationship. Whereas Quentin imagines a space that is exclusively his and Caddy's within the flames of hell, the only place that they can be is in the dark, "lost somewhere below (…) without even a ray of light" (*The Sound* 146).

2.3.3 "A quarter-hour yet. And then I'll not be"[8]: Awaiting Nothingness

While much of Quentin's section is focused on a failed quest for authentic and lasting relationships, his encounter with the Italian girl at the end of his section functions as a paradoxical reversal. In fact, in refusing to leave his side, she does what Caddy had never been able to do: stay. However, whereas Quentin finds in her a "rediscovered sister" (Bleikasten 78), her refusal to leave becomes tinged with ominous qualities. As Bleikasten points out, "in her uncanny silence, her dark stare, and her inexplicable stubbornness in following him everywhere, [she becomes] a symbol of Fate" (78); in particular, a fate that does not let him go without playing one last joke on him. As a matter of fact, Quentin's genuine willingness to help the little girl find her home leads to him facing an accusation of "meditated criminal assault" (*The Sound* 118). While in the episodes located in the past Quentin was often portrayed as crying, he now begins to laugh and his laughter crucially registers the tragic fracture between what he wanted and what turned out to be real. His motive had always been that of protecting Caddy and of securing an exclusive relationship with her, but all he is left with is an unknow Italian girl that he is accused of "stealing." This comes a long way from his dreams of purifying the name of the Compsons and of seeking revenge against Caddy's lovers. Things have become so paradoxical that Quentin continues to laugh and, while he initially tries to control himself, he later "quit[s] trying to stop it" (*The Sound* 124). As Noah and Polk suggest, this sentence literally points to his blocked attempt to stop the laughter but from this moment onwards he will also quit trying to stop the intrusion of the past which will soon overwhelm him entirely (123). Quentin lapses into it to the point that he fades from the present in a way that is clearly visible even to those around him: "They watched me through veils, with a kind of delicate horror" (*The Sound* 119). This remark powerfully suggests how the intrusiveness of the past creates a barrier between Quentin and the outside world. Also, it shows that to an external gaze

[8] Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. Vintage, 1995, p. 147.

it is as if Quentin is already disappearing, his image hidden behind the diaphanous veil of memory. In this sense, Sartre's words once again seem particularly fitting: "Faulkner's entire art aims at suggesting to us that Quentin's monologues and his last walk *are already* his suicide" (91). Indeed, how can it be otherwise when Quentin's identity is one that already suffers "rigor mortis, failing to reinvent itself at the close of his family's historical day" (Matthews 91). His plight is that of "a person impaled by cultural change, trapped within a major historical value system that he knows is now hopelessly obsolete" (Singal 129). That is why Quentin lives in a constant anticipation of death, in a sterile immobility that amounts to a non-existence. "A quarter-hour yet. And then I'll not be. The peacefullest words. Peacefullest words. *Non fui. Sum. Fui. Nom sum*" (*The Sound* 147). Interestingly, this is Quentin's only projection of himself the future, but what he considers is actually "a nonfuture, a simple promise of extinction" (Bleikasten 97). For Quentin there is no moment of being, no epiphany, no illumination, no possible escape from his fractured internal time: "the encounter of present and past, instead of achieving a happy fusion, can only result in agonizing confusion" (Bleikasten 97). Consequently, the last pages of his monologue acquire a dizzying pace as Quentin's consciousness contemplates the contradictory impulses of being, non-being and having been. The past tightens its grip on him and the overlapping of temporal planes is increasingly pressing until "all stable things (…) become shadowy paradoxical" (*The Sound* 144). Meanwhile, the grandfather's watch is still there, "telling its furious lie on the dark table" (*The Sound* 147). The grandfather's watch *lies* precisely in making him believe that its ticking indicates a forward movement, while it is exactly the family ethos that gives him no way out of the past. Quentin's last words are indeed dedicated to his father and to the lengthiest, most dense, rendering of their conversation regarding incest. Its placement at the very end of the section emphasizes its importance and in particular how the deadly interconnection of time and inheritance provides the key to Quentin's suicide. First and foremost, this conversation renders evident how Mr.

Compson's analysis of Quentin's confusion and fears "reduces a strongly felt emotion to a pseudoscientific problem" (Noah and Polk 101), to something that lacks any particular significance. He states: "you cannot bear to think that some day it will no longer hurt you like this" (*The Sound* 150) and especially that someday he will come to realize that "she was not quite worth despair perhaps" (*The Sound* 151). To these remarks Quentin responds with one enigmatic word, repeated four times: "temporary" (*The Sound* 150-151). As Noah and Polk suggests, it might represent a claim that his suffering is only temporary because he will soon kill himself, but also a way to challenge his father's analysis of his pain as something that he will get over when his devotion to Caddy is actually eternal (150-151). However, Quentin longs for a sublimation of his pain that will never be within his reach; as Mr. Compson claims, for man only "finitude" (*The Sound* 150) exists. Throughout the section he has bombarded Quentin with his beliefs in the meaninglessness of life, and his conviction that there is nothing else in the world but man's temporary condition which "dispossesses us of our memories, dulls and degrades our affections, and wears away even our sorrows" (Bleikasten 100). As much as Quentin tries to rebel against this vision, to look for a sense of wholeness and a validation of his strong emotions, he still succumbs to it. Actually, it cannot be otherwise since, as Sartre points out, Quentin's suicide "is not an *undertaking*, but a fatality" (91). Still, the choice to commit suicide by drowning is highly charged at a symbolical level and many critics have indulged on the possible meanings behind it: a form of purification, a return to the maternal womb (Singal 129), a way of regaining possession of his lost childhood and even a final consummation of incest in death (Bleikasten 90). Bleikasten even adds that, as much as he carefully prepares himself,

> Quentin dies above all because of his inner weakness, and nothing in his monologue allows us to assume that at the point of death his blind confusion has yielded to tragic lucidity. Quentin *lives* the absurd in the narcissistic vertigo of his obsessions and fantasies; to the end he lacks the detachment which would convert his experience into

> awareness and so make his suicide a death *against* the absurd. Quentin's is not a philosophical suicide but the predictable end of his long journey into night. (Bleikasten 100)

However, it might be argued that Quentin's suicide is tragic precisely because, even in its fatality, he approaches it with *both* confusion and lucidity. While on the one hand he is indeed at the mercy of the confusing invasion of the past, on the other, he knows that his allegiance to the Compson tradition is what nailed him down to it. In fact, not only does Quentin swear allegiance to the southern tradition but he does so knowing all too well that it has lost its meaning. It is precisely in this coexistence of fidelity and necessity that Quentin's tragic fate begins to unfold. That is why suicide is not so much an amplification of his inner weakness as a gauge for his utter impotence; an impotence motivated by the dark "dungeon" of its inheritance. In this sense, suicide is not an "imagined solution" (Matthews 88) and, as Bleikasten indeed notes, not even attempt to wrest control over his fate, to rebel *against* it. In fact, suicide *is* Quentin's fate, something that he never considers *not* doing. With the Compson legacy weighing over him, Quentin can do nothing but slide towards his inevitable destruction. Interestingly, he does so through the coexistence of two parallel and seemingly irreconcilable impulses: while his mind gives in to the pressure of the past and everything in his consciousness becomes unstable and "shadowy paradoxical" (*The Sound* 144), Quentin prepares the suicide in an extremely ritualistic and mechanical way, cleaning his clothes, mailing letters, carefully buying flat irons of the right weight and shape so that they might look like a box of shoes[9]. The section indeed closes with Quentin brushing his teeth and his hat before heading to Charles River, two actions that suggest an extreme degree of detachment. However, these rituals also give Quentin an apparent sense of control over a destiny that he is not really choosing but

[9] "The clerk said, 'These weigh ten pounds.' Only they were bigger than I thought. So I got two six-pound little ones, because they would look like a pair of shoes wrapped up. They felt heavy enough together (…)" (*The Sound* 71)

simultaneously longing for. In fact, for Quentin the words "I'll not be" are the "peacefullest" (*The Sound* 147) precisely because they represent the moment when "time will cease to torture him" (Brown 551), when his consciousness will cease to hold him back. Indeed, while "being" has entailed a harrowing confusion with "having-been," "non-being" is finally a promise of peace and nothingness. Therefore, the laceration between the time of the watch, relentlessly registering a movement forward, and the time of Quentin's consciousness, running backwards towards the past, can have no solution but in death, in utter annihilation. His battle is lost from the start or, borrowing Mr. Compson's words, it is not even fought.

2.4 "I seed de beginning, en now I see de endin"[10]: A Story of Denied Redemption

Having analyzed Quentin's monologue, which constitutes only one of the four sections of *The Sound and the Fury*, one key question still needs to be answered if this work is to be labelled a tragic novel: Is there a way out of Quentin's "decapitated" time? Is redemption possible for the Compsons? Considering the second section alone would make this question seem rhetorical and even expanding the vision to Benjy's and Jason's monologues would hardly offer a different perspective. In fact, despite the significant differences that undoubtedly exist among the various sections, they demonstrate how Benjy, Quentin and Jason are all nailed down to the past, damaged by the shared inheritance of the Compson name and trapped by the forces of a decline that cannot be reversed. However, the last section of the novel is not dedicated to a family member but to the family cook, Dilsey. As a more dynamic and positive character, she has often been interpreted as the "missing" link to the future, as someone who is able to transcend time (Messerli 36) and therefore provide a possible solution to Quentin's

[10] Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. Vintage, 1995, p. 253.

"decapitated" perception of it[11]. Indeed, her section is so different from the previous ones that its variations and thematic implications might seem blinding, oriented towards a completely different direction with respect to the brothers' monologues. However, a closer look reveals that Dilsey's section does not really constitute a complete break with what came before it but rather a more nuanced continuation. First of all, the shift to an omniscient narrator provides a stark contrast with the "narrowly limited viewpoint" (Bleikasten 126) of the preceding sections. Yet, as much as this narratorial choice allows for a "sensation of aerial freedom" (Matthews 104) that was not granted before, the bleakness that characterized Benjy's, Quentin's and Jason's monologues is hardly dissipated,

> The day dawned bleak and chill, a moving wall of grey light out of the north-east which, instead of dissolving into moisture, seemed to disintegrate into minute and venomous particles, like dust that, when Dilsey opened the door of the cabin and emerged, needled laterally into her flesh, precipitating not so much a moisture as a substance partaking of the quality of thin, not quite congealed oil (*The Sound* 225).

Immediately painting a picture of coldness and murky grayness, the incipit of Dilsey's section does not evoke a more lively, welcoming atmosphere. Quite contrarily, dawn is described as "disintegrat[ing] into minute and venomous particles" that "needle" into Dilsey's flesh; a description that instantly delineates a hostile world where even air has a malevolent, heavy quality similar to "not quite congealed oil." This passage thus seems to depict the close of day rather than its beginning and it clearly does not fulfill the promise of a world born afresh (Bleikasten 126). However, any account of the negative undertones of the last section, which

[11] Many critics point to one scene in particular to support this argument: "On the wall above the cupboard, invisible save at night, by lamplight and even then evincing an enigmatic profundity because it had but one hand, a cabinet clock ticked, then with a preliminary sound as if it had cleared its throat, struck five times. 'Eight o'clock,' Dilsey said" (*The Sound* 233). Bleikasten points out that "[i]n his rage against time, Quentin tore off the hands of his watch. The Compsons' old kitchen clock has but one hand left and its chime is out of order. Yet Dilsey does not take offense at its "lying" and automatically corrects its errors. To her, time is no matter of obsession" (135). Messerli similarly notes that "Dilsey corrects the kitchen clock, automatically demonstrating the irrationality of time measured in space rather than the consciousness" (31).

are indeed evident from the very beginning, is quickly put to the test if we consider Dilsey's strong religious beliefs and the fact that the core of her section is formed around her attendance of the Easter service with Benjy and her children. In particular, what appears puzzling in the architecture of the novel is Reverend Shegog's sermon which focuses with increasing exaltation on the certainty of redemption and resurrection: "Breddren! Yes, breddren! Whut I see? Whut I see, O sinner? I sees de resurrection en de light; sees de meek Jesus sayin Dey kilt Me dat ye shall live again; I died dat dem whut sees en believes shall never die" (*The Sound* 252). What is noteworthy about this sermon is that, placed towards the end of the novel, it does not merely indicate a tonal shift but constitutes a radical reversal that alters the novel's very texture (Bleikasten 140). Steeped in eschatological anticipation and communal enthusiasm, Shegog's words indeed overshadow, both thematically and stylistically, the self-centered worlds of Benjy, Quentin and Jason. Actually, they constitute a real "emotional shift from rational coldness to spiritual fervor" (Bleikasten 140), to a voice so powerful for the congregation as to be capable of "sinking into their hearts" (*The Sound* 250). Indeed, this sermon represents a radical reversal precisely because for the first time in the novel not only is a voice *heard*, but also *listened to*, awaited and hoped for. In this sense, Dilsey's reaction to it is paradigmatic: "Two tears slid down her fallen cheeks, in and out of the myriad coruscations of immolation and abnegation and time" (*The Sound* 250). Again, her tears prove that Shegog's is not only a voice that *speaks* but also one that *moves*, "allowing at once personal identity to be transcended and cultural identity to be confirmed" (Bleikasten 141). Ultimately, what the Easter service places before the reader is thus a "oneness of emotion and purpose" (Singal 141), a strong sense of community that wins over solitude (Bleikasten 141). It therefore appears clear that the theorization of *The Sound and the Fury* as a tragic novel reaches a crossroads before it: should the meaning of Shegog's sermon be extended to the whole novel and therefore suggest that there might be hope for redemption after all, even for the Compsons? Or should it be interpreted

as a moment of wholeness and transcendence from which the decaying family is painfully excluded? The strength of the Ester service, and especially its placement towards the end of the novel, might be misleading but Quentin had already provided a definitive answer to the question,

> And I will look down and see my murmuring bones and the deep water like wind, like a roof of wind, and after a long time they cannot distinguish even bones upon the lonely and inviolate sand. Until on the Day when He says Rise only the flat-iron would come floating up. It's not when you realize that nothing can help you — religion, pride, anything - it's when you realize that you don't need any aid (*The Sound* 66).

For Quentin no transcendence is possible, no resurrection in the light, only the flat irons will remain to rise on Judgement Day. His body, instead, will be lost completely, his bones indistinguishable "upon the lonely and inviolate sand." While for Quentin time is "*that which separates*" (Sartre 89), leading to anguish and solitude, Dilsey's adherence to religion allows her to have a conception of time "[f]irmly rooted in the eschatological doctrine of Christianity" (Bleikasten 136) and thus in a strong sense of community and sacrifice. However, religion cannot help Quentin; as he sees it, Christ "was not crucified" (*The Sound* 64) but similarly "worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels" (*The Sound* 64). The history of humanity is only that of a lost battle with time; a time that has no teleological dimension but only a chronological one that wears away everything.

While Quentin's thoughts turn to the end of times, even within the present of the fourth section there is a crucial detail which contributes to undermine the idea that Shegog's sermon might be valid for the Compsons. As Bleikasten points out, the Easter service is counterpointed by Jason ruthlessly hunting down his niece (Bleikasten 129), " [t]he bitch that cost me a job, the one chance I ever had to get ahead, that killed my father and is shortening my mother's life every day and made my name a laughing stock in the town" (*The Sound* 258). While Dilsey is being comforted by religious communion and elevated by Shegog's words, Jason is plotting his

revenge, unable to accept that he was "outwitted by a woman, a girl" (*The Sound* 261). This parallelism serves to highlight a crucial matter, one that settles this novel's definition as tragic: for the Compsons nothing changes. There is no point in assigning to Dilsey a saving role because, even in her courage to persevere, she does not, and cannot, interfere with their irreversible decline[12]. Here the nature of the tragic novel as an "open" form becomes unmistakably evident: Shegog's sermon is the negative evocation of a reality that exists "in the distance" but that *cannot* include the Compsons and *cannot* reconcile their contradictions. In this sense, its insertion into the novel becomes almost ironical for it points "to a vanishing myth and expose its total irrelevance as far as the Compsons are concerned" (Bleikasten 137). That is why its presence does not diminish the tragic dimension of the novel but adds to it; indeed, it exacerbates the conflict between a real chance for redemption and the total impossibility of accessing it. In this sense the tragic novel establishes itself not a problem-solving mechanism but a form that leaves the wound open, that shows the decline of the Compsons in its utter irreparability while revealing only in the end that an alternative exists. However, the resolution of the contradictions, both historical and familial, which have motivated the Compsons' ruinous fate remains tragically incomplete. With respect to this, both Warwick Wadlington and Anna Street talk about the "absence of tragic closure in the novel" (Wadlington 68), claiming that Faulkner wrote "a tragedy whose greatest outrage is the absence of anything tragic at all" (Street, "Untimely Loss"). However, that is only because they substantially misinterpret the nature of the tragic and insist on considering the novel within the premises of *tragedy*. Wadlington states that,

> Whereas in a standard "Aristotelian" formula for tragedy, plot resolution at the level of incident is necessary to trigger catharsis in the audience, in *The Sound and the Fury* the

[12] This is something that Faulkner makes even clearer in the Appendix, specifically when Dilsey refuses to "see" Caddy's picture portraying her next to a German general, claiming that her eyes are not good anymore: "she didn't want to see it know whether it was Caddy or not because she knows Caddy doesn't want to be saved hasn't anything anymore worth being saved for nothing worth being lost that she can lose" (212).

> direction is reversed. The plot offers no resolution at the level of narrative action, so that the novel as aesthetic tragic event must be completed, if it is to be, by a successful evocation of resolving catharsis in the reader. In this significant respect, *The Sound and the Fury* is a tragedy not of plot but of voice (68).

The Sound and the Fury is not a tragedy but a successful tragic novel that problematizes the idea of catharsis itself, especially of a higher resolution. It is true that the novel is "open-ended as far as plot is concerned" (Bleikasten 132) and does not offer a climactic, definitive, heroic action but this does not mean that closure, or even purification, has to be found elsewhere. The point is that catharsis is not "carefully *displaced* from Quentin to Dilsey" (Wadlington 76 emphasis mine) but missing altogether. Even though Dilsey "stand[s] above the fallen ruins of the family like a ruined chimney, gaunt, patient and indomitable" (Faulkner, *Essays* Ch. VIII), her section "does not provide the hoped-for perspective from which the dissonant earlier sections could be seen as parts of a coherent and understandable whole. It only introduces us to another, less solipsistic "world," juxtaposed to the worlds of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason but *incapable* of holding them together" (Bleikasten 145 emphasis mine). Therefore, no final "click" is granted and Macbeth's "Signifying nothing" (5.5.28) hovers over the four sections of the novel. When Dilsey says "I seed de beginning, en now I see de endin" (253) she does not enclose the story of the family within a meaningful narrative with her as the observer but voices the downfall of the Compsons as one of redemption denied, destined to remain tragically out of reach.

