THEATRE AT THE IMPASSE:
POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND BLITZ THEATRE GROUP'S
LATE NIGHT

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I. Introduction: The Theatre of the Impasse

To speak of impasse is to speak of something other than crisis. Where crisis finds no decision, there we discover the impasse. This is important because a crisis, whatever else it may be, can only be realised as a 'crisis' once it is answered by the decision that it has called forth. Reinhart Koselleck once wrote that 'crisis', from its earliest roots in the ancient Greek language, 'aimed at a definitive, irrevocable decision' (2002, 237). Decision consists in a singular accomplishment: the assertion of 'man's' mastery over the world, over his own destiny, by means of his political mastery over himself. This cannot be true of the impasse. For in the first place, impasse is that which renders every decision inoperative. One cannot 'decide' on the impasse, as one might decide on the 'state of exception'. Carl Schmitt's well-rehearsed aphorism—the very essence of his political theology—states: 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception' ([1922] 2005, 5). But impasse and exception are wholly incompatible, however proximate they may appear to be, insofar as the latter belongs to the power of the sovereign to decide; while the former testifies to the nullity of every decision—and thus to sovereignty's incapacitation. Impasse is not only Hamlet's indecision; it is Lear's 'poor, bare, forked animal' (Act II Scene IV; 1982, 848). To encounter the impasse is to accede to that which undoes the dyadic structure of crisis-decision that belongs to the voluntarism of both the sovereign exception and its justification in political theology. 'We are at an impasse' is the plaintive cry of the

helpless, not the rallying call of the strong. Impasse in the strictest sense is 'impassable.' What it demands is impassivity not sovereignty. It can be suffered or endured or withstood, if one is resilient enough. It cannot be transcended.

The same dilemma can be found in the theatre in its post-dramatic form. Where theatre traditionally presented a world that was in crisis, contemporary theatre—or at least much of it since Beckett—has sought out the limits of its own possibility, by reaching into the impasses of its capacity to represent a world as such. It is worth recalling in passing, since it has some bearing on what comes next, Hans-Thies Lehmann's criticism of Ionesco's theatre of the absurd, as a theatre that still 'remained a world representation' (2006, 54). But it is not the fact that contemporary theatre no longer seeks to represent a world that makes it a theatre of the impasse. What makes it a theatre of the impasse is that it has lost faith in the power of decision. Where once decision belonged equally to both politics and theatre, through which a crisis in either the dramatic world or the world of states and princes, consuls and diplomats, would lead to a final resolution of the conflict on the stage (or on the world stage), now crisis, for the theatre, designates an unassignable place and time that fails to coincide with the arrival of the sovereign.

One might also think the theatre of the impasse as embarking on the 'wayless' path of *aporia*—where it inhabits a space of irresolvable contradiction—providing insight into that which is essentially incompleatable. A theatre that makes manifest *aporia*, in other words—seeking neither its resolution, nor (in more explicitly dialectical terms) its reconciliation—is a theatre that is quite unlike the theatre of crisis that tarries with the *aporetic*—with the difficult, with the unsurpassable—but only with the aim of overcoming and thereby excluding or banishing it. The theatre of the impasse not only confronts *aporia*, it dwells within its uncomfortable entanglements—only in this way does it become both a source of—and thereby invitation to—critical thought. Adorno identified it, not with the theatre of Brecht, but with Beckett's universe of clowns and antiheroes—a theatre that is 'as crepuscularly grey as after sunset and the end of the world' ([1970] 2002, 81). Here it is worth bearing in mind Adorno's definition of negative dialectics that 'will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope' ([1966] 2004, 406). If I may borrow from Gillian Rose (1992) her inspired expression—this is a theatre of the 'haunting impasse'—an impasse that is not 'welcomed', since to welcome it would 'transfigure *aporia* into *euporia*' (73)—into riches, abundance, and wealth. The theatre of the impasse, it will be argued, gives up theatre's riches, in order to embrace its poverty of means, its insufficiency, and its inadequacy. This essay aims to unfold this impoverished theatre, while excavating the aporetic site in which it is located as being one of the impasse. I approach this problematic of the theatre of the impasse in two ways. In the first half of the essay, through a theoretical engagement with political and theological understandings of crisis, and the proposal that impasse undoes the discourse of 'crisis'—specifically insofar as it enacts what I shall term the 'teleological suspension of decision.' In the second part, I pursue this idea in relation to a contemporary example of the theatre of the impasse—Blitz Theatre Group's production *Late Night*, performed at the Barbican theatre in London in 2016. I argue that while this theatre stages the crisis of the European polity, what it reveals is something else: that it should be understood, in allegorical terms, as a theatre that reveals the limits of human sociality as being fundamental to the experience of impasse.

