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John D. Lyons, *Tragedy and The Return of the Dead*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018. 288 pp. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8101-3710-3.

Review by Jennifer Tamas, Rutgers University.

At a time when the humanities in general and seventeenth-century French studies in particular are at risk, John Lyons' book is a vital contribution to our field because it conveys the necessity to study classical and neoclassical tragedies in order to understand the society we live in—its traditions, its rituals, its emotions.

Indeed, this beautiful study reinvigorates the notion of tragedy to discuss its controversial definitions and understand its evolution. Lyons identifies a turning point at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century as a new conception of mankind is being shaped in the name of freedom. By assimilating tragedy to the struggle of mankind against an overwhelming force, idealists undermine the emotion of fear that was core to the Aristotelian conception of tragedy. Viewed as a battle between two equal and legitimate forces (see Hegel's analysis of *Antigone*), this romantic conception of tragedy oversimplifies the very notion of what could be considered tragic. [1] As a result, Albert Camus stresses the rarity of tragedy, claiming that its existence is limited to the fifth century BCE and the European Renaissance. By challenging these perceptions of tragedy, Lyons encourages us to rethink this notion—its nature, its existence, its meaning.

John Lyons delves into major works of antiquity, the seventeenth century, and recent movies in order to challenge the common belief about tragedy's demise articulated in George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy*. [2] Lyons proves quite eloquently that, on the contrary, tragedy is not dead and still inhabits our culture because it triggers a pleasure in fear. Therefore, *tragedy* remains a relevant word to understand 21st-century mass culture. A host of zombies, revenants and specters haunt some of our most successful movies and TV shows. When perceived as a *form* or a *kind of event*, tragedy suddenly becomes particularly relevant to our society.

Artfully narrated, Lyons' inquiry tells his readers a fascinating tale stretching from antiquity to the present day. Combining close readings and more general interpretations, the study is very well written and easy to read. The opening chapter brings us to the heart of the home ("Home and Hearth") haunted by secrets and lies. The second chapter gives a closer look at the treatment of the dead by the living ("Burial and the Care of the Dead"). As we go further in the book, we venture deeper into darkness and mystery. The third chapter examines the afterlife ("Specters") while the final chapter offers a reflection upon the very nature of fear and its changing perception throughout centuries ("The Aesthetic of Fear"). The thematic index is really helpful for reviewing concepts and for working with students.

In the first chapter, Lyons portrays family as a dangerous sphere rather than a protective one. The return of a departed family member (Oedipus, Agamemnon, Thyestes, etc.) brings trouble rather than peace to the family circle. The so-called reunion masks a fatal disunion that leads to death. Lyons' close

reading of *Agamemnon* by Sophocles stresses the dichotomy between a heroic life and a grotesque death, as the glorious leader of the Trojan War ends his life stabbed like a pig. Because of its aesthetic form, tragedy underlines the obscenely blurred separation between the dead and the living. Theater powerfully brings to life ghosts, spirits, or gods.

The second chapter focuses on the treatment provided to the dead by their family members. Tragedy represents a “disruption in the cycle of domestic continuity” (p. 85) because most dead are not taken care of. Stinking corpses, cadavers left alone, bodies buried alive...the possibilities to deprive the dead of funeral rites are numerous. As a result, the tragic scene becomes a place for revenge and justice for the dead (*Hamlet*). In exploring the spatial qualities associated with the dead, Lyons gives special attention to the tomb in tragedies – a place of recognition and a space where the living can encounter the dead. For instance, in *Hecuba*, Astyanax hides in the tomb of his father, which makes him an “antispecter,” a term Lyons crafts to conceptualize how a living person can disappear into the grave. This disappearance can be literal (as in the case of Astyanax) or metaphorical, for example when a character experiences a civil death (*Le Tombeau des amants*) or has no more role to play (like Horace in the eponymous work by Pierre Corneille). When the dead are not given proper burial, unfinished business results in their return.