Chapter 3

Irreconcilable Claims, Problematic Resolutions: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a Postmodernist Tragic Novel

3.1 Postmodernism and the Tragic: An Excess of *Present*?

> The past (…) has (…) become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum[,] (…) more apt for the "prehistory" of a society bereft of all historicity, one whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles. In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as "referent" finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.
>
> - Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (18)

> (…) she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. (…) Nothing. (…) Then something. The plash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes (…).
>
> - Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (6-7)

If Faulkner and *The Sound and the Fury* served to expose the roots of the tragic mode's legitimacy in the American context, and more specifically to detail its interaction with the modernist aesthetic, it is now a matter of discussing whether the form of the tragic novel can still answer to the symbolic needs of a vastly altered historical, social and economic landscape:

postmodernity. Understanding the nature of this alteration is crucial and involves venturing even further into uncharted territory regarding the possibilities of the tragic novel. In fact, since the previous chapters have repeatedly emphasized how this form is closely linked to a specific perception of *modernity*, what happens when that modernity is *post*? Also, as the set of cultural practices attributed to *post*-modernity, what does *post*-modernism actually entail? While "no clear consensus about its meaning exists among scholars" (Hassan 32), "post" has come to adopt various stances with respect to "modernity" and "modernism": a total break, an impoverishment, and even a form of liberation from what were considered excessive constraint and a misdirected faith in totalization and centering. Indeed, the perceived necessity to overcome modernity, its cultural production as well as its philosophical premises, is rooted in the fact that it is recognized as embodying "the [Hegelian] dream of an absolute metanarrative of the historical unfolding of an always unitary reason" (Barnett 2). Among the theorists of the postmodern, Lyotard in particular famously defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard XXIV), that is, as a moment in which reality substantially exceeds the boundaries within which a unifying metanarrative would like to understand it. In this respect, Lyotard adds that any "consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. (...) Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (XXV). Therefore, where there was once a center, a symbolic consensus, there is now the incommensurability of difference and heterogeneity. In this sense, postmodernism can be defined as "employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning" (Aylesworth, "Postmodernism"). Stimulating this sense of destabilization and feeding the divide with modernism, Jameson attacks historical progress and states that "'modernist history' is the first casualty and

mysterious absence of the Postmodernism period" (XI). Indeed, he analyzes postmodernity as "an age that has forgotten how to think historically" (IX) in which "any observation about the present can be mobilized in the very search for the present itself" (XII). As a consequence, postmodernism sees "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (9) which becomes its most significant formal characteristic. Certainly, Jameson and Lyotard are only two examples of the extremely rich and diversified theories of the postmodern but they reflect a discernible trend in defining this period: an emphasis on discontinuity which results in attributing to it an excess of *present*. As Fusillo points out, the postmodern one is "una temporalità tutta schiacciata sul presente, che recupera il passato in un museo di fotografie e di ritagli, attraverso uno storicismo onnivoro e libidico, e attraverso operazioni di nostalgia" ("a temporality completely crushed on the present, which recovers the past in a museum of photographs and clippings, through an omnivorous and libidinal historicism, and through operations of nostalgia"; *Estetica* 102). Indeed, the perception is that of an age which somehow lives in isolation: behind it lies a past that it rejects, or that, in Jamesonian terms, it has supposedly lost and attempts to nostalgically retrieve, and ahead not a future but a debilitating sense of the end: "the end of ideology, art, or social class; the "crisis" of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state" (Jameson 1). This description of postmodernism can only lead to one central question: can a notion like the tragic, originally born from an active "engagement with historical thought" (Billings 5) and functioning only in close contact with it, survive in an age that has supposedly lost history and rather lives in a "timeless" present? In order to answer this question affirmatively, two fundamental assumptions about postmodernism must be rethought: the idea of a fixed definition covering a supposedly essential trait and, ultimately, the exact meaning carried by the prefix "post."

3.1.1 The Face(s) of Postmodernism and the Tragic

In his attempt to answer "the question of postmodernism," Hassan points out that, "[d]efining traits are [always] dialectical and also plural; to elect a single trait as an absolute criterion of postmodern grace is to make of all other writers preterites. Thus we can not simply rest (…) on the assumption that postmodernism is antiformal, anarchic, or decreative" (33). Also, "[c]atalogues of postmodernist features are typically organized in terms of oppositions with features of modernist poetics" (McHale 7), but this practice only provides a "schematic bipolitics" (Hassan 35) that perpetuates an incomplete and univocal understanding of postmodernism and its defining traits. This very incompleteness strengthens the notion that postmodernism and the tragic are incompatible, a perspective that Terry Eagleton falls victim to when he asserts that the tragic "grates on the postmodern sensibility, with its unbearable lightness of being" (IX). Once again, what he is thinking of is tragedy as a performative art form that retains "an ontological depth and high seriousness" (X) that is resolutely incongruous with the "rather too shallow" (X) postmodernism. Also, in keeping with Jameson's analysis Eagleton similarly asserts that the "amnesiac postmodernism" (XVI) has suppressed every possibility of coming close to anything truly tragic. He goes on to say that,

> If boredom and brutality are just the way things are, then (so the case goes) they may be pitiable but scarcely tragic, any more than one could speak of the colour of the grass as tragic. Anyway, if human beings are in fragments, then they are not even coherent enough to be the bearers of tragic meaning, like those Beckettian characters whose suffering cannot be without respite since they cannot even remember what happened to them yesterday. (…) Perhaps what the death-of-tragedy advocates really mean is that a certain kind of value – immanent, heroic, sacred, foundational – is no longer much in vogue (64-65).

From this passage it appears clear that Eagleton builds his analysis on a profoundly simplistic and univocal understanding of both the nature of the tragic and postmodernism itself. In fact,

the tragic cannot simply be equated with a "certain kind" of heroic and sacred value, just like postmodernism should not be reduced to commonplace boredom and brutality. Even more incorrect is the assumption that human beings should be coherent "enough" to be bearers of tragic meaning. While it is true that postmodernism undertakes an "enquiry into the nature of subjectivity" (Hutcheon, "Beginning" 17) whose outcome reveals that the "subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity" (Hutcheon, "Beginning" 17), it is this very fragmentation which becomes *tragic*. In this sense, tragic clearly has nothing to do with the life of tragedy in postmodernity, as Eagleton would have it, but it becomes an instrument to explore the negative space opened by this period's "general questioning of any totalizing or homogenizing system[, where p]rovisionality and heterogeneity contaminate any neat attempts at unifying coherence – formal or thematic" (Hutcheon, "Beginning" 17).

However, Eagleton is not the only one who delves into the relationship between the tragic and postmodernism. In this respect, Maffesoli speaks of a "return" of the tragic in postmodern societies and, quite contrarily to Eagleton's analysis, he explains how he considers them perfectly compatible. Indeed, his argument stems from a very different understanding of postmodernity which is no longer considered a space of shallowness but a positive space of difference, of "small freedoms" (135) and of a relentless pursuit for pleasure. Firstly, he describes postmodernity as a moment in which "every person exists according to a principle of heteronomy" (Maffesoli 141) and no longer of individual affirmation; secondly, postmodernity promotes an "art of living that is no longer based on a search for absolute freedom, but rather for small freedoms that are interstitial, relative, empirical, and lived from day to day" (Maffesoli 135); and thirdly, Maffesoli points out that "[l]ife is now no more than a concatenation of motionless moments, eternal moments, from which one must be able to draw the greatest amount of pleasure" (134). The sum of these characteristics, however, does not stray far from Jameson's analysis or Eagleton's conclusion: postmodernism still retains "an air of nonchalance

that encourages not concern for tomorrow but, on the contrary, a desire to live in the present" (Maffesoli 137). What changes is the judgement of value given to this "presentness": people are now "determined to make use of the pleasures of the present, leading a bold, audacious life, a life permeated by the freshness of the moment - insofar as the latter is provisional, precarious, and therefore intense" (Maffesoli 137). Benefiting from a passionate, present-oriented and group-oriented existence, how can postmodernism witness a *return* of the tragic? Maffesoli clarifies that such a return,

> clearly underscores the predominance of fate, a fate with which one must reckon both in terms of individual life and of social life as a whole. The importance that the pursuit of pleasure is taking on – or taking on again – is illuminating in this regard. It is indeed true that, traditionally, the culture of pleasure goes hand in hand with the tragic sense of destiny. We can say, moreover, that the theatricality of everyday life, the pursuit of the superfluous, even the frivolous, and of course the importance given to carpe diem, not to mention the cult of the body in its diverse forms, are all expressions of such a tragic consciousness (135).

The tragic therefore returns as an imposition of a sense of necessity, a feeling that things are "inescapable, that (…) everything mysteriously takes its course without there really being the possibility of intervention" (Maffesoli 135). However, based on this definition, it seems much more accurate to speak of continuity rather than a return. Maffesoli points out that, "[w]hat is at stake in this return of fate is the very negation of the philosophical foundation of the modern West: free will, the decisions of individuals or social groups acting together to make history. The great fantasy of universality was the result. By way of contrast, the affirmation or reaffirmation of cyclical systems makes such free will null and void" (139). Yet, it would be mistaken to believe that modernity's project of establishing an equivalence between self-realization and mastery of oneself and the world failed only upon reaching the threshold of *post*-modernity. Quite contrarily, an attempt has been made to highlight how the fractured landscape of modernity already provides a fertile ground for the tragic sensibility and how it does so

precisely by accentuating a sense of necessity, that is, by exerting a force that "cancels out" the forward movement of progress. Therefore, modernity's future is not simply "predictable and controllable at will" (Maffesoli 136) and the modern individual cannot be simplistically defined as "ruled only by reason" (Maffesoli 139). Actually, how can it be the postmodern culture of pleasure that goes "hand in hand with the tragic sense of destiny"? If the tragic is understood as an acceptance of fatality and a replacement of history by a destiny that must be taken on, then, according to Maffesoli, postmodernity is the only moment that allows for a particularly strong emphasis "on experiences lived for their own sake, that exhaust themselves in the very act and that no longer point forward into a future" (Maffesoli 136). The resurgence of the tragic is thus marked by a celebration of the present moment, of religiosity and of exuberant living in the face of death.

Both Eagleton's and Maffesoli's perspectives on the connection between the tragic and postmodernism, even in their opposite outcomes, ultimately suffer from a narrowness of vision. Indeed, it seems that we are not really dealing with the *faces* of postmodernism but with a single face, with a definition that remains univocal. That is why neither of them achieves the depth required to fully grasp the tragic's scope of influence and space of action. Therefore, let us turn once again to the prefix "post" in order to arrive at a conceptualization of postmodernism that might pave the way for the entrance into the territory of the tragic novel.

3.1.2 A Fractured *Post*-Modernity?

While postmodernity has been often analyzed as carrying a single essence that embodies a definitive break with the past, it should now appear clear that the present analysis must rest on a different understanding of what the prefix "post" implies: undoubtedly, an intentional and strongly perceived discontinuity which, however, is nevertheless accompanied by a strong

substratum of continuity. As McHale points out, "post" indicates "the element of logical and historical *consequence* rather than sheer temporal *posteriority*. Postmodernism follows *from* modernism, in some sense, more than it follows *after* modernism" (5). Hassan similarly states that, "a period must be perceived in terms of both continuity and discontinuity; the two perspectives are complementary and equally partial. (…) Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt, all must be honored if we are to attend to history, apprehend (perceive, understand) change" (32). Therefore, postmodernism attempts to define itself against what came before it with a particularly strong emphasis but that sense of break remains somehow incomplete. In fact, just like modernity reveals a landscape that is actually fractured and cannot simply be encapsulated by a metanarrative of historical and rational unfolding, postmodernity similarly discloses somewhat contradictory impulses. Precisely in this respect, Linda Hutcheon points out that postmodernism should be understood as a place of paradoxical co-presences that "uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" ("Beginning" 10). According to her, it can be appreciated and acknowledged only as "fundamentally contradictory" ("Beginning" 11), as a moment whose art,

> asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control and identity (…) that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism. Those humanistic principles are still operative in our culture, but for many they are no longer seen as eternal and unchallengeable. The contradictions of both postmodernist theory and practice are positioned within the system and yet work to allow its premises to be seen as fictions or as ideological structures. (…) Such a process reveals rather than conceals the tracks of the signifying systems that constitute our world — that is, systems constructed by us in answer to our needs. ("Beginning" 19).

Therefore, in postmodernism "[t]here is no radically new paradigm (…), even if there is change" (Hutcheon "Beginning" 13). Consequently, modernity cannot really be said to be *post*, discarded completely, but actually in the process of being re-negotiated and re-thought. As

Hutcheon points out in the passage above, the mechanism and signifying systems inherited from it are constantly exposed rather than concealed, still operative rather than outright rejected. Hassan phrases this double-movement in a particularly significant way: "postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silences – veers toward all these and yet implies their very opposites, their antithetical realities" (36). Once again, it is precisely in the interplay between the discourse of fragments and the hinted reversal into its opposite that the tragic finds its space of action in postmodernism. Actually, postmodernity is a moment in which fractures multiply, in which the crisis of meaningfulness surrounding both human life and cultural production is felt ever more deeply. That is why the tragic remains a valid instrument of problematizing this historical condition, one that does not completely break with modernity but that, quite contrarily, amplifies and exacerbates its concerns. In this sense, the meaning of "post" is finally settled: it "does not mean what the dictionary tells us it ought to mean, but (…) functions as a kind of intensifier" (McHale 4). Indeed, what is intensified with respect to modernity is the perceived instability of every interpretative schema, the idea that a center no longer holds. Such discourse seems particularly reminiscent of Adorno's negative dialectics and the nature of the tragic as a mode of thought that "non mira a ordinare e classificare, a stabilire connessioni causali che consentano di operare e di manipolare, ma piuttosto a mettere in risalto le crepe, le contraddizioni della realtà, l'inquietudine e l'instabilità che la rende precaria" ("does not aim to order and classify, to establish causal connections that allow to operate and manipulate, but rather to highlight the cracks, the contradictions of reality, the restlessness and instability that makes it precarious"; Petrucciani 125 my translation). No words could describe postmodernism better than restlessness, instability and fragmentation. Jameson himself points out that after the supposed loss of history and therefore of a sense of direction, "it becomes difficult (…) to see how (…) cultural productions (…) could result in

anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory" (25). With no metanarrative, no center, no history, postmodernism is praised for its new emphasis on total freedom and, yet, it is also interpreted as a time characterized by an "existential bewilderment" (Stephanson 33) that causes the subject's impossibility to "position [themselves] within this space and cognitively map it" (Stephanson 33). But is history really irretrievably lost? As Fusillo suggests, the notion that "il postmodernismo sanci[sce] la fine della storia [è] solo una formula facile. A spegnersi realmente [sono] i modelli teleologici (…): l'idea che la storia vada sempre e inesorabilmente verso un fine ultimo" ("postmodernism mark[s] the end of history [is] merely an easy formula. What truly [fades] are the teleological models (…): the idea that history always and inevitably moves toward a final goal"; *Estetica* 100). That is why beginning a discussion on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a significant example of tragic novel in the postmodern context means revisiting Jameson's claims, or, rather, even siding with Linda Hutcheon's push for an understanding of postmodernism as "resolutely historical" ("Beginning" 11). Yet, the following sections will attempt to show how Jameson's analysis shouldn't be entirely discarded or put completely in contradiction with the project of the tragic novel. In fact, it is true that postmodernity brings along a sense of disorientation and consequently a loss of the ability to "actively" organize past, present and future into a coherent experience (Jameson 25). Still, the past cannot be reduced to "a set of dusty spectacles" (Jameson 18); on the contrary, it possess a clarity and a destabilizing force that is even difficult to control, to keep at bay. In this sense, Morrison's *Beloved* can be best introduced precisely by drawing attention to the two quotations that opened this chapter: while Jameson speaks of a society "bereft of all historicity" (18), Morrison writes about Sethe's conflictual relationship with the past, in particular, with a past that is indeed extremely difficult to incorporate in her present experience but which has nothing to do with anything *dusty*. Rather, it is something that under the guise of the plantation of Sweet

Home keeps "rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes" (7). It is in this constant "rolling" that Morrison's project takes shape and, in particular, her tragic problematization of the historical condition of slavery and, more specifically, that of motherhood within it.

3.2 Toni Morrison and Postmodernism: In *and* Out?

Although a general introduction was needed in order to provide some reference points regarding the context of postmodernism and the fate of the tragic, Morrison's placement within this movement, and more specifically that of her novel *Beloved,* is actually considered to be quite problematic. As Kimberly Davis points out, "the novel's status as part of the African American tradition of social protest, and Morrison's investments in agency, presence, and the resurrection of authentic history, seem to make the novel incompatible with poststructuralist ideas at the root of postmodernism" (243). Still, while the roots of her work are undeniably sunk in the variety of the African American tradition and shaped by a life-long quest for authenticity, her writing is also strongly influenced by a broader drive for rethinking that could be placed alongside a postmodernist, de-totalizing project. In particular, her impulse for revision has first and foremost to do with the reception of history and more specifically with the experience of slavery. Clearly, these two dimensions do not simply assimilate Morrison to postmodernism but they acquire a particular importance in light of the present analysis as they serve to trace the contours of the novel's tragic dimensions.

3.2.1 Revising History: Official Records and the Re-Assembling of Memory

> I'm not suggesting the past haunts us, but until one comes to terms with it, the past will be a haunting—something you can't shake. It's particularly true in the United States because most of its history was erasure (…). This was the new people, the new country;

> everything was in the future, the frontier. Only recently has the U.S. become very nationalistic and involved in restating the past, reconfiguring it in different ways for different sects and sections of the population (Jaggi, "An Interview with Toni Morrison").

It seems particularly interesting, as well as reminiscent of the previous chapter, how Morrison herself points to the myth of the Frontier as the site of the United States' most powerful historical contradiction – one which fueled the inherent conflict between a marked sense of futurity and a systematic erasure of the past that legitimated that very projection forward. However, the question of history cannot be adequately addressed in the case of *Beloved* without considering the fact that we are no longer dealing with the twilight of the Southern myth and the decline of the planter elite, as in the case of the Compsons, but, quite contrarily, with Morrison giving a voice specifically to African American history and the past of slavery. Consequently, Kimberly Davis suggests that a novel like *Beloved* "offers a necessary correction to Jameson's theories" (248) in the sense that "history is not 'over' for African Americans, who are still struggling to write the genealogies of their people and to keep a historical consciousness alive" (243). As the passage above shows, Morrison herself points out that African American writers are becoming involved in a process of "restating" and "reconfiguring" the past precisely when "white literati are abolishing it in the name of something they call 'post modernism.'(…) History has become impossible for them" (qtd. In Davis, "Postmodern Blackness" 247). However, while history has supposedly become impossible for *them*, it has actually proven essential for all the African Americans who have been deprived of it due to the systematic erasure of slavery, both in its causes as well as its long-lasting consequences. Still, it might be argued that Morrison's treatment of history, though clearly dissonant with Jameson's theories, "bears some similarity to Hutcheon's postmodern 'historiographic metafiction'" (Davis "Postmodern Blackness" 243). Obviously, it should be kept in mind that her relationship to this form of discourse is conditioned by her aim to write novels that "fit first into African American

traditions and second of all, this whole thing called literature" (Schappell "The Art of Fiction"), but Hutcheon indeed suggests that "much of postmodern fiction is still strongly invested in history, but more importantly in revising our sense of what history means and can accomplish" (Davis "Postmodern Blackness" 242). In particular, she argues that,

> Instead of seeking common denominators and homogeneous networks of causality and analogy, [novelists] have been freed (…) to note the dispersing interplay of different, heterogeneous discourses that acknowledge the undecidable in both the past and our knowledge of the past. What has surfaced is something different from the unitary, closed, evolutionary narratives of historiography as we have traditionally known it: (…) we now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men (*Politics* 63).

