

An Invitation to Dance Ourselves Through Death: Postdramatic Tragic Medeas

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche already observed our modern lack of the musical and poetic spirit of the text.¹ His proclaimed death of the tragedy pointed at a domination of reason, at the rule of the written word (*logos*) over the sound of the spoken word. Following Nietzsche, tragedy died when the oral culture of Greece, with the literal phonetic function of the letter as a means for preserving sound, had been replaced by the culture of the text. The profoundly sensible pleasure that is the effect of musical sound and lyric poetry had been muted and appropriated in Aristotle's dramatic aesthetics.² In contrast with classical dramatic aesthetics, in which dialogue rules dithyrambic choruses and *logos* rules pathos, Flemish theatre makers like Jan Decorte and Stefan Hertmans seek to outwit *logos*, to introduce intensity and physicality into the cognitive viewing experience. This article explores how the poetic adaptations *Betonliebe + Fleischkrieg* (Decorte, 2001) and *Mind the Gap* (Hertmans, 2001) reflect a changing understanding of the 'tragic' Medea that signals the emergence of a postdramatic theatre aesthetic. I shall argue that in these performances, the texts are treated as *Fremdkörper* -as an impure, foreign body- in order to articulate a postdramatic vision of the performative power of poetic language. The hierarchical relationship between music and language is re-arranged.

Open Unfolding Poetry

In Nietzsche's view, when language distinguished itself from music and, by extension, became limited by the *logos* rule, tragedy died. He is convinced that tragedy has crashed on the career of the word: "Logos defeats the pathos of tragedy. [...] What is language? An organ of consciousness. Music, however, is being".³ The poverty of language therefore lies in its need to explain and to be understood. In her *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart has observed that Aeschylus' introduction of the second actor in

¹ F. NIETZSCHE, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by S. Whiteside, ed. by M. TANNER, London, 2003.

² Cf. B. E. BABICH, *Words in Blood, Like Flowers. Philosophy and Poetry, Music and Eros in Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Heidegger*, Albany, 2006, p. 46-50.

³ Nietzsche in R. SAFRANSKI, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, translated by S. Frisch, London, 2002, p. 63.

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Greek theatre not only transformed the function of the dithyrambic choruses. The new structure also enabled a conflict of wills and marked the beginning of a process of individuation.⁴ This process of individuation was a step towards the emergence of Subjectivity and the hegemony of logos or reason. With Aristotle's *Poetics*, the 'language embellished' was put forward as an ideal standard, language into which rhythm, harmony and song entered. Following Aristotle, a language having the twofold charm of meter (which is a kind of rhythm) and melody reveals a perfect charm in producing its full effect of pleasurable emotion, a sense of Beauty. Yet, the essence of the poetry still lies in the imitation of an action, leading towards cognitive understanding and clarity. The harmonious melody and the verse of song and diction are but the seasoning of language. Text, rhythm, dance, and gesture are harmoniously attuned to each other through logos. The sound is ultimately dominated by logos and by the voice of the tragic hero, through what Lehmann called "linguistic individualisation".⁵ Eventually, theatre further developed in this direction and by the nineteenth century, poetry had disappeared entirely from the stage. Dialogues were acted out by actors impersonating characters, and dancing and singing were the core business of ballet and opera, which had become independent branches of art.

Contemporary theatre-makers like Decorte and Hertmans share Nietzsche's complaint that the new tragedy of logos gained priority over the old tragedy of pathos. They aim to outwit logos, introduce intensity and physicality into the cognitive viewing experience, and bring us to the edge of reason. It is no surprise then that they return from dialogue to poetry. Poetic form comprises language but revolves around rhythm and musical effects, which speak to our body instead of our mind. Moreover, as Stewart has aptly pointed out: "poetic form relies on effects of meaning that, in their metaphorical and imaginative reach, cannot be taken up completely in any single moment of reception. The semantic dimension of poetry is an open unfolding one [...] The poem is always manifold".⁶ In their reevaluation of music and musicality, Decorte and Hertmans liberate music from the logocentral grip of language.

⁴ S. STEWART, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Chicago, 2001, p. 13.

⁵ H.-T. LEHMANN, *Theater und Mythos: Die Konstitution des Subjekts im Diskurs der Antiken Tragödie*, Stuttgart, 1991, p. 157. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from languages other than English are my own.