Theatre, Crisis, and Politics of the Impasse

To confront impasse in terms of that which is, strictly-speaking, impassable, is to grasp the concept of crisis in stark contradistinction to the way it is theorised by political philosophy. Richard T. Peterson (1996) provides the following definition of impasse that afflicts the realm of the political:

> "Impasse" here means an incapacity not only to find political solutions to outstanding difficulties but also to find terms in which to articulate those difficulties in a concrete and illuminating way. [...] The idea of an impasse implies not simply the existence of difficulty or unresolved problems, nor does it have exclusively to do with persisting injustices and oppressions. Rather, use of this idea implies that specific issues count as symptoms or expressions of problems with the framework in which social action takes place, and so with the ability of society to maintain itself as a stable process. Impasse is reflected in society's repeated failure to resolve problems that represent threats to its constitutive institutions. (22)

This definition is far from being inadequate. And yet it changes little in the structure of the concept of impasse that would persuade anyone who cared to look that it has been sufficiently distinguished from the notion of crisis, which it is seen to compel. Impasse designates the failure of the political system to remedy that which threatens the functioning of its institutions: the contradictions to which they give rise and the various gridlocks by which political, economic, or social crises are provoked. When we have reached 'an impasse', when all talks and all hopes of resolution to our difficulties have faded or been abandoned or have broken down, then we are in the midst of full-blown crisis.[1]

As far as political theory is concerned, impasse is to be conceived in terms of a relational dysfunction, operating between two discursive polarities. On the one hand, it appears as the contradiction that engenders a systemic crisis: impasse signifies a profound loss of legitimacy at the administrative level of rational social organisation, and a failure of the norms that motivate its agents' choices;[2] on the other hand, it provides a name for the repeated frustration, evidenced at a conceptual level—at the imaginative level of thought and at the level of existing political discourse—of the solutions that would allow the crisis to be brokered into an accord. Impasse occurs when there is a dearth of 'good ideas'—those 'solvents of impasse', in the words of Yanis Varoufakis (2017). To say this is a standard intuition of crisis discourse is simply to say that the impasses of thought and structural contradiction constitute its two basic presuppositions; they provide the coagulants of crisis. For Christopher Pierson (2011), impasse is understood as 'both an acute crisis in the political institutions of the advanced capitalist world [and as] a crisis of confidence in the capacity of conventional tools of political analysis to diagnose, let alone offer remedies for, this political malaise' (30). Bill Martin (1996) states that the 'present impasse of politics' is nothing other than our 'present inability to think the polis' under the conditions of contemporary capitalism (3). Meanwhile, Peterson advocates a structural analysis of the 'inadequacies of liberal knowledge-politics' that would specifically target the impasses of

contemporary liberalism. 'Liberalism today,' he writes—he is writing during the 1990s, but his assessment nonetheless remains extremely relevant—'is marked by a combination of institutional triumph and political exhaustion'. Its triumph lies in the global extent of its hegemony; its political exhaustion appears in the form of the various contradictions and political emergencies to which it gives rise but for which it has no answer. These are, he describes, *inter alia*: the democratic deficit, the 'degeneration' of political discourse, the 'flattening' out of the public sphere, the contradiction of productivity and economic growth, as well as the ecological consequences of over-consumption as they are now becoming manifested through the effects of global climate change (Peterson 1996, 29–30). Quite understandably, each of these analyses starts from the perspective of political crisis in order to identify a structural impasse—the contradictions and incongruities of the underlying system—to which critical thought must apply itself in all its creative vitality and with all its resourcefulness in order to diligently root out the causes of the malaise. Thus, impasse belongs to the discursive form of a diagnostics of crisis: of its reasons, ongoing effects, and far-reaching consequences—and ultimately to its prognosis and eventual (or so it is imagined) overcoming. An impasse is something to be 'broken' by an act of political will—by decision. In this way, impasse serves the analytic of crisis, in the same way that the symptom, with its modes of description, tracing the progressive course of a pathology, serves the analytic of disease. From this much can be learned about the nature of the political failings of a system, but little of the nature of impasse as such.