Total History is thus being De-Totalized (*Politics* 59), freed from a univocal perspective and especially from providing a stable sense of control, while the past is increasingly understood as something that "resists complete human understanding" (Hutcheon *Politics* 65). Also, Hutcheon calls attention to the necessary narrativization of the past since "events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed – not found – order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure" (*Politics* 63). At this point, the similarities with Morrison's project in *Beloved* spontaneously emerge: problematizing the "monolith" of the past and our access to it, writing a de-centered history that includes "losers" as well as "winners," "women" as well as "men," attempting to understand the past by reading it through a narrative model that might provide order…Yet, how much harder is it to construct a sense of order if your past includes slavery? This is where the uniqueness of *Beloved* is revealed: only in postmodernity is the perception of the past changing and the purpose of historiography shifting, but this novel problematizes the very existence, or rather, absence, of official records on slavery. As Morrison herself points out,

> Nobody in the book can bear too long to dwell on the past; nobody can avoid it. There is no reliable literary or journalistic or scholarly history available to them, to help them, because they are living in a society and a system in which the conquerors write the narrative of their lives. They are spoken of and written about – objects of history, not subjects within it ("I Wanted To").

In writing about the "losers" and the unaccounted for, in exposing the inadequacy of scholarly history, Morrison thus places her focus on an inherently tragic condition: that of the "freed" slaves, who, considered "cultural orphans" with "no history, no languages, no country" (Jaggi, "An Interview"), found themselves excluded from the narrative of their own past and deprived of the instruments to retrieve it meaningfully. What this condition discloses is indeed the contradiction between the freedom that had supposedly made the former slaves subjects and an official history that continued to treat them as objects, "spoken of" and "written about." From this circumstance comes Morrison's need "to substitute and rely on memory rather than history because [she] knew [she] could not, should not, trust recorded history to give [her] the insight into the cultural specificity [she] wanted" ("I Wanted To"). In this sense, the space of action of the tragic in this novel is not only that of problematizing the official history of slavey but also that of exacerbating a tension that reaches much "deeper," to the workings of memory itself. As a force that models the narrative, the tragic thus takes the form of "the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting" (Morrison, "I Wanted To"), between rebellious memories and the safety provided by oblivion; a battle whose raging can be hardly controlled,

> She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite? (…) there is still more that Paul D could tell me and my brain would go right ahead and take it and never say, No thank you. I don't want to know or have to remember that. (*Beloved* 83)

As this passage demonstrates, Morrison strongly problematizes Sethe's space for agency, revealing how the intrusions of the past ignite an internal conflict over her failed attempt to forget – or rather, to reject – unwanted memories. Sethe's "brain" is indeed "rebellious" and she seems incapable of controlling it, of saying "No thank you. I don't want to know or have to remember that." She too often suffers from the addition of a "hateful picture" that she could not refuse even though unable to "hold another bite." While she works hard to "remember as close to nothing as [is] safe" (*Beloved* 6), the past nevertheless invades her present with increasing insistence and clarity until it physically manifests itself in the character of Beloved. In this sense, Morrison applies another correction to Jameson's statement that postmodernism witnesses a "waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and memory" (16). In *Beloved*, what takes central stage is rather an intensification of the mystery of memory and a proliferation of the complexities of time and temporality. Where official history leaves a void, memory steps in, striving to re-assemble "a usable past" (Morrison, "I Wanted To") that might provide meaning to a traumatic personal experience. Therefore, what the tragic enacts is precisely a challenge to the pursuit of that "usability," a questioning of whether the battle between remembering and forgetting can ever truly achieve a positive balance. However, any discussion on the tragic in *Beloved* would be incomplete without considering the unique lens through which Morrison aesthetically renders slavery.

3.2.2 Rethinking Slavery, Foregrounding Motherhood

Numerous critics have noted how *Beloved* belongs to the tradition of the neo-slave narrative (Smith 174; Bell 9) and, indeed, this form powerfully unites a revision of history with a rethinking of slavery. Emerging from the crucial historical mark of the Sixties, this form was in fact born from the convergence between a renewed academic interest in the study of the

American past and the rise of the Civil Rights movement (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). Placed at the heart of this convergence, even the study of slavery was reinvigorated and took the form of an unprecedented "respect for the truth and value of slave testimony, the significance of slave cultures, and the importance of slave resistance" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4). In particular, the neo-slave narrative asks "what it means for a postmodern author to negotiate and reconstruct what is essentially a premodern form" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 7), one in which "African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity" (7). Yet, as much as Morrison herself acknowledges her debt to antebellum slave narratives, she also states that "whatever the level of eloquence or the form, popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience" ("The Site of Memory" 90). Even more importantly, slave narratives contained "no mention of [the slaves'] interior life" ("The Site of Memory" 91). It is from this absence that the project of *Beloved* takes shape in its attempt to "rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" ("The Site of Memory" 91), to expose the interiority of people who could not write about it. That is why memory becomes so important: "I was trying to make it a personal experience. The book was not about the institution — Slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another" (Angelo, "The Pain"). On the contrary, in *Beloved* it is official history that somehow appears anonymous, "mentioned only in parentheses" (Davis, "Postmodern Blackness" 246) and what is put to the foreground and symbolically treated with a capital letter is, rather, Motherhood. As Marianne Hirsh points out, "[s]lavery heightens and intensifies the experience of family and of motherhood, of connection and separation. It raises questions about what it means to have a self, and to give that self away." (95). Morrison further clarifies in an interview with Maya Jaggi,

> I started thinking about the ways in which women love things. (…) The women are in historical situations in which the act of love is compromised or impossible, or requires some Herculean or heroic activity. In *Beloved*, it seemed a powerful metaphor that claiming responsibility for your children could be seen as anarchy or revolution or sabotage. For Sethe, it was freedom; the battle was to have and be responsible for her children—in other words to love them ("An Interview with Toni Morrison").

Here, another crucial, tragic, battle on which *Beloved* stands is placed into focus: not only that between remembering and forgetting but also that between being a slave and being a mother. Finding herself in a situation in which love is "impossible," and because she "owns" neither herself nor her children, Sethe indeed poses the question of maternal feelings and the boundaries of acceptable maternal behavior with a particular emphasis (Hirsh 96). In this sense, claiming her children in the context of slavery can be seen not only as a form of revolution but as a tragic clash that culminates in the act of infanticide; a clash without synthesis between a mother's love and the inhuman claim of the slave master, between Sethe's limited knowledge of what the future holds and the unshakable certainty of what the slave past cost her. Yet, speaking of a contradiction without synthesis might appear inappropriate in the context of *Beloved*. For example, Kimberly Davis suggests that this novel is ultimately "about the traumas and healing powers of memory" (250), while Bernard Bell points out that Sethe's story is one of "realization of personal wholeness in the community" (14). As traumatic as the past may seem, it appears possible to make it "usable" in a way that might "unite the individual and the world in a meaningful relationship that strengthens individual self-identity and fortifies identity and power for the community" (Pérez-Torres 706). Consequently, is *Beloved* actually a healing project? How can this notion be compatible with the label of the tragic novel? It seems abundantly clear that in Sethe's story we cannot truly speak of utter defeat as was the case with the Compsons, so what are the conditions that symbolically *nail her down*? Actually, it might be more correct to speak of *the* condition, of slavery, as something that, in Morrison's own words, remains

"undigestible and unabsorbable, completely" (Washington 235). Yet, Morrison also points out that this novel is not about slavery with a capital S so it is now time to break down the contours of *History* and *Slavery* and to finally attribute concreteness to *Beloved* as a tragic novel whose strength builds on a postmodernist rethinking of those domains.

3.3 A Novel of Outrageous Claims

3.3.1 A Mother's Milk, A Slave Master's Property

If official history leaves a void which requires the intervention of memory and causes and internal laceration between the impulses to remember and to forget, in *Beloved* the tragic space crucially expands to the interpersonal level and this movement outwards is encapsulated in one key word: claim. As it has been mentioned in the previous section, the two claims that are clashing are first and foremost that of the natural law of motherhood and the institution of slavery. This conflict leads to one fundamental question: in which sense is Schoolteacher in the position to claim the slaves as his property and Sethe in the position to claim her children, and even their lives, as a form of freedom, of protection, of love? In this regard, *Beloved* powerfully tests the limits of freedom, of maternal power and questions the value of a family "constituted under a slave economy that violates the most basic definitions of humanity and individuality" (Hirsh 96). In fact, even in a situation in which human connections and love bonds are seemingly impossible, Sethe fights to assert her maternal subjectivity and to claim that her children are *her* own property. As Marianne Hirsh puts it, "the maternal subject in Morrison's novel becomes (…) a resistant, even an oppositional cultural voice. It may seem surprising, even counterintuitive, to identify maternal discourse as oppositional: mothers, after all, are usually seen as the conservers of value and tradition" (96). However, in the case of *Beloved*

motherhood, and especially Sethe's peculiar maternal re-memory, functions as a rebellious claim that opposes the "nullification" of slavery. In particular, Sethe's attempt to escape Sweet Home figures as the first enactment of her claim because, as Hilary Emmett suggests, "she simultaneously rejects the two paradigms of black motherhood enforced upon her: the Mammy/wet nurse figure, wherein the slave mother's milk was fed to white babies before her own, and the childbearing figure, wherein reproduction was for the profit of the slave-owner" (252). In this respect, Sethe's *own* milk indeed becomes a crucial element in asserting her uniqueness as the sole provider for her children,

> "I had milk," she said. "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. (…) All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn't have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it" (*Beloved* 19).

In repeating "nobody but me" and in her insistence that she is the only one having her baby girl's milk, Sethe seeks to avoid the systematical impoverishment of the mother-children relationship which is far too common under slavery – an impoverishment that she herself experienced with her own mother, who "nursed [her] two or three weeks (…). Then she went back in rice and [Sethe] sucked from another woman whose job it was." (*Beloved* 72). However, in Sethe's view milk becomes the guarantor of a continuity, a claim of ownership and distinctiveness. That is why the episode of the theft of milk holds such a strong significance in the architecture of the novel and especially in the construction of Sethe's oppositional discourse. In fact, she repeatedly states that the crawling already baby girl is "[t]he one I managed to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it; after they handled me like I was the cow,

no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (*Beloved* 236). For Sethe, this form of degradation and violation becomes traumatic not so much as a woman but as a mother. In stealing her milk, Schoolteacher's nephews are indeed taking something that is meant only for her children, an action that she considers even more condemnable than rape. As Hirsh points out, under the slave economy, "in which even one's own body is not one's property, the white masters can rob Sethe of everything, including her mother's milk. Her maternal labor is supposed to be theirs, not hers or her children's [so] she needs to devise a discourse of resistance to assert her own maternal knowledge" (99). The constant repetition of "nobody but me" is precisely that assertion, the symbol of her unwavering determination to bring her milk to her children *despite* the theft and even despite the loss of her husband. Morrison herself explains that, precisely when Sethe can no longer rely on Halle's support, she merges into her maternal role with even greater intensity: "it's unleashed and it's fierce. She almost steps over into what she was terrified of being regarded as, which is an animal" (Darling 252). Only later, through the intervention of Paul D, does she discover that the sight of the theft of milk is what broke Halle and left him squatting by the churn with butter all over his face. In hindsight she confesses that it would have been much easier to share his fate, to just go crazy: "What a relief to stop it right there. Close. Shut. Squeeze the butter. But her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio and no butter play would change that" (*Beloved* 84). Indeed, she admits that going crazy was never a possibility for her, whose children were waiting for her, for their mother's milk. Her claim is thus stronger than rape, stronger than the theft of milk, stronger than the whippings she gets for trying to escape and, most importantly, stronger than Schoolteacher and the constraints of slavery. In this respect, Terry Otten rightly points out that "Sethe's motherhood constitutes the nexus of the tragic vision in *Beloved*" (290) but he states that "not until she crosses into freedom (…) can Sethe claim ownership of her children and acquire the capacity for choice that

distinguishes high tragedy" (291). Firstly, *Beloved* cannot and should not be considered a case of high tragedy and, secondly, Sethe's claim is tragic *because* she makes it even before crossing into freedom. Morrison herself explains that, "[u]nder those theatrical circumstances of slavery, if you made that claim, an unheard-of claim, which is that you are the mother of these children – that's an outrageous claim for a slave woman. She just *became* a mother, which is becoming a human being in a situation which is earnestly dependent on your not being one" (Darling 252). The "simple" fact of being a mother is thus a challenge to the system of slavery, an act of anarchy and revolution that defies the incompatibility of humanity and slavery. Motherhood is indeed what makes Sethe "tougher" (*Beloved* 56), capable of doing and surviving things that "they believed she should neither do nor survive" (*Beloved* 56). It therefore becomes clearer why Hirsh points out that the mother figure in *Beloved* "serves as a ground of resistance and opposition" (96); an opposition that, however, arguably borders on excess. Morrison indeed observes that Sethe's is "an excess of maternal feeling, a total surrender to that commitment" (Darling 252) which turns out to be outrageous, murderous. Indeed, the conflict between the claims of motherhood and the claims of slavery cannot find any type of resolution but culminates with Sethe's act of infanticide,

> Then all four started toward the shed. Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time (*Beloved* 175).

> Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. (…) The whole lot was lost now. Five. He could claim the baby struggling in the arms of the mewing old man, but who'd tend her? Because the woman—something was wrong with her. She was looking at him now, and if his other nephew could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success (*Beloved* 175-176).

Despite being the central event in the novel, the moment when Sethe commits infanticide is somehow "deferred, unseen" (Schappell "The Art of Fiction"), told from multiple perspectives and by multiple voices, thus underscoring the idea that it is somehow inexplicable, impossible to ever pin down. The first recounting of the event sees Sethe as a "nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest" with no further explanation but Schoolteacher's comment that "something was wrong with her." The sight of the bleeding children convinces him that there is nothing for him to claim at 124. However, Sethe has indeed asserted her claim and she has succeeded in killing one of her four children, the crawling already? baby girl. While for Schoolteacher the scene is simply a lesson that "you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success," for Sethe it is the beginning of her tortured attempts to explain, to provide reasons for something that for her was just "simple" (*Beloved* 192). Indeed, infanticide is for her a simple matter of dragging her children "through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe" (*Beloved* 192). In his attempt to read *Beloved* as an example of high tragedy, Terry Otten describes Sethe as a "classically 'divided' heroine" (287), driven to commit infanticide by 'unredeemable opposites'" (289). However, in this case quite the contrary appears to be true: Sethe does not waver and is not torn between opposing codes of conduct; instead, she acts the only way she knows how. Employing Hegelian terms, infanticide might be said to be the tragic consequence of the *unilaterality* of Sethe's claim, of her tougher motherhood and her conviction that she is the only one capable of deciding what is best for her children, even if "best" includes death. Again, Terry Otten characterizes Sethe as guilty of hubris in her free, deliberate, choice to kill her child (292) and Missy Kubitschek writes that her gesture "belongs to freedom, not to slavery" (qtd. In Otten 293). Yet, is the distinction between slavery and freedom really valid when it comes to Sethe's maternal identity and drive towards infanticide? It seems, instead, that her "rough choice" (*Beloved* 212) belongs *equally* to freedom and to slavery, whose traumas remain indelible even

after Sethe crosses the Ohio River. Actually, it is precisely those traumas that constitute the base of Sethe's action,

> "I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. (…) Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon--there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean? (…) I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out" (*Beloved* 190-192).

Moved by the certainty that she cannot "let all that go back to where it was," Sethe's claim transcends the boundary between life and death. Letting her children live under schoolteacher is simply "out." That is why the choice to commit infanticide cannot be said to belong entirely to freedom. Yet, it would be equally wrong to deny the importance that Sethe's escape from Sweet Home holds for the strength of her claim. Indeed, Sethe herself asserts that she could not love her children "proper" in Kentucky and began to love them "more" after she crossed into freedom. However, it would be more appropriate to speak of an intensification of her claim rather than a mere apparition that coincides with her escape. Having lived under slavery *and* having experienced twenty-eight days of freedom, Sethe sees Schoolteacher arrive and simply thinks, "No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple" (*Beloved* 192). Agency is here presented almost as operating at a pre-consciousness level, as the arrival of the four horsemen does not trigger a series of rational thoughts but an action based on raw emotion. This further complicates our understanding of the infanticide and our ability to judge it, if that is possible at all. Yet, those around Sethe do judge her act, starting from Paul D, who is even scared by her excess at maternal feeling: "This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted

him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him" (*Beloved* 193). Even more scary than the act of infanticide itself is indeed what Sethe claims: not only her daughter's life but also the reading of what she did as an act of love and protection. As Hilary Emmet suggests, the fact that Sethe talks about safety with a handsaw has to do with the identification of this instrument "as a kind of branding iron by which [her] possessive and all-consuming 'motherlove' replaces the brutalizing discourse of the possession of property by which slaves were 'hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized'" (254). Yet, precisely Sethe's boldness to "go as far as the handsaw" to replace the brutalizing discourse of slavery leads Paul D to the assertion that her love is "too thick" (*Beloved* 193). This description, however, problematizes the fact that motherlove has to be evaluated with a different measure and, in fact, Sethe herself responds that,

> "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all."
> "Yeah. It didn't work, did it? Did it work?" he asked.
> "It worked," she said.
> "How? Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leave the yard. How did it work?"
> "They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em." (*Beloved* 194).

The master claims the lives of the slaves, the mother claims the lives of her children, what is the difference? Can Sethe's act be considered a success, something that, in her own words, "worked"? As Morrison herself points out, Sethe "has stepped across the line, so to speak. It's understandable, but it is excessive" (Darling 252). Indeed, *Beloved* is a novel in which "characters problematically insist that they own each other" (Hirsh 99), but does a mother really own the lives of her children? While there is no easy answer to this question, it is undeniable that the act of infanticide causes a profound fracture which stretches above all between Sethe

and the daughter who was not able to have a say in her fate. Ultimately, Sethe's claim clashes not only with Schoolteacher's but especially with Beloved's.