⁶ S. STEWART, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, p. 12.

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Shout, shout, let it all out

Decorte made a radical gruesome, minimalist adaptation of *Medea*, the great classic work by Euripides. *Betonliebe + Fleischkrieg* consists of dialogues, but the childlike idiom is filled with holes of silence. Instead of Aristotelian 'language embellished' -which is also a tool in the struggle for cultural hegemony and distinction- Decorte deliberately uses an unsettling childlike language. Kings, courtiers and fools, no matter what their rank might be, speak the same trivialized and infantilized language. "zo schoon/méun gezichtjes/gelick/wollekskes/enkem/de sjal/wechedaan/dakkunoge/zach." The social dimensions of the characters, the social differences that become apparent through their language, disappear.

The text is presented as an alien body or *Fremdkörper*, using "text as peeled-off skin".⁷ In this respect, the words are whispered, coughed out, dug up and exclaimed. The text is spit out, stammered, declaimed, and recited, and is in contrast with Aristotle's proposed standard of 'language embellished'. This entails a particular performative speech. The at times whispering actress (Sigrid Vinks) stands still, hands next to her body, and speaks in a rather neutral tone. The dancer (Sharon Zuckerman) coughs up short sentences. The text hence produces a kind of musicality, not written with notes, but with words. The actors do not, in their gestures, illustrate the inner emotions to motivate their movements; instead, they are incited to move by the musicality of the words, not by the meaning of the words. In their turn, these actors incite the spectator to move in a Nietzschean sense of Dionysian thinking and commit "an act of extreme emotional intensity".⁸ The actor no longer perceives to move or act properly, that is, towards a particular goal, narrative, end, or result. The tragic hero does 'injustice' to the traditional dramatic function of movement on stage, which is meaningful action. The spectator has to surrender to what he perceives and another kind of seeing is required, capable of dealing with zones of indistinction between stimulus and response, between action and reaction.

Mind the Gap, a drama written by Flemish author Stefan Hertmans in 2000, features the figure of Medea, next to Antigone and Clytemnestra. She cannot express herself but through poetic speech, literary silences and cognitive stalling. Dialogue has become a painful monologue; confession has become a long lamentation. Medea's words do not explain, but articulate pain, doubt, hesitation and suffering. This is because catharsis in this postdramatic constellation no longer exists. The deliberate short-circuiting of dialogue into

⁷ L. VERBEECK, *Goethe ondanks Goethe: Torquato Tasso een afrekening in Etcetera* 1/2, 1983, p. 7.

⁸ R. SAFRANSKI, *Nietzsche*, p. 181.

monologue creates a particular effect. The monologues of Medea are intersected with the monologues of Antigone and Clytemnestra. On stage, the women are unaware of one another. They do not seem to hear or see each other. They do not react to each other's words. Their words are directed towards the audience, not towards one another. They do not talk at cross-purposes. Apart from the static impression we get, this speaking in one and the same direction produces the impression of a chorus.⁹ Whereas Aristotle's *Poetics* avoids confusion and prefers harmony and comprehensibility, the post-dramatic structure of *Mind the Gap* is marked by *parataxis* and simultaneity: "My Greek women do not dialogue. But the blocks of monologue among themselves, and the whole with everything around it - the context, the audience at the start of a new century, the evolution in the writing of and about tragedy: all this is nothing other than a single large dialogue. But the interlocutor is totally fulfilled with what I do not yet know. The dialogue contains everything that goes above and beyond myself. These terrible monologues are my dialogue with everything that has occupied me in this tragedy."¹⁰

The reduction to choral and monologic lamentation creates a polyphonic monologue rather than a dialogue in the strict sense of the word. Despite some analogical themes and genealogical connections, synthesis and unity are eluded and the reader is often left wondering "whether there exists any real *connection* in what is being presented simultaneously or whether this is just an external *contemporaneity*. Parataxis and simultaneity result in the failure of the classical aesthetic ideal of an 'organic' connection of elements to form an artefact".¹¹ As the play develops, the reader has to 'zap' from one story to another, to shift from one level to another. What starts off as three narrative trajectories soon multiplies into a kaleidoscope of, at times, contradictory and ambiguous memories, revealing bits and pieces of the complex situation of the women, a situation one will never be able to comprehend completely. According to Jan Kott, the theatrical monologue offers insight into the protagonist.¹² But in *Mind the Gap*, this view is overwhelmingly kaleidoscopic.