In the theatre of the impasse, it is the reverse that is true. If crisis discloses impasse, it is the impasse itself, rather than crisis, that emerges as the heterological terrain inhabited by the theatre. How, first, should one describe the scene, landscape, or *topos* of the 'impasse'? Lauren Berlant has offered a quite distinct way of addressing the problem of impasse in her book *Cruel Optimism*. There, for Berlant, impasse is characterised by an affective experience of extreme precarity. It is a 'formal term for encountering the duration of the present, and a specific term for tracking the circulation of precariousness through diverse locales and bodies' (Berlant 2011, 199). Having arrived at an impasse, one finds oneself lost in a 'cul-de-sac'—a term for which, as Berlant reminds her reader, impasse was invented as a substitute or synonym. Impasse is a 'middle without boundaries, edges, a shape…': it is experienced in 'transitions and transactions'—but where nothing has 'traction' (200). What is peculiar to its specific spatio-temporality is its 'decompositional' structure; its formlessness: 'one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the same place' (199). In the impasse, one experiences everything differently to the productive logic of the norm: time, space, historicity. One is constantly mobile, yet always immobile: one comes from nowhere and one goes nowhere; in a state of permanent passage, one has always departed, yet without hope of ever arriving at a secure destination. Locked in the present without meaningful access to the future or the past, to be in the impasse is to occupy a 'stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic' (4). This is the terrain of the impasse, and it is upon this strange, forsaken, and inexplicable no-man's land, into which we seem to have stumbled, as if blindly, unknowingly, or perhaps carelessly, that the aesthetic configurations of the theatre of the impasse are built.

Facing conditions of irresistible breakdown, expelled from the matrices of given knowledges and whatever certainties they formerly provided for the world—its sense of solidity, stability, and direction—cast, in other words, into the wilderness of unknowing, and held captive there by an obstinate fascination for the phantasmagoria of disaster, for catastrophism, the orientation of the theatre of the impasse is set not by the illuminating lights of 'crisis-decision' but by the *experience* of impasse as such: by an experience of the profoundly disorientating effect that comes with being ship-wrecked. What it produces might be seen as being akin to George Bataille's description of the fabrications of those ancient Gnosticisms that so fascinated him: it stages 'strangely abased cosmologies' ([1930] 1996, 46). The theatre of the impasse thus invents, through unexpected and startling allegorical visions—as we shall see in detail later—an esoteric knowledge of the crisis-infected world. Let me say—understanding this to be nothing more than a guiding, conditional, and entirely speculative description at this point—that what the theatre of the impasse discloses will be the *experience* of an 'englobing' sense of immanence, of the loss of the redemptive powers of transcendence, and of entrapment *within* an immanent world. To experience the theatre of the impasse, in other words, is to be led along the path toward an *immanent* understanding of 'crisis', in which the world of the impasse—and thus the 'world' as such—is experienced *as* crisis.

At the impasse, the world *is* crisis: it removes the certainty of the ground upon which decision gains a foothold. This is because impasse is nothing other than the destabilisation of the very hierarchies of truth and knowledge that decision wishes to restore – as if the world could be returned to splendid order and to the way it once was through the magical power of wishful thinking alone. But to experience impasse is to experience the powerlessness behind every transcendent claim, and thus the radical annulment of the force of decision; it is to render unenforceable the traditional ways in which political and exorbitant power justifies its reign over the 'world'. Impasse abrogates: it invalidates the authority and rights of the sovereign just as it erodes the legitimacy of institutions and governments. It testifies to the dissolution of the norms upon which social hierarchies are constructed; it speaks only of diminishment, of deterioration, of irrecoverable losses sustained by the human community, of apoplexy and prostration. Viewed in cosmological terms, which is to say, in terms of the world thought through the prism of 'theology', what impasse reveals is precisely nothing – the nullity of the world: nothing 'returns' in the impasse except nullity itself, and repeatedly so. There is simply no way out of the impasse; impasse is only surrender and defeat and perpetual sacrifice. In the impasse one appeals to the Gods only to hear that they themselves have been reduced to silence by it. This is why impasse-gnosis represents knowledge of the de facto 'closure' of every voluntarism, of all hopes for a return of the sovereign, or the saviour, for above all what is consummated by the impasse is nothing other than the 'teleological suspension' of every political decision—the suspension of every decisionistic end that would deliver the world to its salvation. Impasse reveals a world without rhyme or reason—taking this in the most literal sense to mean that the world of the impasse is an irregular, arrhythmical, and 'out of joint' world.