3.3.2 "You Hurt Me"[1]: The Claim of the Dead

When asked whether the Sethe's choice to slash her daughter's throat could be interpreted as "being strong," Morrison responded: "Well, Beloved surely didn't think it was all that tough. She thought it was lunacy. Or, more importantly, How do you know death is better for me? You've never died. How could you know?" (Schappell "The Art of Fiction"). Yet, Sethe's claim is grounded precisely in in her unwavering belief that she *does* know what is best for her daughter, that "safe" necessarily equals death rather than a life under slavery. However, while she never falters in her conviction, the same cannot be said for the crawling already? baby girl. Actually, it appears particularly striking that, even before the infanticide is mentioned and before Sethe's articulation of her unique "motherhood," the reader is rather introduced to the story through Beloved's claim from the other side: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims" (*Beloved* 3). The opening of the novel is thus focused on a ghostly presence that is connected to a strong idea of persecution: it is venomous, full of spite, outrageous and tiring. Yet, it also appears immediately clear that there is no questioning the source of this presence: it is the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter who is expressing "the baby's fury at having its throat cut" (*Beloved* 6). Indeed, Sethe confesses that, "[c]ounting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage?" (*Beloved* 5). It is from these sentences that the act of

[1] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 1997, p. 256.

infanticide slowly starts to emerge and from which we begin to understand that Beloved rejects her mother's claim to make one of her own: "I am not dead" (*Beloved* 252). This claim is no less powerful than Sethe's and, just like hers, it is able to transcend the boundary between the life and death and to draw Beloved back to the realm of the living. The fact that the reason for her return is primarily "see[ing] her face" (*Beloved* 88), which is simultaneously her own and Sethe's, "the face that left me" (*Beloved* 252), suggests that what Beloved laments is, first of all, a violent, unwanted, separation from her mother which occurred at a time when she was not yet an independent being. Her idea of "safety" does not coincide with the handsaw but with recuperating the face that she has lost, with reclaiming an exclusive relationship with her mother. That is why Sethe becomes the only object of her attention, the only place where she feels like she belongs. However, as Phelan suggests, "[h]er appearance is [actually] disruptive" (716) and comes precisely when Sethe, Denver and Paul D are "moving towards harmony" (716). This raises numerous questions: What does she really want? Is she seeking for a form of revenge? Does she want to reclaim the love that she feels she has been deprived of? While the mysteries that she contains turn out to be inexhaustible, what appears striking is rather the effect that she has on Sethe. After hearing "the click" (*Beloved* 206) and finally admitting to herself what she had always known, that Beloved is her daughter, Sethe feels like she can "remember nothing" (*Beloved* 216) and, most importantly, that she can stop trying to explain her choice because "[s]he understands it all" (*Beloved* 216). Now that her dead child has rejoined her, she convinces herself she can completely discard the past and live only for the "timeless present" (217) of 124. As Lifson suggests, the "visceral relief" (51) that floods over Sethe when she recognizes Beloved stems from the fact that she has never "fully mourned her daughter's death" (51) or fully articulated the meaning and consequences of her gesture. As a matter of fact, what she will end up realizing is that she cannot forget and that she actually feels the need to explain what she did to her daughter,

> Thank God I don't have to rememory or say a thing because you know it. All. You know I never would a left you. Never. It was all I could think of to do. When the train came I had to be ready. (…) Schoolteacher'd wrap that string all over my head, 'cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth. I thought he was a fool. And the questions he asked was the biggest foolishness of all. (…) I never told nobody this. Not your pap, not nobody. I almost told Mrs. Garner, but she was so weak then and getting weaker. This is the first time I'm telling it and I'm telling it to you because it might help explain something to you although I know you don't need me to do it. To tell it or even think over it. You don't have to listen either, if you don't want to (*Beloved* 226-27).

While insisting that she does not have to justify her act, Sethe nevertheless keeps emphasizing that she would never have abandoned her daughter but was simply forced to be "ready" when Schoolteacher arrived. To support the impossible explanation of her claim, she relies on the very past that she had tried to bury and, in particular, to Schoolteacher's mapping of the slaves' features in rigidly separate columns: animal and human. "So I sent you all to the wagon (…). No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither. What I had to get through later I got through because of you. (…) only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you. You remember that, don't you; that I did? That when I got here I had milk enough for all?" (*Beloved* 233). The question of Sethe's milk returns here with particular emphasis as she uses it to prove that everything she has ever done, especially the hardest things, have always been for the sake of her children. However, Beloved does not comprehend how the same mother that fought death itself and the slave catchers to bring milk to her could also be the one that so deliberately took her life. However, the incompatibility of their claims lies especially in one crucial detail: Sethe's need to explain does not coincide with a form of apology or repentance; "[s]he is consumed by guilt, yet she cannot confess to a crime" (Otten 293). As Morrison herself points out, the strength of Sethe's claim to motherhood lies precisely in her "unwillingness to apologize or bend" (Darling 252). Just like her extraliterary model, Margaret Garner, Sethe strikes for her "sanity and lack of repentance (…)[, her] single-minded[ness] and

(…) [her ownership of] the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom" (*Foreword* XI). Yet, the act of infanticide does not invoke a comparison only to Garner but also to a mythical counterpart, Medea[2], with one crucial distinction: while Euripides' play focuses on "tutte le oscillazioni interiori di Medea, le indecisioni, i rimorsi, i conflitti laceranti" ("all of Medea's inner oscillations, her indecisions, remorse, and lacerating conflicts"; Fusillo, *Empatia* 124) leading up to infanticide, in Sethe's case, these emotions surface afterwards and, interestingly, they never include indecision or remorse. As it appears clear from the previous section, she does not hesitate in committing infanticide, but it is in the confrontation with the victim, absent in Euripides, that the full tragic weight of Sethe's choice is revealed. Indeed, while in both *Beloved* and *Medea* we come to understand the motivations that underlie this "atto abnorme" ("abnormal act"; Fusillo, *Empatia* 125), Sethe's challenge lies not only in capturing the reader's empathy but especially that of the murdered daughter. Still, one might say surprisingly, what she wants is not forgiveness but understanding, as Denver points out towards the end of the novel: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (297). Indeed, none of the two falters in their respective claims,

> She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her? And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to—that she had to get them out, away, that she had the milk all the time and had the money too for the stone but not enough. That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever. Beloved wasn't interested. She said when she cried there was no one. That dead men lay on top of her. That she had nothing to eat. Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light. Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. (…) Beloved denied it. Sethe

[2] Numerous critics have addressed the implications of this comparison: see Cullhed, "Procne in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (pp. 89-92); Emmett, "The Maternal Contract in *Beloved* and *Medea*"; Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South*.

> never came to her, never said a word to her, never smiled and worst of all never waved goodbye or even looked her way before running away from her (Beloved 284).

This passage again focuses on Sethe's relentless and obsessive return to her choice and her effort to explain it but her reasons fail to reach Beloved, who had a completely different experience of the consequences of her mother's actions. Sethe explains that she never meant to leave her, and Beloved is not "interested"; she continues to list her reasons but Beloved "denies" them. Actually, what strikes in this passage is her vivid, though quite disturbing, description of the other side: "when she cried there was no one," "dead men lay on top of her," "she had nothing to eat," "ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her." This description crucially enlarges her role, and strengthens her claim, not only as that of the murdered daughter but as a representative of all the victims of the Middle Passage. Therefore, what haunts Sethe is not just the ghost of her baby girl but also "the specter of slavery" (Lifson 51). What Beloved seems to describe is in fact the slave ship as a confined and lonely space where many Africans died of disease and starvation and where rape was not unusual, as the experience of Sethe's own mother made clear. Therefore, she not only stands for a reminder of Sethe's choice to commit infanticide but also acts as a channel for the collective memory of slavery. As Marianne Hirsh suggests, "Beloved's is a composite personal and cultural memory that boldly equates the womb with the tomb with the slaveship, the crouching in the Middle Passage with the fetal position, the sea with uterine fluid, milk with blood" (105). However, as the embodiment of this traumatic past, Beloved endangers the stability of the present and, even more significantly, her "undifferentiated, engulfing, collective voice that emerges from [her] memories threatens to kill" (Hirsh 106). As a matter of fact, towards the end of the novel 124 becomes a "quiet" place where Beloved and Sethe are "busy rationing their strength to fight each other" (281). However, it is Beloved in particular who begins to feed on Sethe's energy and to transform 124 in a deteriorating world of desperate needs and impossible disputes: "(…) the arguments began.

Slowly at first. A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe. (…) Wasn't it too cold to stay outside? Beloved gave a look that said, So what? Was it past bedtime, the light no good for sewing? Beloved didn't move; said, "Do it," and Sethe complied. She took the best of everything" (283). As Denver notes, "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that" (295). Indeed, their respective claims – "You hurt me" (256) and "She had to be safe so I put her where she would be" (236) – nail the two women down where they are and transform their mother-daughter relationship into a tragic one of mutual destruction, or rather, of a destruction that is ultimately inflicted upon Sethe: she "sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (295). It will ultimately be up to Denver to get out of 124 and seek help by mending the bond with the community – a bond that was once again broken by Sethe's outrageous claim. Indeed, in response to the act of infanticide and, even earlier, to Baby Sugg's excessive celebrations, the community asserted a claim of its own by excluding 124 altogether. It is now time to examine this last claim in order to determine whether it truly holds a potential for healing and, most importantly, whether it opens the possibility to reconcile Sethe's and Beloved's positions.

3.3.3 "Too much, they thought"[3]: The Claim of the Community

One way in which *Beloved* builds the inherent complexity of Sethe's act, while also revealing a strong postmodernist influence, is the absence of an all-encompassing, supremely authoritative perspective on it. As Morrison herself explains, "It's important not to have a totalizing view. (…) I try to give some credibility to all sorts of voices, each of which is

[3] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 1997, p. 161.

profoundly different" (Schappell, "The Art of Fiction"). Bernard Bell points out that *Beloved* is indeed "a multivocal text" (9) in which Sethe's claim is challenged not only by Schoolteacher's and, most significantly, by Beloved's but also by the voice of the community, which is equally implicated in the infanticide. In fact, while there is an initial collective rejoicing of Sethe's successful escape, the community then becomes divided because of Baby Suggs and what are perceived as her unwarranted pride and excessive celebrations,

> From Denver's two thrilled eyes it grew to a feast for ninety people. 124 shook with their voices far into the night. Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry. (…) Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone (161).

The core of the community's claim against 124 is thus excess – what they perceive as excessive pride, while they themselves are consumed by an excess of jealousy. In fact, they are reading their lives against Baby Sugg's, which was "good" compared to other slaves, and therefore elicits mixed feelings in a community whose border of belonging is marked by a shared experience of violence and demotion. Indeed, she "had not even escaped slavery—had, in fact, been *bought out* of it by a doting son and *driven* to the Ohio River in a wagon—free papers folded between her breasts (…), and rented a house with *two* floors and a well from the Bodwins" (162). In this sense, Hinson suggests that "Morrison concentrates on exposing the atrocities of slavery as the origin of violence within the community around 124 (…) [as] violence instigated by whites spreads (…) of its own accord, perverting and twisting emotions" (153). Indeed, while slavery undoubtedly distorts the emotional responses of the community, its role as the origin of violence is actually rooted in a profoundly diversified perception of the atrocities endured under it. Precisely because of their anger at what they feel is Baby Sugg's

"lighter" treatment and her excessive pride in "loving, cooking, cooking, loving," the community fails to warn her and Sethe of Schoolteacher's arrival, thus deliberately becoming involved in the infanticide. A complete break indeed occurs after Sethe's act, and the crime for which she is condemned is once again that of behaving too proudly,

> Outside a throng, now, of black faces stopped murmuring. Holding the living child, Sethe walked past them in their silence and hers. She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cheery blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all (179).

In a culture where singing is one of the most powerful ways to produce shared narratives, the community paradoxically voices its claim – "too much" – through complete silence. "No words at all" accompany Sethe on her way to jail because her head is "a bit too high" and her back "a little too straight." Indeed, Morrison points out that "[t]hey abandon her because of what they [feel is] her pride. Her statement about what is valuable to her – in a sense it damns what they think is valuable to them. They have had losses too. (…) she would kill her child again is what they know. That is what separates her from the rest of the community" (Darling 252). This separation is certainly enforced by the act of infanticide but then greatly magnified by Beloved's haunting. In fact, particularly after Baby Suggs' death, "124 shut down and put up with the venom of its ghost. No more lamp all night long, or neighbors dropping by. No low conversations after supper. No watched barefoot children playing in the shoes of strangers" (105). The complete isolation to which Sethe is subjected is thus evident from the very beginning of the novel, when she notices that "[o]utside a driver whipped his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124" (5). It therefore becomes clear that

Sethe's claim and that of the community become spatialized through the contrast between a haunted, self-sufficient, inside and a diffident, disapproving, outside. This polarization is intensified by Beloved's arrival and Paul D's subsequent departure which renders 124 a self-sustaining female space of mutual ownership. Indeed, as Stamp Paid approaches the house in a first timid attempt to bridge the gap between 124 and the community, he hears only "a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. (…) All he could make out was the word *mine*" (202-3). It is precisely because of this outrageous claim of "self-sufficiency" (202) that Stamp Paid retraces his steps, feeling that "he [is] indeed a stranger at the gate" (203). As Morrison herself points out, what the people of Cincinnati respond to is not Sethe's "grief, but her arrogance" (Darling 252), her belief that she can manage to live in isolation as long as her lost daughter remains with her, whatever the form. Precisely because 124 is sealed shut by the destructive interference of Sethe's and Beloved's claims, it is only when Denver steps outside that the community weakens its silence. In this respect, Rushdy points out that while Beloved stands for the consuming power of the past, Denver "becomes the daughter of hope" ("Daughters" 578), the only one who "develops the understanding necessary for an affirmative return to life" (578). In fact, she seems to be able to mitigate her mother's claim and to engage the community through the remembrance of her grandmother and of the days in which "124 was a way station" (293). Ella, in particular, is the one that convinces the others that rescue is in order. She symbolically represents the community both through her history of violation and personal suffering, with a particularly deep understanding of what slavery inflicts to a woman, and also in her reaction to Sethe's choice which she views as rooted in pride,

> She understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself too complicated. When she got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody, and lived as though she were alone, Ella junked her and wouldn't give her the time of day. The daughter, however,

> appeared to have some sense after all. (…) Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe's crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy (302).

What moves the community towards action is thus not only Denver's intervention but the idea that past errors should not "take possession of the present." In this sense, Beloved as an incarnation of the memory of slavery comes to confront not only Sethe but the whole community; indeed, "when she becomes pregnant and her body grows too unmanageable proportions, she threatens to perpetuate the pain of memory to the lethal point where she has to be stopped" (Hirsh 106). Her evil spell is unacceptable precisely because it is the instantiation of past errors and that is why the women of the community, guided by Ella, finally gather to exorcise it out of 124. This moment is crucial in the architecture of the novel because it is considered to be the one that gives Sethe a new life and that dismisses her claim along with that of the community: "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (…) It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (305-8). Instead of the initial silence, a semiotic language of pure sound takes central stage in this scene and "baptizes" Sethe into a new beginning – a beginning that is supposedly crystallized in her reaction to Bodwin's approach of 124 which is worthy to be quoted at length,

> He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand. Standing alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling. But now her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black

> people, falling. And above them all, rising from his place with a whip in his hand, the man without skin, looking. He is looking at her (308-9).

In his attempt to analyze *Beloved* as an example of high tragedy, Terry Otten identifies this scene as the culminating moment of catharsis, where Sethe symbolically reenacts the defining moment of infanticide but achieves a different outcome (295). As a matter of fact, Sethe initially superimposes the sight of Bodwin upon the memory of Schoolteacher coming in her yard to take away "her best thing" and therefore manifests her original "fierce will" (Otten 295) to say "No." However, she crucially flies in another direction: not towards the shed to kill her children but towards the perceived enemy and away from Beloved. According to Mae Henderson, this demonstrates "her possession *of* rather than *by* the past" (qtd. in Davis, "Postmodern Blackness" 251) and Otten points out that "[a]cting this time to save Beloved rather than inflict her criminal love on her daughter, Sethe at last exorcises the vengeful ghost that has come seeking retribution" (295). Linda Krumholz even suggests that "As a freed woman with a group of her peers surrounding her, Sethe can act on her motherlove as she would have chosen earlier" (qtd. in Otten 295). However, would Sethe really have acted on her maternal claim any differently upon Schoolteacher's arrival if she had been surrounded by a "hill of black people"? Bernard Bell points out that this is finally the moment of "Sethe's realization of personal wholeness in the community" (14), but can she really be said to be whole, to have definitively exorcised the vengeful ghost that was seeking retribution along with the traumatic memories it carried within it? Answering these questions finally means confronting the central obstacle to *Beloved*'s definition as a tragic novel: what is believed to be the healing, wholly affirmative, nature of its ending.

3.4 "This is not a story to pass on"[4]: Resisting Reconciliation

Kimberly Davis significantly points out that, after her failed attempt to attack Bodwin, "Sethe is hardly healed, whole and 'reborn'" (251) and that, on the basis of this second "infanticide," she can hardly be celebrated "as a subversive heroine and revisionist historian who has achieved the power to change the past" (251). In fact, what is deemed a successful redemption of her previous "error" actually leads to another tragic, even more permanent, form of laceration: Sethe is once again separated from her daughter and, this time, no haunting will bring her back. Indeed, at the end of the novel she is willing to let herself die because her "best thing" has left her and she is still tortured by the memories of the past which she thought she could forget – especially the sense of complicity she believes she shares with Schoolteacher: "I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink." (320). Also, she appears "tired" (320) and with "expressionless" (319) eyes, spending her time lying in Baby Suggs' bed with "no plans at all" (320). As a woman who had always constructed herself as "the object of her children's needs" (Hirsh 103), Sethe succumbs to her own unmovable claim which has now remained without an object: Beloved is gone and Denver, in Paul D's words, is visibly "grown" (314). Now that her children no longer need her milk, how can she uphold her claim and carry the weight of her "exhausted breasts" (321)? In this respect Paul D's offer to bathe her establishes a strong parallel with the time when Baby Suggs meticulously cared for every tortured part of her body after her arrival at 124. While that moment marked a rebirth and a true new beginning for Sethe as a mother of children that were finally *hers* alone, Paul D's proposal can be hardly described in the same way,

> She is thinking: No. This little place by a window is what I want. And rest. There's nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her

[4] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 1997, p. 324.