The drama text is long and director Gerardjan Rijnders decided not to cut it down in the 2001 staging. In the space of two hours, the audience has to deal with 125 pages of text. Moreover, one actress, Marieke Heebink, speaks very quickly, without pausing, so as if to catch up with time while speaking.

⁹ H.-T. LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated by K. Jürs-Munby, London, 1999, p. 129.

¹⁰ S. HERTMANS, *Antigone. Aantekeningen, een werkjournaal bij Mind the Gap* in *Nieuw Zuid* 5, 2001, p. 64-65.

¹¹ H.-T. LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 88.

¹² H.-T. LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 127.

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More than once, the voices intermingle. The result is what Hans-Thies Lehmann would call a “repletion [...] of sings,” a “dialectic of plethora,” “plenitude” in a postdramatic theatre.¹³ It involves an enactment of the Artaudian aesthetic in the sense that the gestural dimension of language is privileged: sonority, intonation, and intensity. “Les mots seront pris dans un sens incantatoire, vraiment magique”.¹⁴ It also involves images as non-causal becomings, images that carry their own negation within them. This means that the spectator is no longer guided towards the right interpretation by cognitive understanding, by a ‘clear’ and ‘distinct’ narrative plot. Cognitive vision has given place to a multi-perspective aesthetic of intensities and *Voyance*; a sign does not find its equivalent in language, but in creative thinking. The meaning attributed to images and signs is mobile and in a perpetual state of becoming. It moves and changes in its contact with other images and signs, independent of a co-ordinating narrative plot.

But the staging of the tragedies as three intertwined monologues also has another effect. Lehmann pointed out that the monologue “is often deprived precisely of that which the theatre author was traditionally meant to produce with its help: namely the electric suspense towards the response and progression”.¹⁵ The women’s reflection on and memory of the past prevails over the suspense of the plot. In *Mind the Gap* a “poetic-epic reconsideration has taken the place of the dramatic development”.¹⁶ Director Gerardjan Rijnders opts for a deliberate detached de-psychologization of the text. He is convinced that text needs to be ‘said’, not psychologically interpreted. The performance is in this sense an enactment of the Artaudian aesthetic insofar as the body-experiences are not tuned to premised fictional characters, the ideas they propagate and their caricature experiences. But the word-gestures -in the sense of sonority, intonation and intensity of words spoken- are not linked up by a syntax of bodily drives by the actors. The desired bodily *pulsions* do not drive the text forward.

Instead of Artaudian confessional outbursts, Rijnders opts for stylised acting, a dilution, deprivation and emptiness of action, a stillness in movement. The actor’s body is not a hieroglyph burning with metaphysical forces, revealing secret, violent truths. The performance *Mind the Gap* is provocative in presenting death and suffering with terrifying coldness. Moreover, scenographer Erik Kouwenhoven and light designer Imeen Rijdsdijk create a

¹³ H.-T. LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 89.

¹⁴ A. ARTAUD, *Cœuvres complètes*, ed. by P. THÉVENIN, 26 vols., Paris, 1956, iv, p. 121.

¹⁵ H.-T. LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 126.

¹⁶ H.-T. LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 126.

tough, cold atmosphere. The scene reminds us of - nothing. It breathes the emptiness of a Deleuzian *espace quelconque* or any-space-whatever - “irrational, disconnected, aberrant, schizophrenic spaces - no longer obey[ing] laws of traditional, commonsensical causality”.¹⁷ A critic described the stage as “a subterranean, weird construction of tubes that feeds on the city like a worm. [...] the emptiness that toughens, dulls, kills”.¹⁸