It is in relation to this teleological suspension of decision that the theatre of the impasse must be understood as a theatre that exists wholly in opposition to the traditional theatre of crisis (that is, any theatre that seeks to reconcile reality and its representation) with its pretension of representing a world order to a community whose ethical being and ontological coherence it seeks

to reaffirm through the resolution of the crisis it stages for their benefit. In the first place, the theatre of the impasse can no longer be seen to redeem the world by transposing its effects, through the resolution of the decision-crisis structure, onto an audience conceived as a congregation, political assembly, or ethical community. To the extent that the theatre of the impasse cannot constitute a community it cannot be a theatre that claims to represent 'the world' on behalf of that community. It can—at best—only reveal the poverty of every community, the poverty within which every community subsists in relation to its world (and where the term 'world' here does not designate the security of foundation, but the paucity and barrenness of the terrain upon which any community must be built). Jean-Luc Nancy has provided a designation for the essential impoverishment of every community, by naming it the 'inoperative community'. It is a community founded not on the plenitude of communitarian being, but on a principle of radical incompletion. Community emerges as a 'sharing' that is a 'workless and inoperative activity' rather than something that expresses itself through an act of veneration. The inoperative community dispels the phantasms of a presumed *Gemeinschaft* that springs from the 'delirium of an incarnated communion' (Nancy 1991, 35). Theatre of the impasse, for the same reason, can offer no communion, no spiritual association, no pastoral direction, and no redemption. What it reveals is rather 'an originary or ontological "sociality"' (28)—a community exposed, Nancy writes, by its very finitude to an 'areality that above all extroverts it in its very being'. The theatre of the impasse evokes our 'being-in-common'. And thus its audience, like the community of the impasse itself, is comprised of fragile, unshielded, vulnerable creatures—exposed in needful and precarious ways to one another; what it does not invoke is a 'common being' (29) in which a community might fully substantiate itself through the assertion of an exclusive togetherness (as is found, for instance, in the affirmation of the myths of natality and intrinsic identity that provide the preassigned characteristics of a people or a nation).

The notion of sharing, which Nancy insists upon, deserves some attention. To split, to apportion, to partake—inevitably, the problem of 'sharing', and thus of affirming that which we hold in common, leads the theatre of the impasse to make the following concession: that the problem of the world—of a world-in-common—cannot be so easily dispensed with by the theatre. If I may express this thought through a proposition or, better still, 'hypothesis' that I would then like, in the second section of this essay, to examine in relation to a specific example: the theatre of the impasse—that is, the theatre that understands itself explicitly as confronting the impasses of the world-representative function of the theatre, and of the world's representational 'crisis'—must be located at the impasse of a world that no longer has faith in the powers of transcendence. What this hypothesis says is that even as the theatre rejects the idea that it stands in a metaphorical relation to the world, which it 'represents'—and which, through its representations, it transfigures—nevertheless it re-establishes itself in a metonymic and contiguous relation to the world of which it becomes a representative part. In this sense, it becomes possible to speak of the broken discourse of the theatre of the impasse as a fragment, a fractured element, shard, or splinter, one that belongs both to the world's own broken discourse and refracts it, as do the remnants, vestiges, and ruins of history. What this brings to mind is Walter Benjamin's account of allegory as 'an object of knowledge nesting in the thought-out constructions of rubble' ([1925] 2008a, 183). In allegory, 'things bear the seal of the all-too-earthly. Never do they transform

themselves from within. Thus their illumination by the limelight of apotheosis' (182).[3] It is in virtue of the following contiguity, then—theatre's impasse *and* that of the impasse of the world—that a certain contemporary theatre proclaims an 'allegorical' orientation to the world (for which it acts as a partial 'stand in').[4] Here the contiguous 'and' does not express a brute juxtaposition any more than it signals a simple conjunction; it signals an aesthetic operation—what Nancy calls an *exposition* (1991, 29). What this would seem to suggest is that the theatre of the impasse reveals, through an exposition of its own impoverishment, the poverty of the world itself and for the simple reason that it is itself the synecdoche 'of the world'.

We might summarise this state of the theatre, bound no longer to the transcendence of decision but by the realisation of the immanence of the world in which it is absorbed and inescapably ensnared, by returning momentarily to Schmitt and the problem of political theology. For theatre to acknowledge the impasse, it must suspend every lingering hope, residing in the hearts of its auditors, that the stage might provide, in theatrical form, any service to a project founded, however covertly, on a 'political theology'; the idea that the concepts of the modern state are merely 'secularized theological concepts' (Schmitt [1922] 2005, 36). More specifically, it must hold in suspension any thought that—as with God's creation of the world 'ex nihilo'—sovereign decision 'emanates from nothingness' (32)[5] (on which basis, for Schmitt, it required no legitimation from any pre-existing norm or authority). It must hold to nothingness as such: that nothing really is simply 'nothing', and thus to the truth that nothing 'emanates' from nothing. It is this insight alone that confers upon the theatre the power to suspend the presumptuous claims of decision, while at the same time enabling it to reveal the true nature of the impasse. Insofar as the theatre of the impasse emerges at the point of a teleological suspension of decision, there can be no 'miracle' performed there in which either the world will be redeemed or in which sovereignty would be permitted to lay claim, once again, to its ancient prerogatives and rights, let alone hope to regain its lost transcendence. The theatre of the impasse, like the insecure and contingent community it convokes, is held entirely captive by the condition of immanence that presides over its world.