> back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold? (321)

Morrison herself observes that many critics write about Sethe and describe her as "this powerful, statuesque woman who [isn't] even human. But at the end of the book, she can barely turn her head. She has been zonked; she can't even feed herself. Is that tough?" (Schappell, "The Art of Fiction"). Indeed, after Beloved's departure, Sethe has lost all sense of purpose and all sense of stability as she is not even sure that the parts of her body will "hold" Paul D's touch. Morrison underlines that this is because Sethe has "always thought of herself as a mother, as her role" (Darling 251) and even Hirsh points out that, from the very beginning, Sethe's life has rested on the "hierarchy of motherhood over selfhood" (99). However, Hirsh also argues that this hierarchy ultimately gets subverted when Paul D says, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (322) and she responds "Me? Me?" (322). Indeed, she contends that while "[t]he self that Sethe learned to claim with the help of Baby Suggs and the community during the short twenty-eight days of her rebirth process is not entirely hers to own" (Hirsh 103), her question "Me?" appears as an altogether different moment of "self-realization" (Hirsh 104) which signals the birth of a subjectivity that is finally disentangled from her maternal role. However, she also rightly notes that this subjectivity is "constructed in question" (103) and not asserted as a statement which reinforces the perception of it as tentative and noticeably hesitant. Furthermore, its placement right at the close of the novel's third and last section contributes to cast a shadow on the implications of Sethe's question: is that selfhood truly "speakable" outside the contours of motherhood? What happens to her discourse of resistance, to the unilaterality of her claim now that she begins "to think of herself as a proper name" (Schappell, "The Art of Fiction")? Indeed, it might seem that Sethe's oppositional role has somehow weakened or even disappeared altogether now that she is no longer "merged" with her children. Yet, it might be argued that it is nevertheless there: indeed, Sethe appears weaker as she laments the abrupt

departure of her "best thing" but continues to oppose any kind of repentance or apology. Throughout the whole novel, she has defended her choice and endured the suffering and isolation it brought, battling with both Beloved herself and with the community, yet she never regretted her action or admitted it was wrong. Even as she embarks on a journey to conquer her subjectivity, a fracture remains open within her: between her choices and their consequences, between her past into slavery and her role as a mother, between the present "Me?" and the possibility of building a future on a suffering that cannot be undone. In an interview with Bessie Jones, Morrison points out that people complain about the endings of her novels because "it looks like they are falling apart. (…) I don't shut doors at the end of books. There is a resolution of a sort but there are always possibilities – choices" (177). Morrison herself uses the word catharsis to describe this "resolution of a sort" because characters have "a glimmering of some knowledge that [they] didn't have when the book began" (177). In another interview with Thomas LeClair, she further clarifies: "I write what I suppose could be called the tragic mode in which there is some catharsis and revelation" ("The Language Must Not Sweat"). Morrison interestingly applies the label "tragic" to her own work which, apart from acknowledging her debt to classical literature, recognizes the complex interplay between revelation and resistance to complete resolution. Specifically in the case of *Beloved*, what needs to be made clear is precisely that the presence of "some" type of catharsis is not incompatible with the tragic novel as a form that is anti-dialectic or at least that problematizes the very idea of a positive resolution. In fact, "[t]he novel ends not with completion bur with the renewed possibility of choice as Sethe reaches a new dimension of freedom" (Otten 296). While she indeed begins a journey of understanding, the question mark at the end of "Me?" reveals that she still has many things to choose and to work through and, most importantly, that she is still haunted by her past, particularly by the fact "that she called, but Howard and Buglar walked on down the railroad track and couldn't hear her; that Amy was scared to stay with her because her feet were ugly

and her back looked so bad; that her ma'am had hurt her feelings and she couldn't find her hat anywhere" (321). Therefore, the ending of the novel highlights the cracks of Sethe's reality, the absences that still characterize the assimilation of her past, with Beloved being one among many others. In this sense, Sethe's remark that she only wants to "rest" suggests that she ultimately has a limited power to revise, erase or control her past. Budick significantly points out that "reconstituting in the present what was lost in the past, will not, this book insists, restore order and logic to lives that have been interrupted by such loss" (131). It is precisely here that the tragic nature of *Beloved* emerges with utmost clarity: even as Paul D projects Sethe towards "some kind of tomorrow" (322), what we see is actually a partial form of synthesis which is inhibited by gaps, absences and losses that cannot be undone. Budick argues that the key lies in accepting those losses and therefore "opening up a space for others in the world. This space also allows us room to become ourselves, because we accept that the self is incomplete, in need of similarly incomplete others, who can help the self to discover such wholeness as exists in family and in community" (132). However, even if we posit that family and community contribute to a restoration of wholeness, that wholeness denounces precisely the impossibility of a true, full synthesis. In fact, the tragic novel ultimately works to expose the unassimilable: broadly speaking, slavery as an enduring force that is "undigestible and unabsorbable, completely" (Washington 235) and, more specifically, the unbearable, although simple, choice that slavery has imposed on Sethe – infanticide. As Aretha Phiri points out, precisely through the interplay of these dimensions, "the possibility of existential repair is persistently disrupted – always incomplete and insufficient. Insofar as (…) narratives can help us to confront and excavate our traumas and repressions within a broader project of social redress and reconciliation, [the text] confront[s] black precarity as a corollary of chronic racial trauma" (73). Therefore, a genuinely tragic reading of *Beloved* does not necessarily hinge on the *impossibility* of reconciliation but rather on the *resistance* to complete reparation and on the

precarity of the achieved order. Also, what this novel puts to the foreground is the enduring impact of slave history in the formation of subjectivity which leaves a lingering question mark after every attempt to assert "I." However, the novel does not end with only Sethe's repeated question "Me? Me?" but with the repetition of another ambiguous expression that "warn[s] against a utopian vision of existential restoration" (Phiri 79): "It was not a story to pass on"; "It was not a story to pass on"; "This is not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 323-24). The reiteration of this dictum severely disrupts the reading experience and appears rather self-contradictory as the narrator has, in fact, just passed on the story (Phelan 720). Actually, these remarks refer both to the challenge, if not danger, to share the realities that have been depicted so far, and to the response of the community to Beloved's constant presence and non-presence (Phelan 720-21). In fact, the last pages turn her into the ghost of the beginning, whose footprints "come and go, come and go" (324) as she becomes "disremembered and unaccounted for" (323). As Phelan points out, "the narrator's insistence on bringing her back into the narrative and calling her 'disremembered' paradoxically emphasizes that she is not entirely forgotten, not entirely disremembered" (719). She is therefore a figure that, as a synecdoche for the whole novel, resists a definitive interpretation but whose veiled presence delimits the potential for existential recovering. Ultimately, *Beloved* displays a tragic component that is certainly more nuanced than the irreversible decline of the Compsons but no less compelling. In revising official history and incomplete stories of slavery through the power of memory, Morrison indeed writes at the site of trauma and gives life to a tragic novel whose strength lies in the foregrounding not of utter defeat but in "the seam that always bears the marks of the suture" (Phiri 79), in proposing a moment of synthesis that, however, is never fully achieved.

Chapter 4

Challenging the Myth, Problematizing History: The Unspeakable Voice of a Holocaust Perpetrator in Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*

4.1 A Haunting Memory of Horror: The Tragic Novel in the 21st century

> It seems obvious to me that anything written about the Nazi genocide against the Jews that is not primarily documentary, that does not uncover new information about the history of that singular event, requires special justification.
>
> - Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (xi)

> (…) I could just as easily not write. It's not as if it's an obligation. After the war I remained a discreet man; thank God I have never been driven, unlike some of my former colleagues, to write my memoirs for the purpose of self-justification, since I have nothing to justify (…). These notes of mine might be confused and awful too, but (…) I can assure you that they will at least be free of any form of contrition. I do not regret anything: I did my work, that's all (…).
>
> - Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*[1] (4-5)

With Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006), the form of the tragic novel crosses one last, significant, threshold, that of the 21st century, and once again operates within the boundaries of a newly transformed dimension. Yet, providing a comprehensive definition of this new domain and measuring the effects of the transformations it entails appears to be much more

[1] All the quotations drawn from *The Kindly Ones* in this chapter refer to Charlotte Mandell's translation from the French.

difficult than with the avant-gardes of the 20th century. Indeed, while the previous chapters could specifically focus on the interaction of the tragic mode with modernist and postmodernist aesthetics, both of which found their legitimacy in a self-proclaimed "newness" and in the symbolic enactment of a break with what came before them, the decades that span across the turn of the century are more difficult, if not impossible, to enclose in a single aesthetic label. As Mazzoni points out, the literary production of these years "elude[s] all the taxonomic categories and oppositional pairings invented by literary theory in order to group texts together" (*Theory* 338). In particular, words like realism, modernism, postmodernism, or even avant-garde, seem incapable of adequately describing works like *The Kindly Ones*. A novel of encyclopedic breadth, it encompasses all of these categories and yet belongs to none of them exclusively: its foundations are equally rooted in nineteenth-century realist and historical fiction; in the modernist discovery of psychic life and the use of the mythic method; in the literature of excess and erotic transgression of Sade and Bataille; in hyperrealism and in the exquisitely postmodernist manipulations of text, narrative and voice. Indeed, authors like Littell "guardano agli ultimi due secoli della storia narrativa occidentale con l'atteggiamento di chi non mette barriere fra la propria opera e la tradizione narrativa ottocentesca e novecentesca. (…) Ciò [accade] perché le grandi strutture di senso dell'epoca che ci contiene sono rimaste le stesse" ("look at the last two centuries of Western narrative history with the attitude of those who do not place barriers between their own work and the narrative traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth century. (…) This [happens] because the major structures of meaning of the era that contains us have remained the same"; Mazzoni, "Sul romanzo" my translation). Just as one could not speak of a complete break between modernism and postmodernism but of a more nuanced continuation, the 21st century inserts itself in a territory that is already charted but, unlike the 20th century avant-gardes, systematically and consciously exploits the implications of this continuity and sees new potential in the union of the literary practices that have emerged

since the mid-19th century. Therefore, or rather, once again, the entrance into the 21st century can be best conceptualized in terms of a continuity rather than a rupture but of a continuity that takes the form of a mesmerizing kaleidoscope of literary traditions that coexist even within a single work. In the case of *The Kindly Ones*, and its 1000-page length, this coexistence marks "un'ontologia della complessità" ("an ontology of complexity"; Mazzoni, "Sul romanzo" my translation) which aims at emphasizing the plurality and heterogeneity of reality, its unruly nature and the inherent difficulty in expressing it aesthetically. As a product of and contributor to this literary kaleidoscope, it is thus difficult to place *The Kindly Ones* in a single category such as realism, modernism or postmodernism[2] but what are the implications of defining it a *tragic novel*? It should be kept in mind that Littell's "ontology of complexity" finds its peculiarity in the dialogue not only with the literary traditions of previous centuries but underlies the effort to grapple with their turbulent history. Indeed, "the pressure exerted by the historical on the literary" (LaCapra 12) remains constant and continues to encourage "intricate and variable forms of interaction, especially modes of mutual interrogation" (LaCapra 12). In this sense, *The Kindly Ones* can be best described as a tragic novel which paradoxically, or perhaps we should say perfectly in keeping with its "abilities" and symbolic function, enters the new dimension of the 21st century by looking back at one of the most traumatic and indelible events of the 20th century, one that has opened an irreparable fracture at the heart of European and world history: the Second World War and the Nazi genocide against the Jews. As Mazzoni points out, despite the temporal distance that separates him from those events, Littell decides to write about a historical juncture "di cui non ha esperienza, riconoscendone in questo modo l'assoluta centralità nella storia moderna" ("of which he has no experience, thus recognizing its

[2] For example, Grethlein suggests labeling *The Kindly Ones* as "historiographic metafiction," in line with Linda Hutcheon's theorization and Ansgar Nünning's amplification of her approach ("Myth, Morals" 91-92). As he sees it, this definition is particularly fitting because this novel "combines a wealth of factual information with a high degree of self-reflection" (92). Other critics similarly attempt to frame *The Kindly Ones* along the dichotomy realism-postmodernism (see Suleiman 9; Sandberg 249).

absolute centrality in modern history"; "Sul romanzo" my translation). Yet, the recognition of this "absolute centrality" takes a form that has occasionally been deemed as shocking and scandalous, if not even dangerous. Indeed, while the Holocaust "has often been viewed as an event so singular as to defy both comparison and representation" (Sandberg 232), one that is surrounded by an aura of unspeakability and whose portrayal requires "special justification" (Lang XI), Littell breaks this silence by giving voice to a former SS officer, Maximilien Aue, who begins his encyclopedic memoir of epic proportions with the assertion that he has "nothing to justify" (Littell 4). Also, throughout the novel it becomes increasingly clear that one of his main objectives is that of "arguing against the alleged historical singularity constituted by Nazism" (Ercolino, "Negative Empathy" 253), thus refuting the "canonical" insertion of this phenomenon in a narrative of exceptionalism. In fact, Mazzoni suggests that what Littell boldly debunks is the theological framework of isolation that is usually applied to the process of thinking and representing the Holocaust which has often taken the form of an archetypal and extreme clash between the absolute entities of Good and Evil[3] ("Sul romanzo"). Instead, *The Kindly Ones* "riporta il carnefice fra gli uomini e l'evento nelle dinamiche contingenti della storia europea" ("brings the executioner back among men and places the event in the contingent dynamics of European history"; Mazzoni, "Sul romanzo" my translation). In doing so, this novel powerfully transcends the dichotomy of good and evil and becomes "an investigation of the complexity of men and history (of men in history)" (Mosca 198). These are precisely the parameters which delimit the space of action of the tragic which becomes the only "meccanismo testuale capace di trasmettere l'esperienza a un livello profondo" ("textual mechanism capable

[3] In her essay, "Good and Evil in the Modern Critical Tradition," Mitrano discusses the "unfathomable quality of th[is] dualism" (21) and its enduring presence both in literature and literary criticism, particularly in the aftermath of World War II. Indeed, she points out that "the reception of art and literature was irreversibly transformed by the Holocaust and, particularly, by the emergence of concentration and death camps such as Auschwitz" (25), whose prisoners became "the most enduring evidence of the defeat of good at the hands of evil" (23-24). Yet, she also underlines that the "*and*" that separates good and evil should not "draw out their remarkable opposition" (23) but rather "join the two abstract nouns in coordination" (23). The project of *The Kindly Ones* is built precisely along this line, as it strives to emphasize the complexities inherent, and often concealed, in that coordination.

of transmitting experience at a deep level"; Piga 2 my translation), and, it should be added, not simply experience by a *historically traumatic* one. However, what appears striking, or rather misleading, in the analysis of *The Kindly Ones* as a tragic novel is the fact that the interweaving of Aue's personal destiny and the collective history of the Holocaust is modelled by the myth and in particular by consistent references to "an Aeschylean mythopoetic framework" (Sandberg 231) which comes from the *Oresteia* and more specifically from the *Eumenides*. Indeed, it is from the title itself that Littell lays the foundations for the unfolding of the story through "a dense intertextual net" (Grethlein, "Myth, Morals" 77), of which the *Oresteia* is the most relevant item. However, precisely the preponderant influence of the myth in the novel's themes and structure raises two fundamental questions: what is its role in the representation of historical and personal trauma? And more importantly, what is its connection to the *tragic*? The analysis of this novel must begin from the answer to these questions, which will clarify how the myth is what unites the two perspectives, personal and collective, man and history, under the inquisitive gaze of the tragic. What this gaze reveals are ultimately the cracks that propagate and progressively widen even in an account that boldly claims to be free not only of any form of contrition but also of self-commiseration.

4.2 Myth, History and the Tragic Novel

4.2.1 Interrogating the Myth: The Problematic Shadow of Orestes

> But all these frenetic events left me indifferent, I barely noted the latest changes, since I had made a wonderful discovery, an edition of Sophocles. The book was torn in half, someone must have wanted to share it, and it was alas only in translation, but *Electra* was still there, my favorite. (…) At the boarding school where my mother had had me locked up (…) our class organized a performance of a tragedy, *Electra*, in fact, in the

> school gym, rigged out for the occasion; and I was chosen for the title role. I wore a long white dress, sandals, and a wig whose black curls danced on my shoulders: when I looked at myself in the mirror, I thought I saw Una, and I almost fainted. (…) When I walked onto the stage I was so possessed by hatred and love and the sensation of my young virgin's body that I saw nothing, heard nothing; (…) [a]nd when it was over, I didn't hear the applause, didn't hear the words of Father Labourie who was congratulating me, I was sobbing, and the butchery in the House of Atreus was the blood in my own house (Littell 411).

This passage, coming from the ending of the section "Courante," which recounts Aue's involvement in Stalingrad, contains a mixture of the key elements that are needed in order to delineate the interaction of the spheres of myth, history and the tragic: the connection between the historical and the personal through the myth, the reading of Aue's familial plot as "the butchery in the House of Atreus," and his profound identification with his sister Una to the point that the boundaries between them become blurred. All these elements are strictly connected as Littell "rivisita il cerchio di colpa e sofferenza che stringe la casata degli Atridi, e lo fa immergendolo nella storia più buia del Novecento" ("revisits the circle of guilt and suffering that tightens the House of Atreus, and he does so by immersing it in the darkest history of the twentieth century"; Piga 3 my translation). In fact, parallel to the history of the war and the articulation of the Final Solution, runs the "personal" one of Aue as an incestuous brother and matricidal son. It is in this correspondence that "the butchery in the House of Atreus" acquires a double resonance that continues to echo throughout the whole novel: it not only refers to Aue's crimes in the private sphere but more broadly includes the actions that are taking place on the historical level and his direct involvement in them. What results from this is the suggestion of a mutual influence "between matricide and mass execution" (Grethlein, "Myth, Morals" 85) that hinges Aue's story on questions of freedom, guilt, fate and justice. This is precisely what critics such as LaCapra lament about this novel, asserting that the "intertwining— or even twinning—of Aue's personal erotic excesses with genocidal excesses

as parts of the same "fated" story threatens to make the genocide itself an effect of fate and not of the complexities, including the constraints, of human action in history" (103). He even goes as far as to say that "[i]n the figuration of history as a derivative of fate and myth (or of a fatalistic transhistorical "theory") the problem of the articulation of history and literature is dissolved rather than addressed" (103). Even Grethlein ultimately maintains that the mythic subplot "trivializes the Nazi crimes as an aspect of power politics" ("Myth, Morals" 78) and that "[m]odeling the killing of six million Jews on the murder of Clytaemnestra by Orestes may not only seem inappropriate, but the very juxtaposition is flawed, for the Germans lack a motive that is comparable to the revenge of the father and the divine order in the Greek myth" ("S.S. Officers" 571). This statement epitomizes how those who associate the mythological framework to a form of trivialization are generally those who treat Aue's history and German history as if they were to overlap perfectly. However, in order to evaluate this intertextual connection meaningfully, what is needed is not necessarily a common motive but the recognition that it is the divergences from the myth which end up problematizing Aue's involvement in the Holocaust through the tools of the tragic. In fact, while history might be perceived as not entirely superimposable to the Greek myth, even as contradictory to it, it is not in conflict with the *tragic*. Or rather, it is precisely the tragic, which, "clad" in myth, questions the latter's imperfect adherence to history. Furthermore, talking about the *Oresteia* does not mean fully addressing the tragic nature of this novel, since these two elements collaborate closely but do not perfectly coincide. As Piga suggests, the myth constitutes a "fondo oscuro che sta al di là del tragico e [che] si manifesta attraverso di esso, continua[ndo] ad evolversi e a intrecciarsi con la storia e la tragedia" ("the dark background that lies beyond the tragic and [that] manifests itself through it, [continuing] to evolve and intertwine with history and tragedy"; 1 my translation). As a "dark background," the myth lends some of its characteristics to the novel, but at the same time "withdraws" itself in some fundamental points, leaving space

for a division that amplifies the tragic problematization. For example, with the Orestes-myth, especially in its Aeschylean formulation[4], the novel shares the problematic knot of the relation between freedom and imposed destiny (Piga 4), as Orestes, in committing matricide, is driven by his desire for revenge and but also by the word of the oracle. Indeed, Apollo himself tells the persecuted Orestes in the *Eumenides*: "The fact is, I did persuade you to kill your own mother! Remember that; do not let fear overcome your mind" (Aeschylus, lines 84-88). In this sense, just like a divine being makes Orestes the instrument of a preordained destiny, the pressure exercised by this imposition is symbolically exemplified in *The Kindly Ones* "dal Terzo Reich: un'entità *storicamente* sovradeterminante, incarnata dal Führer, dall'ideologia nazista e le sue leggi inumane" ("by the Third Reich: a *historically* overdetermining entity, embodied by the Führer, by Nazi ideology and its inhuman laws"; Piga 6-7 my translation). However, unlike the myth and, one could add, precisely because *The Kindly Ones* is a tragic novel, no divine acquittal will ultimately be possible for Aue. It is precisely from this deviation that the tragic scheme of the novel begins to emerge, particularly in its suggestion that a historical trauma such as the participation in the Second World War and the Holocaust is in no way assimilable or divinely forgivable. In this sense, those who claim that the mythological framework is a way to "trivialize" Nazi crimes (Grethlein, "Myth, Morals" 88; LaCapra 102-104) and to filter their unspeakability, fail to realize how it is actually a way to amplify their seriousness and to emphasize their inherently problematic nature. In fact, Orestes' story is not only one of imposition and limited agency but also, crucially, one of freedom. As Janßen points out, "by bearing complete responsibility for his crime, Orestes proves that he is free, or rather that he may liberate himself by an act that he can claim as entirely his own. The fact that Orestes commits his crime out of allegiance (…) by no means impairs is freedom, since the act is a