Unspeakable Sensations

Mind the Gap reminds us of the unspeakable and unrepresentable in cruel experiences, of the inherent failure to comprehend tragic events. It is important to avoid the self-evident, commonplace response, the discourse of those members of society who have obtained the right to speak out and have their voices amplified. In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze refers to Plato’s *Republic* and his distinction between two types of sensations.¹⁹ The first kind of sensation is the object of recognition that leaves the mind tranquil and inactive. Recognition correlates to the ideal of common sense, which unites our faculties in a voluntary and harmonious accord. The second kind of sensation forces us to think, gives rise to thought. To ‘mind the gap’ then is not to subordinate the eye to the model of recognition, nor to preconceived notions. To ‘mind the gap’ is to leave room for the ‘discordant accord’ between the demands of reason and the faculties of imagination. To ‘mind the gap’ is to love differential relations and intensities. Let a gaping wound disfigure the harmonious accord. Love its scar: “Sometimes I see her on a picture, in the newspaper - a Taliban woman that unveils her face, against the Law; a Kosovo woman that empty-eyed stares behind barbed wire. But here the story, the anecdote, threatens to reduce what happened into human size and makes it a little more bearable. No, there should not be anything bearable about her, except for the distance she keeps towards her own nightmares. To understand the Greek is to know that we will never understand this hiatus, this gap in our memory of experiences. Caesura.”²⁰

¹⁷ G. FLAXMAN, *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 5.

¹⁸ W. BORREMANS, *Toneelgroep Amsterdam-Mind the Gap* in *Goddeau.com: magazine over muziek en andere*, 15 December 2001 (<http://www.goddeau.com/content/view/724>).

¹⁹ G. DELEUZE, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by P. Patton, London, 2004.

²⁰ S. HERTMANS, *Antigone*, p. 35.

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To go on, and on, and on

The static theatre and the musicality of the language echo the mediations of Flemish symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck who declared -in 'The Tragical in Daily Life' (1896)- how unimpressed he was by the violence and tragic action in Greek and Elizabethan tragedies: "I am shown a deceived husband killing his wife, a woman poisoning her lover, a son avenging his father, a father slaughtering his children, children putting their father to death, murdering kings, ravished virgins, imprisoned citizens - in a word, all the sublimity of tradition, but alas, how superficial and material! Blood, surface-tears and death!"²¹

Maeterlinck was convinced that there is a tragic element in everyday life far more real, and far more penetrating. For him, the 'real' tragedy begins when the weapons remain silent.²² As Jacques Rancière has aptly noted, his motionless tragedy, filled with holes of silence countered dramatic action and replaces Aristotle's logical arrangement of incidents by "the intimate suspense of the world".²³ The result is a feverish state of inaction, a condition of waiting or sleeping on behalf of the characters. Similar dramatic 'holes' of silence, stuttering and immobility are characteristic for Decorte's and Hertmans' *Medea*. External action is reduced. There is, however, an important difference here compared to the symbolist notion of 'dramatic' inaction. The contemplative, mysterious silence of Maeterlinck's 'theatre of terror' in these tragedies has been replaced by a postdramatic tragedy of inertia, anguish and desperation. Contemporary tragedies are fed by scepticism and doubt, as Nietzsche had already suggested. Having uprooted the metaphysical tree, we have not been freed to act with confidence, but instead lack co-ordinates and seem to float the sea of life without any compass: "Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning?"²⁴

A nihilistic, fatalistic vision seems to dominate these contemporary Flemish Shakespeare adaptations. As catharsis is no longer effective in

²¹ M. MAETERLINCK, *The Treasure of the Humble*, translated by A. Sutro, Whitefish, 2005, p. 103-104.

²² M. MAETERLINCK, *The Treasure of the Humble*, p. 97.

²³ J. RANCIÈRE, *Film Fables*, translated by E. Battista, Oxford, 2006, p. 6-7.

²⁴ F. NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science (1882)* in K. ANSELL-PEARSON/D. LARGE (eds.), *The Nietzsche Reader*, Oxford, 2006, p. 224.

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postdramatic theatre, Decorte and Hertmans abandon the moralistic pedagogic function proclaimed by the Aristotelian aesthetic. Still, these theatre makers do not wallow in defeatist nihilism. They are careful not to reject belief completely. They remain suspended between belief and doubt, unable to settle for pessimism. The unwavering optimism of Decorte and Hertmans is striking. “Expecting very little yet still doing this and that, that’s what I think is good”, stated Decorte.²⁵

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²⁵ Jan Decorte quoted in H. BRANS, *De persoonlijke objectiviteit van Jan Decorte in Toneel Theatraal* 106/1, 1985, p. 11.