When Benjamin—reflecting on the German Baroque and the *Trauerspiel*, partly in response to Schmitt's theory of sovereignty—observed: 'bad dreams come from the spleen, but prophetic dreams are also the prerogative of the melancholic'—he might well have been anticipating the theatre of the impasse since these morbid and gloomy, sometimes visionary and ecstatic dreams, as he went on to write, 'are to be seen arising from the geomantic slumber in the temple of creation, and not as sublime or even sacred inspiration. For all the wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the nether world; it is secured in the life of creaturely things, and it has nothing of the voice of revelation. Everything saturnine points down into the depths of the earth [...]' (Benjamin [1928] 1985, 152). Not even the sovereign can escape the immanence of the 'state of creation', which led Benjamin to an incisive observation—that the theological privileges afforded by Schmitt to the sovereign were ultimately unwarrantable: 'enthroned over subject and state, [the sovereign's] status is confined to the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature' (85).

I would like to approach this melancholic—or, perhaps it would be better to say, 'saturnine' theatre, more directly through an example, turning at this point in the argument to a performance by Athens-based Blitz Theatre Group called *Late Night* in order to examine the claim that the theatre of the impasse is a theatre without miracles, and whose condition of emergence is the suspension of the political theology of the stage.

II. A Theatre Without Miracles

It is 17 June 2016 at the Barbican's London International Festival of Theatre. *Late Night* has 'come late' to the UK, having toured continental Europe since 2012, although it is no less prescient for its belated appearance, being staged just two weeks before the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union. 'In those days...'—a phrase that is recurrent throughout the performance—our optimism was as pronounced as the 'Remain' badges we wore; for looking around, there was no-one in the auditorium who did not wear one on their clothing. 'In those days' our optimism was, nevertheless, belied by an unobtrusive though nonetheless palpable undercurrent of apprehension at what that vote portended—something that, on retrospect, has made *Late Night* all the more poignant, auguring—as it did—a community of mourning. This is what we encountered, as we entered the theatre: six performers are seated at the back of the stage, which has the look of a sad and dilapidated dance hall. One of them—a woman—busies herself with unravelling the bandage that is wrapped around her leg; carefully peeling it off, layer by layer. Another leans forward in his chair, his hands covering his eyes. The other four sit motionless, waiting, observing the audience, though their faces—as impervious to scrutiny as are masks—betray not the slightest sign of interest in us. We observe them in return; we too wait. Only when something appears to startle one of the performers into leaping from his chair—his brief upward glance suggests something has fallen from the ceiling—does the 'performance' then begin. A waltz starts to play and the performers, now having paired up, begin to glide around the stage in a choreographed formation that has echoes—to my mind at least—of the old Max Ophüls film, *La Ronde*, based on Arthur Schnitzel's play of the same name. It is this image of the waltz that provides the performance with its central motif. Only when the dancers break into fleeting poses—employing a kind of theatrical feint—is the movement momentarily suspended, then the dance resumed; it leaves us with the impression that we are not watching people but marionettes. This rather graceful automatism is suddenly interrupted when one of the dancers stumbles, falling clumsily to the floor. Her partner seems unconcerned and makes no move to assist her, but instead begins to applaud—although it is difficult to say whether he does so sardonically—impudently, or as someone who claps so as to show approval at a feat of great virtuosity that has just been executed before astounded eyes. (He wears a look of astonishment, or perhaps it is blank stupefaction, as a fixed expression throughout the entire performance). Another breaks from the dance to take up a position by a microphone at the front of the stage—he says: 'Yiorgos is applauding Sophia who has fallen. He is thinking of Paris, which was destroyed last November. He is thinking of Orly airport, the snow that was falling, and a woman on the edge of the pier...'. The dance continues, now to the staccato rhythms of a tango; meanwhile one of the women takes her position by the microphone: 'Christos is drinking water', she says, 'He cannot remember how he

ended up here. He is thinking of the sirens in the night… the roar of aircraft over Antwerp… and the hours spent awaiting her in front of the building covered with signs. In those days, the traffic lights blinked all alone in the empty streets'.