[4] As Grethlein points out, *The Kindly Ones* "refers not only to the *Oresteia* but also to its reception in modern literature" ("Myth, Morals" 82). In particular, the novel references Sartre's *Les mouches* and Blanchot's *Faux pas* and the supposed controversies between them (see Mendelsohn, "Transgression").

willing and freely chosen renewal of his allegiance" (180). Piga similarly suggests, drawing from Lesky's work on tragedy, that "Oreste giunge a desiderare con passione quello che prima era solo un ordine a cui si doveva cieca obbedienza. Da strumento del dio, diviene un uomo che agisce e responsabile della propria azione" ("Orestes comes to passionately desire what before was only an order to which blind obedience was due. From an instrument of the god, he becomes a man who acts and is responsible for his own action"; 3 my translation). Just as Orestes is considered free in his enactment of the crime, so is Aue in his obedience of the sacred word of the Führer and in his adherence to the Nazi ideology. Therefore, the mythic subplot does not lead to a diminishment of responsibility, as Aue states at the beginning of the novel, "I am guilty, you're not, fine" (Littell 20), and not even to a malevolent intent of "*essentialisant le mal*" ("*essentializing evil*"; Kristeva, "De l'abjection" my translation), but quite contrarily, provides a framework of reference that enhances the complexities of agency, the "conflict between civilization and the ugly energies that civilized institutions seek, and often fail, to contain" (Mendelsohn, "Transgression"). Indeed, the question of freedom becomes extraordinarily compelling precisely because it is not cancelled altogether by the myth, but because it is relegated to an irreducible space, small but existing nonetheless. Aue himself concedes that, while bearing the weight of fate, he actually had a "little" choice, "a narrow margin for manoeuvring" (Littell 783), which he considers insignificant but which arguably makes all the difference. In fact, the rendering of this world in dialogue with the myth, and in particular in the shadow of the figure of Orestes, "non porta alla giustificazione di uomini ordinari privi di scelta, ma costituisce lo sfondo materiale dal quale parte prepotentemente la domanda di matrice etica alla radice del libro che rimbalza su di noi: cosa avremmo fatto al loro posto?" ("does not lead to the justification of ordinary men lacking any kind of choice, but forms the material background from which the ethical question at the root of the book is forcefully posed and bounces back on us: what would we have done in their place?"; Piga 6-7

my translation). What would we have done with that *narrow margin*? The fact that this novel provokes this question means that we feel close enough to Aue to consider him not simply as an echo of Orestes but as a human like us, in his own provocative words, a "brother" (Littell 3) who establishes a "troubling sense of kinship" (Mendelsohn, "Transgression") with us.

4.2.2 Interrogating the Novel: Aue as a Human Brother

Once again, it is in the negative space created by the divergence from the myth that the tragic sets in and that aligns itself with what Mazzoni described as the project of bringing back the executioner among men ("Sul romanzo"). In fact, Grethlein asserts that "[t]he myth of Orestes allows Aue to cast the Nazi crimes as tragedy and to style himself a hero (…) while also serving [his] exculpatory intention" ("Myth, Morals" 89). Yet, the myth does not serve so much to make him a hero as to make him emerge as a man like all others, who, moreover, feels like he has nothing to justify. In this respect, Palumbo Mosca underlines how Aue's character is not a distillation of evil and not even a banalization of it[5]: "Aue's life, like ours, has been shaped by a plurality of internal and external forces over which he had only limited control. (…) If [his] actions do not have justifications, they have *reasons*" (199). Aue indeed states, "I don't think I'm a devil. There were always reasons for what I did. Good reasons or bad reasons, I don't know, in any case human reasons. Those who kill are humans, just like those who are killed, that's what's terrible" (Littell 24). As Mendelsohn points out,

[5] In particular, Mosca reads Aue against the backdrop of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (2006). While Eichmann is an exceptionally banal character "faceless, lacking any inner life, and having no composite thoughts or emotions" (Mosca 199), Aue is rather "*ordinary*, which means he has all the good and bad qualities of the majority of men (…). Like us he has had hopes and desires betrayed; like us he has a rich inner life that does not always correspond to his actions. What he does is not the exact mirror image of his being" (Mosca 199).

> Anyone who has studied the Holocaust will recognize the bitter wisdom in this statement; its history is peopled with soldiers and civilians, Germans and Poles and Ukrainians and Dutch and Frenchmen, who went to church on Sunday, worried about their health, took care of their sick wives, fretted about their raises and promotions, slapped their children for lying or cheating, and spent the occasional afternoon shooting Jewish grandmothers and children in the head. While some will denounce Littell's cool-eyed authorial sympathy for Aue as "obscene"—and by "sympathy" I mean simply his attempt to comprehend the character—his project seems infinitely more valuable than the reflexive gesture of writing off all those millions of killers as "monsters" or "inhuman," which allows us too easily to draw a solid line between "them" and "us." ("Transgression").

Precisely because of his seeming inability to "draw a solid line," Littell has been variously accused of "attempting to exculpate Nazi criminals" (Grethlein, "S.S. Officers" 571) and to rehabilitate them as their "crimes become newly available to understanding and mitigation" (Adams 28). Tied closely to these charges is the even stronger fear of "contagion" as "the reader, disarmed by the illusory understanding offered by the text, is susceptible to infection by Nazi ideas" (Adams 29). However, those who criticize *The Kindly Ones* for the choice of subject matter or even that of the narrator conduct an evaluation that is still platonic in nature: "rappresentare il male senza apparati didascalici e senza biasimo manifesto significa legittimarlo" ("representing evil without a didactic apparatus and without overt blame means legitimizing it"; Mazzoni, "Sul romanzo" my translation). Actually, even Kristeva points out how the whole novel "agit comme un colossal *virus* propre à contaminer peu à peu le naïf lecteur" ("acts like a colossal *virus* capable of gradually contamining the naïve reader"; "De l'abjection" my translation). While on the one hand Littell reanimates the colossus of history with extreme attention to detail, defining Aue's memoir as a "virus" has to do with the problem, if not even the perceived risk, of character-identification which arises from the "dangers" of the first-person narrative. In fact, the choice to provide direct access to the interiority of a Nazi perpetrator is considered not only a source of ethical concern but also a kind of pollution of

historical truth since, in Littell's own words, Aue is not a "sociologically credible Nazi" (Blumenfeld, *Interview*). Indeed, precisely because this novel establishes a relationship not only with a *particular* phase of history but also with a particular *side* of that history, "it has often been reviewed by Holocaust historians, rather than by literary critics" (Razinsky 176). However, *The Kindly Ones* should not be considered a "history book" (Razinsky 176) for one fundamental reason: it combines extreme historical detail with "un territorio vietato allo storico" ("a territory forbidden to the historian"; Mazzoni, "Sul romanzo" my translation) that rather constitutes the very foundation of the novelistic form,

> la possibilità di accedere alla vita interna di una persona diversa da noi. Mentre il patto su cui si fonda la storiografia moderna obbliga lo storico a parlare solo di ciò che ha lasciato traccia nei documenti (…) la narrativa di finzione può narrare, per via ipotetica, le passioni e i pensieri di personaggi reali o verisimili, mostrando il mondo interno degli altri e trattando gli altri come esseri dotati del nostro stesso diritto: il diritto di essere un epicentro di senso, un soggetto, una prima persona. In un testo come *Le Benevole*, la conseguenza necessaria del privilegio introspettivo concesso al romanziere è una forma di prospettivismo radicale: anche un nazista può raccontare il proprio mondo e i propri valori; anche un nazista ha diritto di parola.
>
> ("the possibility of accessing the internal life of a person other than ourselves. While the pact on which modern historiography is based obliges the historian to speak only of what has left a trace in documents (…) fictional narrative can narrate, hypothetically, the passions and thoughts of real or plausible characters, showing the internal world of others and treating them as beings endowed with the same rights as us: the right to be an epicenter of meaning, a subject, a first person. In a text like *The Kindly Ones*, the necessary consequence of the introspective privilege granted to the novelist is a form of radical perspectivism: even a Nazi can tell his own world and his own values; even a Nazi has the right to speak"; Mazzoni, "Sul romanzo" my translation).

Therefore, in making Aue "an epicenter of meaning" who oscillates between the poles of official history and myth, Littell builds a complex, layered, narrative that takes full advantage

of the devices offered by the tragic and the novel, and especially by their fusion. If the novel shows "the internal world of others," the tragic comes in to problematize that internal world and to highlight the cracks that propagate in an interiority placed at the center of historical trauma. In this novel, the tragic thus becomes an instrument for the narration of what is doubly unspeakable: the historical reality of the Holocaust, and "the passions and thoughts" of a Nazi perpetrator. Ultimately, the tragic invades not only the dichotomy history-myth but constitutes the very mode of Aue's testimony, the way in which he presents those passions and thoughts by creating "a sense of never-ending entrapment; an entrapment in the turbid flow of [his] obsessions, in a suffering that seems to know no bounds; an entrapment in the endlessly repeating nightmare of history" (Ercolino, "Negative Empathy" 254).

4.3 Beyond the Unspeakable: The Talk of a Perpetrator

"Aue is no ordinary witness" (Razinsky 178). If we admit that there really is such a thing as an ordinary witness, especially in Holocaust literature, then Aue clearly does not fall into that category. A former Nazi officer involved in nearly all the major events of the Second World War, Aue begins his memoir with the much-quoted sentence: "Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened" (Littell 3). As Razinsky points out, "[f]rom the very beginning Aue establishes, in the most provocative terms, that his project is to bear witness" (179). However, this project "disrupts the conventional pattern of identification in Holocaust discourse, in which the reader identifies with the victim" (Adams 34). Here, instead, the reader is immediately exposed to the "excessive narrative posture" (Sandberg 237) of a perpetrator who marks the entrance of his testimony by highlighting "the commonalities that might link a war criminal to the innocent reader" (Sandberg 237). However, the question of the continuity between reader-narrator through the shared link of humanity is relevant not only for its ethical

implications but, in light of the present analysis, because it subjects Aue's testimony to a tragic analysis. Indeed, if "tragic" means division, laceration, and if it is an instrument capable of representing an unresolved trauma as it affects the deepest levels of being, then considering Aue a madman, a sadist, an emotionless bureaucrat or even an "*drag queen* insolemment pathétique" ("insolently pathetic *drag queen*"; Kristeva, "De l'abjection" my translation) would seriously impair any attempt to define his character as tragic. Yet, the brief section "Toccata" already discloses crucial details that point towards an understanding of him as anything but flat, pathetic or stereotyped. Indeed, while the novel opens under the banner of his almost arrogant and arguably heartless attitude, sustained by his claims that he has "nothing to justify" (Littell 4) and that he does not "regret anything" (Littell 5), Aue is also someone who describes the recalling of his war memories as "being smothered by a heap of stones" (Littell 5). The past, even if considered "rarely the result of any choice, or even of personal predilection" (Littell 21), has a weight, a way of living on which manifests itself in various ways for Aue. For example, he believes that writing "will do [him] good" (Littell 5) because he has been in a bad mood, constipated (5) and subject to bouts of vomiting (8) which he has inherited from his war experience. As Razinsky suggests, the literal description of bodily functions, which is only hinted here but that will occupy a significant part of Aue's testimony, proves how his involvement in the war "becomes embodied and inseparable from his (…) private, intimate, and irreducible experience" (191). Aue consciously insists that he has no regrets, but his body seems to say otherwise, showing "i sintomi di una coscienza etica e storica" ("the symptoms of an ethical and historical conscience"; Piga 10 my translation). This is where a crack in Aue's being becomes evident, a crack between rational consensus and bodily dissensus that progressively widens to the point of conditioning and rendering unstable his contact with reality. Also, the centrality of the body unveils another crucial component of Aue's tragic predicament: the will to turn his internal laceration into its opposite, into complete union and

sameness. In fact, the division that underlies his war experience symbolically reflects *the* original laceration, that of the separation from her twin sister Una. Therefore, Aue's incestuous search for fusion with her, which borders into the desire to actually *be* a woman, betrays a quest for the total cancellation of any kind of boundary between him and the other, of any kind of division. At the end of the first section, Aue indeed states, "I have loved a woman. (…) Yet she was precisely the one I was not allowed to have. It is quite conceivable that by dreaming of myself as a woman, by dreaming of myself in a woman's body, I was still seeking her, I wanted to draw closer to her, I wanted to be like her, I wanted to be her" (Littell 23). In this sense, even his homosexual relations become a way to seek a union with his sister that is now painfully denied to him. Ultimately, then, Aue declares that he has nothing to justify but, in his own words, "things are far more complex than that" (Littell 7). Therefore, let us break down this complexity and return with more depth on Aue's tragic dimensions as they emerge from his mode of testimony.

4.3.1 "Closing your eyes is never an answer"[6]: War, Murder and the Body

Aue's meticulous plunge in the past begins with the description of his service as an officer in one of the Einsatzgruppen extermination squads operating in Ukraine. While the function of those squads was technically one of intelligence and security in the occupied territories, "they [were] best known for their role in the systematic murder of Jews in mass shooting operations on Soviet territory" (United States, "Einsatzgruppen"), which, in Aue's own words, were considered "inevitable and necessary" (Littell 81) for maintaining safety. Indeed, the section "Allemandes I and II" not only establishes Aue as a witness, and then

[6] Littell, Jonathan. *The Kindly Ones*. Translated by Charlotte Mendell, Vintage Books, 2010, p. 81.

participant, of those mass murders, but the entire operational machinery of the war as working under the imperative, overbearing necessity of "the Führer's word" (Littell 101). What appears crucial, in this respect, is the way in which Aue responds to the supposed inevitability of the killings: "one has to confront atrocity; one must always be ready to look inevitability and necessity in the face, and accept the consequences that result from them; closing your eyes is never an answer" (Littell 81). Actually, he even asserts that "it was vital to comprehend *within oneself* the necessity of the Führer's orders" (Littell 102), that is, to discover a space for freedom, however small, in a necessary obedience. From these statements, Aue's mode of testimony emerges clearly: acting with his eyes open and describing what he sees with an exhaustiveness that goes well beyond the mere fact but which attempts to dissect causes, motives and to problematize the relationship between necessity and responsibility. In this sense, Littell himself describes Aue as "a roving X-ray, a scanner" who is able to "shine a spotlight on the men surrounding him" (Blumenfeld, *Interview*). Indeed, by witnessing the first executions he is already able to "distinguish three different temperaments" (Littell 107) among his fellow soldiers: "First, there were those who, even if they tried to hide it, killed with sensual pleasure; (…) Then there were those who were disgusted by it and who killed out of duty (…). Finally, there were those who regarded the Jews as animals and killed them the way a butcher slaughters a cow" (Littell 107). By situating the unspeakability of mass execution in a list of "temperaments," Aue does not abolish individual responsibility but enlarges the idea of historical truth which "includes not only the facts but also an attempt to grapple with their ethical and psychological implications" (Suleiman 9). However, Aue's role as a scanner and his decision to always keep his eyes open, has a way to escalate through the body, to "backfire" on him. In this respect, the following dream appears horrifyingly remarkable,

> At night, my anxiety bled into my sleep and infected my dreams: seized with an intense need to defecate, I ran to the bathroom, the shit pouring out liquid and thick, a

> continuous flow that quickly filled the toilet bowl and kept rising, I kept shitting, the shit reached up to below my thighs, covered my buttocks and scrotum, my anus kept disgorging. I frantically wondered how to clean up all this shit, but I couldn't stop it, its acrid, vile, nauseating taste filled my mouth, sickening me. I woke up suffocating, my mouth dry, doughy and bitter (Littell 114).