The third chapter pays special attention to specters that appear not only in tragedies but also in theoretical treatises at the end of the sixteenth century (Le Loyer, Taillepied). This well-documented chapter is the most fascinating part of the book, except for one drawback, namely the loose definition of “specter.” The definition Lyons provides, “an apparition that creates doubt” (p. 142), is not entirely satisfactory as it legitimates a comparison between Theseus (in Racine’s *Phaedra*) and a revenant, which is interesting but not exactly accurate. At the intersection of many different fields, specters are a fascinating object of study that can be approached from many angles such as the anthropology of fear, philosophy, scientific discourse, religion, and the history of ideas. One might have expected a short analysis of the specter through the lens of the controversial debate on purgatory, as this theological quarrel directly impacted the nature of the arts (and of theater in particular). However, Lyons makes every effort possible to situate the problems the specter elicits by developing ideas on the boundary between dreaming and walking, the exchange of identities, the possession, etc. Here we see Lyons’ strength in the ease with which he engages with a variety of theoretical concepts and critical approaches. Such an intellectual agility allows him to draw an enriching parallel between antiquity and recent movies. Therefore, this chapter includes numerous convincing and rich analyses such as the one on the *colossos*, conceived as a substitute for the missing corpse, and here applied to Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo*. Particularly striking are the pages dedicated to Martin Guerre and to the analysis of the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Most importantly, this chapter makes us wonder to what extent a dead person is fully dead and if it is the *same* person that persists after death. Once again, tragedy represents the privileged form as Aristotle conceptualized mistaken identity as the tragic motif *par excellence*.

The last chapter shifts to theoretical analysis. By looking at the transition from poetics to philosophy of tragedy, Lyons engages with thinkers such as Aristotle, Szondi, Schelling, or Hegel to ponder over the notion of freedom that seems more important to Romantic thinkers than frightening plots or bloodshed stories. Dwelling on Burke’s analysis of the sublime, Lyons reminds us that according to Burke, the sublime is based on fear, pain, death, and ugly emotions: it is not necessarily good. This perception contrasts strongly with the rhetorical definition of Boileau (heir of Longinus) who conceives the sublime as something transcendental, close to the *je ne sais quoi* typical of court society. Burke’s understanding of the sublime cannot be dissociated from a certain type of fear—a kind of pleasure in this fear—accessible both to the elite and to the masses. The most stimulating pages of the chapter establish a daunting and nuanced parallel between Aristotle and Burke. Both ideas of fear and compassion come to the fore. For both theoreticians, the suffering of the *good* character does not have any moral justification.

Even though John Lyons claims he does not wish to establish new dogma, it is worth noting that he conceptualizes a number of new ideas (such as “antispecter”), some of which could benefit from being further developed. Some original and thought-provoking concepts appear at length in the footnotes and

would benefit from full consideration in the body of the text. Fascinating ideas on “relics” (note p. 227) and “spectralization” (note p. 221) make the reader crave more details. I was particularly intrigued by the comparison between ideas and tropes, especially because it helps refine Lyon’s illustration. His choice to define relics as synecdochic and specters as metaphoric was also most enthralling.

To conclude, this is a beautifully crafted piece of scholarship which glides seamlessly from one section to the next and succeeds in highlighting the complexity of tragedy throughout the centuries. Each chapter, each subsection is clearly thought through and constitutes a crucial piece of the story John Lyons wants to share with us. This serious work, which mostly relies on endogenous tools, aims at reconciling high and low culture. In mastering chronological and intellectual acrobatics, John Lyons convinces his readers but also his students and *our* students that tragedy, given the ghostly nature of representation, is still among us. For those of us fascinated by *The Walking Dead*, *Les Revenants*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, etc., the components of tragedy still live with us. If we want to be at peace with our dead and our literature (which sadly consists mainly of dead people, especially for seventeenth-century specialists), we need to make sure to read, understand, and acknowledge the work of the ancients.

NOTES

[1] Georg Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller and ed. J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

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

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