In this way, what we learn, as the performance progresses, is told through elliptical fragments of speech; and the unsettled narrative that begins to emerge is one of Europe, viewed—and not for the first time—at the 'end of history'. But this is not the end of history as the fabled Owl of Minerva would see it—that owl with which a vainglorious Hegel once identified himself, that spreads its wings only with the arrival of dusk to 'paint its grey in grey' in order to proclaim the retrospective wisdom of philosophy, as realised through the civic structures and institutions of the European *polis*. This is the vision of a Europe that is painted instead in the grey stains caused by the dust and the rubble that is strewn around the fringes of the stage. It is painted in the grey of the debris that suddenly plummets from the ceiling to the floor, like an abruptly cascading shroud, a tumbling shower of masonry and fine concrete powder, that nevertheless startles no-one on the stage since, clearly used to it, they are impassivity personified. This is a vision of Europe caught up in the grey of an interminable war, of a fight against an unknown enemy, of the drudgery of a struggle that occurs elsewhere and everywhere, and which has thoroughly exhausted the security of that once privileged 'safe European home'. It is the grey painted by the permanent state of exception: it is the exception without exception, where there is neither the prospect of defeat; nor the faintest hope for a final victory. This is a Europe in which an army—the European army—is on the march; where various fronts are threatened with collapse—Morocco, Syria, perhaps Poland. In Warsaw, for example, we are told of a great fire that has broken out; while in Greece, hundreds of people have been seen lying down before the Cathedral in Thessaloniki, although it is difficult to say whether they are dead or merely sunbathing. We hear that on the London Underground, trains ferry the wounded to and fro. We discover that the major cities of Europe are either under a permanent state of siege, or ruined, or razed; where people sleep in warehouses, airports, and derelict malls, and where the corpses of escaped zoo animals litter the Boulevards—rotting where they have fallen. In this Europe, the avenues of its once great and proud Capitals are now barricaded, its streets and doorways populated not by shoppers but by assault troops. What we are presented with, in short—and if I may say, to summarise the scenography and dramaturgical setting of *Late Night*—is not just a world in the throes of a major crisis but the world of the impasse as such; of impasse without pass: 'We were hoping', a woman observes at one point, 'that someone, who believed in something would appear… and would save the world. We were certain that he would. This man never came'.

That said, for all its depictions of political and social ruin and devastated lives, there is nothing 'tragic' about *Late Night*. For all the suffering it implies, tragic pathos is entirely lacking in this theatre, despite its portrayal of a world that has been uprooted, and its peoples made homeless. But what plausible reasons could there be for eschewing tragedy today in the theatre? It could be said—especially if one wants to counter my reading of *Late Night* by responding with 'realistic' criticisms—that a play performed before a predominantly 'well-off' and 'metropolitan' audience, at one of London's premier performing arts venues, could hardly possess any profound insight into the nature of contemporary tragic experience. To take into account, or so the objection would go,

the 'materiality of the performance and performers', which is to say, the privileged position from which they speak, would be to cast justifiable aspersions on *Late Night* for its self-evident failings (or at least the self-evident failings of my proposed reading of the production).[6] At the very least it would point to the failure of this kind of theatre to explicitly confront the grim realities of the crises that afflict Europe today. Its abstraction from reality mirrors the abstraction of philosophical concepts. The claims of either to say anything of relevance are belied by the apparent fact that by their very privilege they are inured to the face of actual horror—the horror that exists outside the theatre, and beyond the imaginings of its middle-class audience; horrors captured, for instance, in the grisly images of drowned migrants, whose bodies wash up on the shorelines of Southern Europe. Confronted with real abject human misery, it would surely be tasteless to proclaim *Late Night* 'tragic'. It could also be said: what use is the concept of impasse, when real crises demand real-world solutions? In this sense to decide between the respective merits of a theatre of crisis and one of impasse is surely to ask what each can actually do? Where one might help forge a path out of the difficulty, the other assuages only the indulgent or indifferent: those who are more than happy to proclaim that 'nothing can be done!' But what can theatre actually *do*? What forms of attestation connect it in meaningful ways to the world of which it is a part? These questions, it seems to me, are unavoidable if theatre is to retain its relevance, even if they cannot be answered without risk of foundering or falling to accusations of illegitimacy and dilettantism. If there is nothing that theatre 'can do', that does not mean that it should thereby do nothing. So, let me use these critical objections in order to sharpen my reading of *Late Night* in terms of the problem of impasse: if *Late Night* impresses it is because of what it risks, which is nothing but itself; and it does so precisely by accepting—without asking thereby to be forgiven—its own inadequacy. The theatre of the impasse acknowledges that theatre is an inadequate medium, where inadequacy is to be understood in the sense of its inadequation with reality: its representations fail to be 'true' to the real—this inadequacy belongs both to theatre's *aporetic* nature, but is also the source of its dialectical power: whether explicitly or implicitly, the theatre of the impasse is a theatre that occupies its own *aporetic* space without seeking to suture it into a false totality. It is an inadequate and insufficient theatre, offering neither the consolation of distraction from a tragic world, nor answers to it. To accuse it, is to accuse the world—that is the risk it must necessarily take if it is to function in the way I think it must: as allegory.