As it becomes evident from this passage onwards, *The Kindly Ones* "contains frequent, extreme references to both the process and results of excretion" (Sandberg 250). While Sandberg reads the references to abjection as part of a poetic of excess, especially in the case of this dream which depicts not only a scene "of defecation, but of excessive defecation" (250), Adams suggests that "[t]he body's topography in this passage clearly signals the rising of the repressed, and the challenge [war] poses to Aue's defence mechanisms" (38). It might be argued that the two views are profoundly connected as the excessive defecation, which is not limited to dreams but becomes an uncomfortable reality for Aue, signals the abnormal, extreme distortion that his body suffers under the pressure of the events he witnesses. In this respect, Razinsky contends that "Aue's text, though it attempts to be as encompassing and sophisticated as possible with theory, including various theoretical references to explain the mechanisms of Nazism, achieves its goal in a completely different way, through an obsessive focus on bodily experience, remote from theory or textuality. The body is the witness" (194). If the body is the witness, then this dream and the subsequent references to excretion and vomiting constitute "a (…) fissure in the rational, calculated and impersonal detachment with which Aue observes and narrates his observations" (Sandberg 242). The crack between his rational approach to testimony, founded on a mixture of awareness and submission, and the extreme reactions of his body progressively widens as murder "becomes habitual through grotesque repetition" (Sandberg 244) and his "involuntary" responses grow more violent and intense. A significant representation of this fissure comes during the recounting of the Baby Yar massacre, when Aue is ordered to finish

off the wounded with a pistol. In particular, he stops in front of the body of a young woman with whom he had previously crossed his gaze,

> When I came back she was still alive, half turned onto her back, a bullet had come out beneath her breast and she was gasping, petrified, her pretty lips trembled and seemed to want to form a word, she stared at me with her large surprised incredulous eyes, the eyes of a wounded bird, and that look stuck into me, split open my stomach and let a flood of sawdust pour out, I was a rag doll and didn't feel anything, and at the same time I wanted with all my heart to bend over and brush the dirt and sweat off her forehead, caress her cheek and tell her that it was going to be all right, that everything would be fine, but instead I convulsively shot a bullet into her head, which after all came down to the same thing, for her in any case if not for me, since at the thought of this senseless human waste I was filled with an immense, boundless rage, I kept shooting at her and her head exploded like a fruit, then my arm detached itself from me and went off all by itself down the ravine, shooting left and right, I ran after it, waving at it to wait with my other arm, but it didn't want to, it mocked me and shot at the wounded all by itself, without me; finally, out of breath, I stopped and started to cry. Now, I thought, it's over, my arm will never come back, but to my great surprise it was there again, in its place, solidly attached to my shoulder, and Häfner was coming up to me and saying, "That's enough, Obersturmführer. I'll take over for you." (Littell 130)

As he watches the young woman "gasping" for air, Aue once again *feels* with his body, claiming that her innocent gaze "stuck into [him]" and that the sight "split open [his] stomach." In this sense, Razinsky suggests that "[Aue's] body remembers and reacts, where his psyche remains passive and blind" (191). However, this passage proves how his psyche is not entirely blind, or at least, how it similarly accommodates a fracture between opposing intentions: on the one hand, Aue claims he does not "feel anything," but on the other, as his gaze is returned by the girl's, symbolically juxtaposed with that of a "wounded bird," he wants to "caress her cheek and tell her that it was going to be all right." Under the pressure of these opposing forces, and troubled by the "thought of this senseless human waste," Aue's "sense of integral selfhood

fails" (Sandberg 247) and he begins to randomly shoot with an arm that "detached itself" form his body. This separation is emblematic because it proves how humanity "break[s] through the layer" (Sandberg 247) of habitual violence and hits him with a force capable of breaking the bond between his body and his psyche. However, can this moment be interpreted as one of tragic division or is it another strategy that he employs "to diminish his culpability" (Sandberg 247)? Actually, as Aue regains possession of his faculties and retrospectively reflects on the consequences of killing, he conceptualizes them as such: "If the terrible massacres of the East prove one thing, paradoxically, it is the awful, inalterable solidarity of humanity. (…) [The soldiers'] reactions (…) demonstrated that the other exists, exists as an *other*, as a human, and that no will, no ideology, no amount of stupidity or alcohol can break this bond, tenuous but indestructible" (Littell 147). In this sense, Janßen points out that "genocide is, first and foremost, a rupture with humanity, the sacrifice of the other as fellow human being" (177). However, Aue's words rather point to an understanding of it as a rupture *within* humanity, between different spheres that arbitrarily determine the life or death of millions of people. What appears puzzling, however, is that even the surge of humanity which inundates Aue at the sight of the dying young woman, does not change the outcome: he still "convulsively [shoots] a bullet into her head." Part of this decision upholds the idea of necessity but, at the same time, Aue knows that even if he personally refuses to kill, "the pool of available killers [is] bottomless" (Littell 131). As Mazzoni suggests, in *The Kindly Ones* "ogni atto, anche il più tragico, è sempre calato nella complessità di un mondo che ignora la sorte, la volontà e i desideri dei singoli" ("every act, even the most tragic, is always cast in the complexity of a world that ignores the fate, will and desires of individuals"; "Sul romanzo" my translation), transforming them into a faceless, bottomless "pool of available killers." Yet, in his decision to stay and to perform his "duty," Aue is "slowly, without realizing it, (…) sinking into mud while searching for light" (Littell 179), prey to "widening fissures" (179) as he attempts to understand the mystery of

death. Indeed, what for Aue seems impossible to grasp is the fact that "[c]hi muore va incontro al proprio istante decisivo circondato da esseri indifferenti, curiosi o dediti ad altro, mentre il caso istituisce, fra la vittima e l'estraneo che le toglierà la vita, un rapporto di intimità oscena" ("those who die meet their decisive moment surrounded by other beings who are indifferent, curious, or devoted to something else, while chance establishes, between the victim and the stranger who will take their life, a relationship of obscene intimacy"; "Sul romanzo" my translation). In this respect, the encounter with the victim, with the other, becomes increasingly extreme as Aue not only loses control of his body but wishes it to be annulled, unable to sustain precisely that obscene intimacy. The reference here is to a precise episode, the hanging of a young partisan girl who is kissed by Nazi soldiers before dying,

> When my turn came, she looked at me, a clear, luminous look, washed of everything, and I saw that she understood everything, knew everything, and faced with this pure knowledge I burst into flames. My clothes crackled, the skin of my belly melted, the fat sizzled, fire roared in my eye sockets and my mouth, and cleaned out the inside of my skull. The blaze was so intense she had to turn her head away. I burned to a cinder, my remains were transformed into a salt statue; soon it cooled down, pieces broke off, first a shoulder, then a hand, then half the head. Finally I finished collapsing at her feet and the wind swept away the pile of salt and scattered it (Littell 179).

Faced with the "luminous look" of the young girl, a look that startles for its "pure," inaccessible knowledge, Aue bursts into flames until he is completely melted and transformed into a salt statue that scatters in the wind. This fantasy of complete annulment once again "mira a esprimere l'incontro sconvolgente con la purezza dell'alterità violata (…) [e] rimanda all'impossibilità di sostenere la verità dell'evento e il peso della colpa" ("aims to express the shocking encounter with the purity of violated otherness (…) [and] refers to the impossibility of bearing the truth of the event and the weight of guilt"; Piga 13 my translation). Sanyal even suggests that Aue's dissolution appears extremely evocative because while "contemplat[ing]

the imminent death of another, it is *he* who explodes into the roaring flames of the crematoria that are yet to come, he who embodies the fate of its future victims as anonymous ashes scattered by the wind" (195). However, it might be argued that the strength of this hallucination tragically problematizes the traumatic configuration of Aue's present experience, and in particular the impossible will to erode the dichotomy victim-perpetrator by transcending the boundary between himself and the other. In this sense, what appears striking is that, both in this episode and in the random shooting at Baby Yar, "[t]he dissociation experienced (…) cast[s] the perpetrator-accomplice as the subject of a trauma that is inflicted, paradoxically, *by* the victim (Sanyal 195). Indeed, it is the confrontation with the victim which illuminates a tragic fracture in the principle of humanity as well as the rupture between what Aue rationally casts as necessity and his "bodily" ethical conscience. However, while this fissure initially revealed itself through excessive dreams and nervous bodily functions, it progressively impairs Aue's sense of self and conditions his connection with reality. As Sandberg points out, the episode at Baby Yar and the hanging of the partisan girl mark a crucial point from which the novel's realism itself begins to disintegrate (247) as a mirror not only of the suffering it depicts but also of Aue's fractured conscience. Precisely because we are subject to a highly immersive approach that lacks any distance from his character (Adams 31), we are thus carried through a whirlwind of narrative planes which are not always so easy to distinguish but which epitomize the increasingly invasive and distorting pressure of historical trauma.

4.3.2 The Real, the Fantastic, the Memory Hole: A Collapsing Narrative

As Piga suggests, "la narrazione dell'indicibile si compie (…) attraverso la rappresentazione della scissione o dissoluzione dell'io narrante (…) [ma anche attraverso la] frammentazione in diversi livelli narrativi appartenenti a regimi spazio-temporali diversi" ("the

narration of the unspeakable is accomplished (…) through the representation of the division or dissolution of the narrating-I (…) [but also through the] fragmentation into different narrative levels belonging to different space-time regimes"; 22 my translation). Indeed, the tragic fracture manifests itself not only at the level of conscience but is also linked to Littell's narrative choices and especially to the increasingly intrusive contamination of the realistic register. In this respect, Sandberg points out that the "eruptions of the fantastic are (…) part of *The Kindly Ones*' excessive poetics, part of its attempt to represent the unrepresentable through a fictional matrix that registers the incredible deformations that reality itself underwent during this period" (250). However, it might be argued the fragmentation of different narrative levels is not only a tool of excess but also one of tragic problematization, in particular, the problematization of a historical trauma that exceeds the boundaries of the self and "infects" genre standards themselves. As Eric Sandberg has noted, it is especially in the portion of the novel set in Stalingrad that the "textual transition from real to unreal becomes particularly [evident]" (247) and alarmingly frequent. Also, he points out that "the sort of dissociation of self experienced at Babi Yar becomes the rule rather than the exception (…) [b]ut it is at times difficult to discern where narrative reality stops and fever-dream begins" (247). In this respect, the blurred, or rather erased, boundary between the real and the fantastic occupies a central role at the end of the section "Courante," when Aue is severely wounded in the head,

> Behind me, I thought I could make out some agitation: I turned around, Thomas and Ivan were gesturing toward me, the others were looking at me. (…) I glanced at them again: Ivan was running toward me, but I was distracted by a slight tap on my forehead: a piece of gravel, perhaps, or an insect, since when I felt it, a little drop of blood beaded on my finger. I wiped it off and continued on toward the Volga, which I knew lay somewhere that way (Littell 414).

A potentially lethal wound is here described as "a slight tap on [his] forehead" which causes only "a little drop of blood" to bead on his finger. As Sandberg observes, the transition from

the real to the fantastic is here completely "seamless" (248) as Aue simply wipes off the blood and continues towards the Volga which he wants to contemplate "at least once before leaving [the] city" (Littell 414). However, the intrusion of fantastic elements becomes increasingly clear as Aue "swims the frozen Volga, encounters a mad anti-Semitic scientist operating an airship above the steppe, and plays a strange version of backgammon to rescue his sister from marriage to a malignant potbellied dwarf and a one-eyed man" (Sandberg 249). After this fantastic undertaking, however, the return to reality cannot be said to be equally seamless, as it takes Aue several pages to realize that he is in a hospital bed (Littell 431-433), now healed and "a German hero" (Littell 437). Actually, the wound itself represents a point of no return, arguably a definitive departure from realism, which will be subject to more and more intrusions as the way in which Aue sees the world changes completely,

> I had the feeling that the hole in my forehead had opened up a third eye, a pineal eye, one not turned to the sun, not capable of contemplating the blinding light of the sun, but directed at the darkness, gifted with the power of looking at the bare face of death, and of grasping this face behind each face of flesh and blood, beneath the smiles, through the palest, healthiest skin, the most laughing eyes. The disaster was already there and they didn't realize it, since the disaster is the very idea of the disaster to come, which ruins everything long before term (Littell 443).

The opening of this third eye, "gifted with the power of looking at the bare face of death," symbolically enlarges his claim that "closing your eyes is never an answer" (Littell 81) and projects the mode of his testimony further towards "darkness." Actually, it might be said that the pineal eye is what allows him to finally grasp the tragic fracture, "the infinite cry of anguish of the child forever prisoner in the atrocious body of a clumsy adult incapable, even by killing, of avenging himself of the fact of living" (Littell 514). Quite contrarily, Mercier-Leca contends that, in Stalingrad, Aue's head was "percée d'un trou (un trou de mémoire?) qui symbolise son incapacité à creuser en profondeur dans ses souvenirs, à dépasser le factual" ("pierced by a hole

hole (a memory hole?) that symbolizes his inability to dig deep into his memories, to go beyond the factual"; 13 my translation). However, the return from Stalingrad marks not only a moment in which Aue deeply questions his commitment to the Nazi cause, "A man of convictions? Before, probably, I had been one, but now, where was the clarity of my convictions hidden away?" (Littell 476), but also one in which his familial past resurfaces and intertwines with the doomed fate of Germany, tightening him in a lethal grip. Actually, Aue enacts a real plunge into his past when he decides to visit his mother in Antibes, where he is overwhelmed especially by the memories of his childhood: "My memories rose around me, tactile now with the air, the smell, the light, the dust: and I dove into these sensations as I had plunged into the Volga, with complete abandon" (Little 523). Therefore, Aue cannot really be said to be "unable to dig deep into his memories" but rather increasingly detached from reality *because* of them. In particular, Aue's dissociation from reality culminates with the act of matricide, the crucial action that supposedly unites Aue's personal history and myth. However, what appears striking is that matricide occurs on a narrative level that is not only distorted or fantastic, but that does not exist altogether,

> I walked around the house and climbed the main staircase, without meeting anyone. My room was dark, cool. I lay down and fell asleep. When I woke up the light had changed, it was quite dark (…). I sat up on the edge of the bed and realized I was naked; but I had no memory of getting undressed. My injured fingers hurt and I sucked them distractedly. Then I turned on the lamp switch and, blinking, looked for the time: my watch, on the night table, had stopped[7]. I looked around me but didn't see my clothes. Where could they have gone? (Littell 529)

[7] The detail of the stopped watch goes virtually unnoticed but I believe it could have some interesting implications, especially in relation to the "musical" titles of the sections that make up the structure of this novel. In this respect, Kristeva suggests that music becomes the "métaphore suprême de la sublimation qu'Aue pratique en écrivant" ("the supreme metaphor of sublimation that Aue practices in writing"; "De l'abjection" my translation), which additionally becomes a marker of his extreme erudition. However, perhaps more simply, music is something that is inherently connected to time, as it can be composed, performed or listened to only through it. Yet, precisely from the definitive act of matricide, which is intertwined with his choice to take part in the Final Solution, it is as if time had stopped for Aue, trapping him in a circuit of endless persecution in which the temporal progression necessary for music cannot really exist. In this sense, then, the choice of titles would become an attempt to

At the pivotal point where the novel should overlap with the myth, and transform itself into a tragedy of revenge, there is only an ellipsis, a complete removal. The action that would really make Aue an "Orestes redivivus" (Grethlein, "Myth, Morals" 178) *does not exist*, at least narratively speaking. Yet, the absence from the text perfectly mirrors the absence of this moment in Aue's memory, as matricide is not only never shown directly but also never acknowledged. The fact that this crime is never confessed or remembered has been justified in various ways by critics: for example, Grethlein suggests that the consequences of matricide are rather "transferred to the political history, which is made parallel to the family history and, unlike the family history, is given a full treatment" ("Myth, Morals" 85); Suleiman instead contends that "[b]y having Aue—at least the conscious, narrating Aue—remain dissociated from his act to the very end, Littell can preserve him as a reliable witness to the Holocaust (…) [because] his memory hole about the family murder demonstrates the human ability to block out unbearable action" (18). However, it has been pointed out how it is the divergence from the myth that casts a tragic light on the matricide: indeed, its "absence" does not make Aue an "Orestes redivivus" (Grethlein, "Myth, Morals" 178) but rather a kind of reversed-Orestes, who will never be tried for his "inexistent" crime and therefore never "délesté par le jugement de l'Aréopage" ("relieved by the judgment of the Areopagus"; Mercier-Leca 12 my translation). The cancellation of this crime thus renders matricide "una parentesi vuota nel romanzo ma dagli effetti decisivi" ("an empty parenthesis in the novel but with decisive effects"; Piga 8 my translation) that seal Aue's fate as one of redemption denied, as it will become evident at the end of the novel. Matricide indeed opens an abyss, an empty space into which he falls with ever increasing speed along with Germany and the Final Solution. Persecuted by the Furies,

sublimate his static condition as a prisoner of history, one in which no movement forward is allowed but only a spiral towards the abyss.

impersonated by the detectives Clemens and Weser[8], Aue will continue to testify until the fall of Berlin but not before having allowed himself one last, perverse, all-encompassing fantasy of union with his sister.

4.3.3 "Without you, I am not me"[9]: A Quest for Sameness

Throughout the whole novel, Aue's increasingly traumatic and lacerating experience in the war is profusely interspersed with tales of his childhood and in particular of the bond he shared with his sister. Above all, he dreams of the "age of pure innocence" (Littell 405) when no boundaries existed between him and Una: "Freedom possessed our narrow little bodies, thin and tanned; we swam like seals, dashed through the woods like foxes, rolled, twisted together in the dust, our naked bodies indissociable, neither one nor the other specifically girl or boy, but a couple of snakes intertwined" (Littell 405). As Adams suggests, Aue's "incestuous desire for his sister is phrased as a kind of pre-oedipal, narcissistic longing in which differentiations and distinct identities are rejected" (35). The most profound consequence of this original "sameness" can be found especially in the shaping of Aue's adult identity which legitimizes itself in it and only through it: "Without you, I am not me" (Littell 448). However, Max's loyalty to this statement creates a sense of identity that is not only conditioned by longing but also seriously crippling, as it renders him ultimately unable to cope with the "great catastrophe" (Littell 371) of separation. A separation that, in particular, not only has to do with the scandal of incest and the time spent apart in separate boarding schools, but also with Una's coming of

[8] The association of these two detectives with the Erinyes is supported both by a nominal and a textual component. As Grethlein suggests, "the name *Clemens* refers to the Eumenides, for *clemens* can serve as a Latin translation of the Greek *eumenēs*" ("Myth, Morals" 79). Also, both Grethlein and Mercier-Leca dwell on the similarities in the description of the two detectives and the Furies, both juxtaposed with the image of hunting dogs (Grethlein, "Myth, Morals" 79; Mercier-Leca 4-5). Sanberg describes them "more [as] serio-comical manifestations of fate than realistic policemen" (249).

[9] Littell, Jonathan. *The Kindly Ones*. Translated by Charlotte Mendell, Vintage Books, 2010, p. 448.

age as a woman: “It wasn’t right, I wanted to be like her; why couldn’t I bleed too, share that with her? Why couldn’t we be the same? (…) We were between the Golden Age and the Fall” (Littell 479). Incapable of accepting the consequences of growing up, Aue thus remains, in Una’s words, “a prisoner of the past” (Littell 484), a past that she believes is more than “over” (Littell 484). As a matter of fact, Max and Una seem to have completely different takes on their sexual experiences as children: while Una believes they were just naïve games, Max still sees them as the symbol of their indestructible union: “‘No, no. Max, you don’t understand anything, you’ve never understood anything. (…) You’ve always taken things too seriously. They were games, children’s games. We were children.’ (…) ‘You’re wrong, Una. You’re the one who never understood anything.’” (Littell 486). Therefore, intrinsic to Aue’s being is not only a form of entrapment tied to his involvement in the progression history but also, paradoxically, to the annulment of that history in favor of the restoration of a past that no longer exists and that cannot be recreated. Still, Aue’s war experience is nevertheless accompanied by his hopeless, tragic, pursuit of restoring that unity, or at least to try to preserve it, even through his passive homosexuality: “it seemed to me that in this way I was responding directly to my sister, incorporating her into me, whether she accepted it or not” (Littell 501). Actually, the mere remembrance of the love he shared with his sister seems to be able to reinstate, though temporarily, a feeling of union and to appease his war traumas, as this episode from Stalingrad suggests: “I was far away, thinking of (…) our love even vaster and more endless than that blue sea or the bitterness and pain of the wounded years, a solar splendor, a voluntary abyss. My cramps, my diarrhea, my surges of white-hot fever, my fear too, all that was erased, dissolved in this unhoped-for return” (Littell 404). However, the union is never the pure and authentic one of childhood, but is always mediated, be it by memory, by another body or even by another object. In fact, as the reality of war becomes more unstable and the cracks that invade it become deeper, Aue seeks refuge in Una’s estate in Pomerania where he indulges in the most extensive

and pervasive fantasy of union with her *through* her house. Indeed, he asserts that the "large, cold, dark house (…) was an invitation to the worst excesses, to the most insane, transgressive games, and since the tender, warm body I desired was denied to me, I used her house as I would have used her, I made love to her house" (Littell 900). As Razinsky points out, "[i]n the midst of the war, when Berlin is routinely bombed, when Germany is falling apart, (…) Aue suddenly puts the war on hold, as it were, and plunges into these intimate fantasies in the isolated von Üxküll house, diving into the depths of his experience, dragging the reader down with him" (191). Indeed, while the section "Air" opens under the banner of fantasized conversations with Una and with Aue imagining her doing the same things he does, such as reading (Littell 892), he then drags the reader down in an abyss of increasingly extreme sexual performances. In this respect, many critics have somehow tried to "justify" Littell's employment of an excessively perverse sexuality in the context of a novel that ultimately deals with the Final Solution: Sandberg reads it as part of an aesthetic of excess which ultimately serves Holocaust representation as the "excessive sexuality (…) acts as a form of literary stimulant, providing a new experience of shock, disgust, and dismay to readers inured to the representation of the horrors of the Holocaust" (253); similarly, Grethlein argues that "Aue's perversions mark, metonymically and metaphorically, the transgressiveness of Nazism. His transgressions, represented in transgressive style, are an attempt to express aesthetically the moral abyss of the 'Endlösung'" ("S.S. Officers" 577). Taking an even more extreme critical position, Mendelsohn argues that Aue's erotic excesses, and more in general his personal story modeled on the *Oresteia*, "make it harder and harder—and, finally, impossible—to see him as anything but, well, 'inhuman,' a 'monster,' precisely the kind of cliché of depravity that so many of this novel's strongest passages successfully resist" ("Transgression"). On the contrary, Kristeva contends that with Aue's exaggerated sexual behavior, "l'horreur nazie revêt une dimension inouïe, aberrante et qui, paradoxalement, ne la rend pas plus monstrueuse, mais l'humanise"

("Nazi horror takes on an unprecedented and aberrant dimension which, paradoxically, no longer makes it monstrous, but humanizes it"; "De l'abjection" my translation). While shock, excess and transgression indeed play a crucial role in this novel, Aue's orgiastic mania can also be read as one last, desperate, human attempt to "restore the lost, incestuous, unity of the twin couple of his infancy and adolescence, in a world that is going to pieces" (Ercolino, "Negative Empathy" 254). In fact, the ultimate goal of Aue's fantasies might be said to consist in an actual regression to childhood, best symbolized by his decision to shave his body and, symbolically, that of his sister,

> That night, I took a long, hot bath. I placed one foot and then the other on the ledge and, rinsing the razor in the bathwater, I shaved both my legs, carefully. Then I shaved my armpits. The blade slid over the thick hair, coated with shaving cream, which fell in curly bundles into the soapy bathwater. I got up, changed the blade, placed one foot on the edge of the bathtub and shaved my sex. (…) Leaving the bath, (…) I leaned against the mirror with my whole body, I closed my eyes and imagined myself shaving my sister's sex, slowly, delicately, pulling the folds of flesh between two fingers so as not to wound her, (…) it was the sex of my little twin sister and I burst into tears in front of it (Littell 905-906).