No doubt *Late Night*'s embrace of dystopian imagery—rather like that of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*—is designed to confound the idea of the tragic in favour of the disparagements of the absurd; and its vision of a disintegrating Europe is to be understood as a kind of presentiment of the near future, or at least of a possible near future, invoked as a means to critique the present. As a description— insofar as one can say that it *describes* the *near* future in its *possibility*—one can also say that it assumes an allegorical form, establishing, as all allegory does, an uncomfortable and ambiguous temporal proximity to its present: to our own present, and to our own condition, which it embodies through the transformation of rubble into the allegorical symbols of ruin. It speaks to the historicity of our present, of Europe caught, yet again, at the cross-roads of history; it identifies Europe precisely at a time of political impasse. But it is not simply the fact that the performance responds to the current impasse, or that it thematises the profound uncertainty that now haunts the European, indeed 'Western', project that is of interest. Rather, it is how it does so that matters—

which is to say, precisely in showing impasse as such, and in the two mutually implicated ways that I have suggested define the dramaturgy of the theatre of the impasse: first, and specifically, as a discourse on theatre's inherent poverty—as a mode of theatrical *allegoresis*, in which the allegorical function offers, so to speak, a reading of theatre 'reading' itself; second, as an allegorical discourse on the poverty of the European *polis*, where, importantly, the meaning of poverty is to be understood in and through the problem of sociality—of *our* sociality—as revealed by impasse.[7]

In other words, as much an exposition of the prolixity of the theatre, as it is a cautionary communiqué, warning of the increasing dogmatisation, polarisation, and fragmentation of the European polity, *Late Night* draws attention both to what Benjamin called 'the banal equipment' of the theatre—the 'chorus, interlude, and dumbshow' ([1928] 1985, 235)—at the same time as it effectively deploys that same apparatus in all its banality to invoke our own weakening historicity. There is one point in the performance that exemplifies this autoreferentiality—an interlude that is no doubt designed to invite comparison with the work of Forced Entertainment—where the dance has been paused and the performers attempt to entertain one another in a bizarre pantomime of competing levels of performative failure and incompetence (with hopelessly botched magic tricks and fumbling or unremarkable acrobatics). The stage becomes the locus for the failed aspirations of the theatre as such, which—shorn of its illusions—is revealed as a place of hyperbolic speech and ludic, if also frankly ludicrous, gestures. What this simultaneity of exposition produces— exposition of the theatre, expositing the European crisis—is a theatre that adheres entirely to the world from which it sprang and that it brings into view, as terminal decline. Everything present on stage is at once symbol and mere prop—and testifies to the undecidable conflict between them, in which the former ceaselessly struggles to subjugate the latter's unyielding idiocy and vacuity. Through the collapsing of the opposition of what is both immediately present and what is symbolically presented through the mechanism of the stage, nothing escapes this theatre's commitment to self-immolating acts. And yet, what is sacrificed of the miraculous illusions of the stage, in one sense, is procured, nonetheless in another, by means of a real material advance for the theatre: if what is surrendered here is the symbolic content that produces an elevated performance that ennobles the stage in transcending theatre's otherwise hopeless simulations, *Late Night* nevertheless embraces theatre's inefficacies so as to produce a theatre capable of allegorical or—as Benjamin expresses it somewhat numinously—'creaturely' construction. The image of the waltzing figures is to be grasped precisely, I think, in this way, as an *allegorical* image and these dancers as allegorical *figures*.