For Aue, shaving thus becomes a way to return to the sameness and indistinguishability of their bodies, to a state of purity which, however, is now made impossible by the wounds that both of them have suffered, those of childbirth and those inherited from war,

> When we were eleven or twelve our sexes were minuscule, it was almost our skeletons that collided with each other in the twilight; now, there was all this thickness of flesh, and also the terrible wounds it had undergone, a slit belly no doubt for her[10], and for me

[10] Aue concedes that the mysterious twins might be her sister's and imagines the scar she carries from the c-section: "I tried to imagine my sister pregnant, holding her swollen belly in her hands, my sister giving birth, torn apart, screaming, it was impossible. No, if that was indeed the case they must have cut her open, taken them out through the belly, it wasn't possible otherwise" (Littell 890). However, while recognizing that von Üxküll cannot be the father of those children, he does not consider the possibility that they might be his.

> the long hole through my skull, a scar wrapped around itself, a tunnel of dead flesh (Littell 903).

Actually, Aue's wound might here stand as a synecdoche of his war experience and especially of the trauma it left behind, which becomes an obstacle that not even the fantasy of incest or the symbolic act of shaving can overcome. For him, "worn-out and deranged by the war and the unsustainability of his position in a Germany that is about to capitulate" (Ercolino, "Negative Empathy" 254), returning to a state of union and wholeness is utterly impossible. This is confirmed by the fact that his delirium[11], however long and excessively detailed, must end without having stimulated any kind of healing. Actually, the section closes with Aue returning to the traumatic image of the partisan girl hanged in Kharkov: "such cruelty had no name, no matter how objectively necessary, it ruined everything (…) and that is why I wept, I didn't understand anything anymore and I wanted to be alone to no longer understand anything" (Littell 912). However, Aue cannot remain alone for much longer as the reality of war comes back to knock on his door in the person of Thomas, who brings him back to Berlin shortly before its fall. Yet, this section cannot simply be read as a "distraction" from the reality of the war but as something that prepares, in its denied promise of healing trauma, the final showdown in a Berlin that succumbs to the advance of the Allies.

4.4 "The Kindly Ones were on to me"[12]

As the last section, "Gigue," records the turbulent flow of events that leads to Aue's escape from Berlin, the mythical undertones once again pervade it with interesting implications.

[11] In line with the mythical subplot, some critics connect this delirium to the work of the Furies, who were said to afflict madness on those they were persecuting (see Mercier-Leca 5).
[12] Littell, Jonathan. *The Kindly Ones*. Translated by Charlotte Mendell, Vintage Books, 2010, p. 975.

For example, the two detectives from the Kripo, who have been tormenting Aue throughout the whole novel, make one last apparition in the flooded tunnels of Berlin's underground, claiming that they finally "want justice" (Littell 966). As Mercier-Leca suggests, this last chase "acquiert aussi un surcroît d'horreur, de cette horreur qui reste attachée à la vision des Érinyes. Cette scène nocturne et souterraine rappelle en effet que les domaines infernaux sont l'habitat naturel de ces déesses" ("acquires an extra layer of horror, that horror which remains attached to the vision of the Erinyes. This nocturnal and underground scene recalls in fact that the infernal domains are the natural habitat of these goddesses"; 5 my translation). While Aue keeps claiming that he is "innocent" (Littell 966), they have come with the intention of killing him, but not before confronting him with the crime of matricide. As Grethlein suggests ("S.S. Officers" 572), in a paradoxical reversal of Aue's opening sentence, they state, "We're going to tell you how it happened" (Littell 966). They reconstruct everything down to the last detail, even suggesting that his mother, just like Clytemnestra, showed him her breast to dissuade him from committing murder[13]: "She must have reminded you how she had carried you in her womb, then fed you at her breast, how she had wiped your ass and washed you while your father was chasing whores God knows where" (Littell 967). Ironically, however, Aue differs from Orestes also in this crucial detail: he never breastfed because he was severely allergic to his mother's milk (Littell 968). In addition, the two detectives, despite their careful reconstruction, cannot attribute Aue's action to a specific motive as it happens, instead, in the Aeschylean version of the myth, the revenge of the father[14]. Yet, they claim they do not need a

[13] In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, specifically in the *Libation Bearers*, Clytemnestra attempts to dissuade Orestes from killing her by showing him her breast: "Stop, my son! Hold back, from respect for this breast! You often drowsed at it while your gums drew out its rich milk" (lines 896-898).

[14] Throughout the novel, Aue indeed repeatedly expresses his hatred for his mother, motivated especially by the fact that "she forgot her husband and sacrificed her children to give herself to a stranger" (Littell 370). However, the overlap with the myth might be deceiving because it constructs a framework of expectations that is not directly confirmed. As Mercier-Leca points out,

> La « vengeance » est (…) suspecte. Les causes dmissibles (la mère a elle-même commis un crime, elle doit payer), même si la tragédie d'Eschyle montre qu'elles engendrent des violences sans fins, ces causes ont ici disparu (…). Bref, le meurtre n'a plus de fondement et Aue en est réduit à inventer que sa mère a

motive to judge him guilty (Littell 968). However, precisely when "justice" is about to be done, the Russians invade the tunnels and kill Weser, and later, "[i]n the hallucinatory and allegorical finale, among the ruins and the agonizing animals of Berlin's Zoologischer Garten" (Ercolino, "Negative Empathy" 255), Thomas kills Clemens. Then Aue kills Thomas as well, a gesture that Janßen symbolically interprets as a way to disown his "totalitarian allegiance" (182). However, even though free from every tie to the past and from a persecution that he considered unmotivated, no god will cast his vote for him to acquit him from his crime(s). Actually, the death of the Erinyes and the lack of intercession of a divine being makes sure that they never become "kindly" (LaCapra 102) so that, unlike the myth, "no redemption will ever be possible for [Aue]" (Ercolino, "Negative Empathy" 255). This applies to matricide but also to his participation in the broader history of the Holocaust, both connected by the fact that no apparent trace is left of any of those crimes. Indeed, while the memory hole problematizes the very existence of matricide, by killing Thomas and assuming a new identity, Aue symbolically erases his war crimes as well, at least from a legal standpoint. What appears paradoxical, however, is that he told us everything down to the last detail about his involvement in the Holocaust but nothing about matricide and, yet, these crimes are ultimately made equal by the treatment they receive. In fact, "Aue n'[est] pas (…) jugé pour le matricide, ni pour sa participation au génocide. C'est pourquoi il est condamné à une persécution sans fin, à un éternel retour des crimes et des souffrances" ("Aue [is] not (…) tried for matricide, nor for his participation in the genocide. This is why he is condemned to endless persecution, to an eternal return of crimes and suffering"; 10 my translation). Also, while discussing the Greek model of responsibility,

tué son père. ("'Revenge' is (…) suspect. The admissible causes (the mother herself committed a crime, she must pay), even if Aeschylus' tragedy shows that they engender endless violence, have disappeared here (…). In short, the murder no longer has any basis and Aue is reduced to inventing that his mother killed his father."; 11 my translation).

Again, she underlines the fact that "comme Clemens et Weser, notre conviction dans la culpabilité de Max repose sur une pure construction (peut-être délirante), déduite d'un mythe littéraire porté à notre connaissance !" ("like Clemens and Weser, our belief in Max's guilt rests on a pure (perhaps delusional) construction, deduced from a literary myth brought to our attention!"; 6 my translation).

Aue had pointed out that it was the most appropriate in the case of Nazi crimes because "[c]rime has to do with the deed, not the will" (Littell 592). However, what if the deed does not exist, or rather it exists, but on a different, inaccessible level of reality? It seems that what the tragic problematizes in this novel is thus not only the adherence of the myth to history, but also its very validity. In fact, what "the Kindly Ones" ultimately stand for is the externalization of "un remords inconnu dans la Grèce antique" ("a remorse unknown in ancient Greece"; Mercier-Leca 12 my translation), but profoundly rooted in in the historical trauma of the 20th century. Getting rid of the Erinyes, in fact, is not for him the assurance of freedom but the certainty of condemnation. The novel closes precisely along this line,

> I was feverish, my mind was coming apart. But I still remember perfectly the two bodies lying on top of each other in the puddles, on the footbridge, and the animals moving off. I was sad but didn't really know why. I felt all at once the entire weight of the past, of the pain of life and of inalterable memory, I remained alone with the dying hippopotamus, a few ostriches, and the corpses, alone with time and grief and the sorrow of remembering, the cruelty of my existence and of my death still to come. The Kindly Ones were on to me (Littell 975).

While Orestes, after being acquitted, can speak of "the whole greatness of future time" (Aeschylus, lines 764-765), Aue is feverish, crushed by the weight of a past that he knows will trap him until his death "still to come." Again, more than an Orestes "redivivus," he is a tragic figure who remains nailed down by a set of historical circumstances that allows no form of redemption or divine forgiveness. In this sense, the finale is rather tinged with Blanchot's interpretation of Sartre's Orestes,

> It would be infantile to think that by his fearful murder he has rid himself of everything, that, free of remorse and continuing to want what he did even after having done it, he is finished with his act and outside of its consequences. On the contrary, it is now that he will sound the surprising abyss of horror and naked fear that dogmatic beliefs no longer

> veil, the abyss of naked, free existence, free of complacent superstitions…. He is free; reconciliation with forgetfulness and repose is no longer permitted him; from now on he can only be associated with despair, with solitude, or with boredom (qtd. in Mendelsohn, "Transgression").

Indeed, as we know from the beginning, Aue's life in the lace industry is "quiet but empty, desperate, alone, and above all very, very bored" (Mendelsohn, "Transgression"). However, in his story, however long, something remains unfinished, opaque. This feeling of suspension has to do not only with the prospect of an endless persecution but also with the fact that, just like Clemens and Weser with the act of matricide, we cannot ultimately attribute a clear motive to Aue's involvement in the deadly machine of the war and of the Final Solution. Even though Littell himself pointed out how he constructed the project of *The Kindly Ones* around the unanswered question of "the motivation of the killers" (qtd. in LaCapra 105), it seems that not even a 1000-page memoir can really elucidate it. In this respect, LaCapra contends that it is because of the "fated" mythical framework that the novel cannot "fathom the complexity of the motivation of Aue" (LaCapra 104). However, the myth does not serve as an obstacle to something that might otherwise be clearer, but, on the contrary, it generates the constant problematization which is at the heart of this novel: is motivation so easily attributable? In the end, does it matter? Far more complex than an Orestes that seeks revenge for the death of his father, Aue's character proves that, even after endless reflections, "war and murder are a question, a question without an answer" (Littell 24). In this respect, LaCapra points out that "it is unclear whether Littell's novelistic project aims at elucidating motivation, even partially, or instead insists, or even remains fixated on, the incomprehensibility of the presumably incomprehensible" (105). Indeed, the author himself explains that, in the case of Nazism and the Final Solution, "the more one knows, the more the obscurity (…) becomes impenetrable" (qtd. in LaCapra 99). Also, he adds that "[a] writer asks questions as he tries to make his way through the darkness. Not towards the light, but further into the darkness, to arrive at a darkness

even darker than his starting place" (qtd. in LaCapra 98). Aue's story ends precisely in this "darker" place, which is associated with "time and grief and the sorrow of remembering" (Littell 975). An integral role in building this perceived obscurity has been played particularly by Aue's excesses which, according to Mendelsohn, disastrously diminish our perception of Aue as a human being, let alone a brother ("Transgression"). However, as Adams points out, they might have the more important function of "dislodg[ing] the reader from a passive orientation towards the text, eliciting a questioning and interrogative form of reading that is valuable as a means of responding to the novel's ethical provocations" (42). In this sense, literature should be understood as a destabilizing device[15] which pursues an ongoing quest for new approaches to representation that, as Cazeaux suggests, might "deliver reality (…) in a way which reinvigorates our perception of the world" (qtd. in Sandberg 245). In the case of *The Kindly Ones*, the tragic is what shapes especially the perception of Aue's inner world not simply as one lacking any kind of regret, but also as a site of historical trauma that leaves no escape, no real possibility of renewal, even for someone who speaks from the safety of a new life and a new identity. Haunted by his past, Aue ultimately knows he carries with him a tragic fracture that can never be healed, an inner landscape that can never be made whole again,

> You can never say: I shall never kill; that's impossible; the more you can say is: I hope I shall never kill. I too hoped so, I too wanted to live a good and useful life, to be a man among men, equal to others, I too wanted to add my brick to our common house. But my hopes were dashed, and my sincerity was betrayed and placed at the services of an ultimately evil and corrupt work, and I crossed over to the dark shores, and all this evil entered my own life, and none of all this can be made whole, ever (Littell 24).

[15] Or even, defamiliarizing. As Mitrano suggests, paraphrasing Victor Shklovsky's words, "[d]efamiliarization favors the unusual duration of perception; it jolts the receiver out of the stupor of habitual knowledge and helps restore his or her capacity to receive" ("Good and Evil" 27). In the case of this novel, Aue's excesses have precisely the function of "unhing[ing] the object from a familiar network of perceptions and caus[ing] a reaction akin to shock in the perceiver" ("Good and Evil" 28). As Ercolino similarly points out, this novel is indeed constructed on a "prolonged and carefully orchestrated" ("Negative Empathy" 254) feeling of shock which, however repetitive, never fully ceases to "upset the reader" ("Negative Empathy" 254).

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to advance a more systematic theorization of the form of the tragic novel starting from its historical, philosophical and literary origins to then follow its evolution through an impressive temporal sequence spanning from the mid-19th century to the early 21st. Precisely because its connection with tragedy has long remained ambiguous and rather loosely defined, this genre has fascinated but also raised many doubts, it has provoked discussion and resisted consensus. However, this analysis was designed specifically to shed light on the nature of the tragic and on its precise meaning by taking into consideration both tragedy, from which it isolates itself through the intervention of German Idealist philosophy, and the novel, with which it instead hybridizes, giving rise to a precise symbolic function. This symbolic function, in particular, is rooted in a non-conciliatory aesthetic *reaction* to the dominating and oppressive weight of history's *action*. More specifically, an action that dramatically accelerates with the modern promise of rational progress and relentless movement forward but that, in the presence of particular historical conditions, drastically reverses into its opposite, into a destructive entrapment and a complete immobility. In this respect, Faulkner, Morrison and Littell have offered an extraordinary example of this fractured perception of history, which sees on one hand the movement of a changing world, and, on the other, the stasis of characters who are immobilized by a traumatic moment, unable to move forward. For Quentin Compson that moment is embodied in his loyalty to his family's inheritance and its obsolete aristocratic values in a decaying American South, trapped in the aftermath of the Civil War defeat; for Sethe, instead, the impossibility of escape is rooted in the historical condition of slavery and its enduring shadow, which manifests itself with overwhelming force in the tragic choice that

slavery imposes on Sethe, infanticide; lastly, Max Aue is nailed down by the trauma of his participation in the Second World War and in the genocide against the Jews which subject him to an endless persecution and give him no real possibility to move forward with his life. What accounts for this "impressive trajectory," as Lambropoulos had pointed out (8), is the ability of the tragic to activate, within the realm of the novel, an aesthetic mechanism capable of giving voice to historical constellations that necessitate a "negative" rather than conciliatory response. In particular, it conditions the arrangement of novelistic content in such a way as to mirror a traumatic laceration that exists at the level of history itself. Ultimately, what results from this "mirroring" are characters who are so deeply influenced by the past, both personal and national, that their present becomes almost unbearable, their future impossible to envision. The destabilizing burden carried by tragic characters, echoing Sartre's words on Quentin, is indeed that of being forced to look backwards (90) while the force of history strives to drag them forward. Or rather, the real tragic fracture lies in the fact that the same story that would like to push them forward is also the one that nails their gaze backwards. Caught between opposing forces, these characters are ultimately unable to make any change or even transcend the constraints that imprison them. As Szondi pointed out, anything that can be resolved or sublated into a higher sphere is not actually tragic (55).

While Faulkner, Morrison and Littell have provided a significant example of the tragic novel, the meanings it conveys and the specific historical circumstances that might define the parameters of its emergence, further work is certainly required to expand the understanding of this form, especially by broadening the scope to encompass potentially diverse national contexts and historical conditions. In doing so, this form could possibly establish itself as an essential critical strand within the domain of the Western novel. Yet, another important question needs to find an answer: is the time of the tragic novel actually over? Specifically with Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, we have seen how this form comes to cross the threshold of the 21st century,

coming a long way from the world depicted by Flaubert, Hardy or Dostoevsky. Still, these authors, however distant in time and space, prove how the tragic remains a relevant tool to aesthetically process historical contradictions that continue to be perceived as irresolvable and impossible to assimilate. In this sense, and precisely because this fractured perception of history somehow still contains us, the tragic novel might continue to hold vast possibilities in aesthetic terms. However, only history and the polymorphous life of the novel will be able to provide a definitive answer.

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