The effect of allegory, as Benjamin saw it, at least, is nothing other than what he described, in rather striking terms, as the 'vaporisation' of 'theological essences' (ibid). Even as it expresses an 'unremitting expectation of a miracle' so it consists in the heaping up of 'fragments'. On the one hand, allegories are 'in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things'—'unstoppable decline', a 'picturesque field of rubble';[8] on the other hand, the allegorical gaze—as Benjamin observes in reference to Baudelaire's claim that 'Everything becomes an allegory for me'—is the 'gaze of the alienated man' as it 'falls on the city' (Benjamin [1935] 2008b, 104). According to this perspective, the work of allegory is not to produce those transcendent symbols associated with the political theology of the stage but instead—insofar as it responds to a symbolic system in

crisis—to put on display fragile exemplars. The exemplar's fragility consists in the fact that it transcends nothing: it *is* the thing it represents—recalling here the dialectical 'conflict' residing at the heart of allegory, where profane and contingent objects are invested with elevated or lofty meanings, which they can only, at best, tenuously or conditionally sustain (Benjamin [1925] 2008c, 175). [9] Thus in allegorical exemplification the material and contingent singularity of the representative is preserved; in all its stubbornness, thingliness, and incommensurability it refuses complete dissolution through the transfiguring operations of metaphorical and symbolic substitution. What allegory performs is a quite distinct kind of operation: no longer functionally representational, it would be better to call it 'dysfunctionally' *presentational*. And it is this presentational (dys)function of the exemplar—hovering unceremoniously between image and thing; between the image in its corporeality and corporeal bodies—that can be addressed by returning to the question of the specific meaning of the allegorical image as found in *Late Night*— an image, I would now like to examine, insofar as it points in the direction of that secret 'knowledge'—so difficult to discern—that lies beyond the immediate trauma of the impasse. What is betrayed in that image—what stirs or is awakened there—is a suppressed longing, if not quite a *be*longing; the kindling of a yearning for a union with the other, however unfulfilled it might be, and thus for a reconfiguring of a community 'in crisis'. The utopian tendency, let us say, of the theatre of the impasse is contained—not in any appeal to decision—but in a rather more furtive manner: it is concealed in this presentational operation. I will call this (adapting a phrase borrowed from Jacques Rancière [2009]) an 'operation of communalisation' (34). Such an operation of communalisation can best be understood by reading the specific allegorical content of *Late Night's* dance in light of Nancy's notion of originary sociality for which it becomes a kind of image.

How, given this operation of communalisation, are we to understand this notion of originary sociality in the context of the allegorical content of *Late Night*? In the first place, it is important to recall what was established earlier regarding the problem of what Nancy has called the 'inoperative community'. There is, Nancy insists, 'no communion of singularities in a totality superior to them and immanent to their common being' (1991, 28). There is only a 'singular mode of appearing' through which singularities co-appear in and through their communicating with one another (what he calls 'compearing')—the choreographic configuration of dancers, would be one instance of this co-appearance, revealed through the physical communication of the dancer's bodies. For Nancy, the concept of communication does not rest on a pre-established 'social bond'; nor is it determined by an instrumental concept of rational communicative acts. It defines the opening up of originary sociality as our very being-in-the world: it is already there, visible and tangible, in the (con)figurations of choreographed bodies. [10]

That said, the waltz—itself a kind of allegorical ruin—might well be viewed more problematically for its nostalgic reference to the faded cultural prestige of Europe; but an alternative understanding, here, would be to view it through the popular form of *social dance* and thereby in relation to the 'dance of sociality'. This is not to deny that a sense of nostalgia haunts *Late Night*, but rather to indicate its complexity. Nostalgia allows escape from the present into a past age that is relived in the dimension of pure fantasy but at the cost of it becoming the symbol of present decline. Nostalgia *symbolises* the crisis engendered by a real loss of futurity, and is one of the

characteristics of the inertia of the impasse. And in *Late Night* it is this nostalgic mode of impasse that is constantly transformed by the automatism of the performers into gestures of futile and traumatic repetition. But there is also more to the image of waltzing dancers than a critical use of nostalgia, and that is the 'dance of sociality' which I would like to further pursue, in order to disclose its allegorical function—to return to Nancy: communication subsists, prior to discourse, as the bare fact of our ownmost finitude but equally it defines that circumscription of existence by the conscious work of sharing—in other words, of community, insofar as we are predisposed by our finitude to be with one another 'socially' and 'politically' (Nancy 1991, 40). It 'is there' in our being laid bare, each before the other. Nancy expresses this point in the following way: 'This exposure, or this exposing-sharing gives rise, from the outset, to a mutual interpellation of singularities prior to any address in language' (29). A little later, Nancy relates this problem of originary sociality to that of the self-exposure of lovers, who are exposed both to one-another but also to something outside of themselves—to the political community as such—before which they come to stand as its precarious exemplars. They stand both for and before it; 'their singularities share and split them or share and split each other, in the instant of their coupling' (38).

It is here, in short, in this play of splitting and sharing, that one can begin to understand the meaning of the allegorical image of the dancers, of those figures caught up in the circular dance, displayed through a choreographic operation of coupling and uncoupling, which is also an image of the play of lovers—exemplifying the extreme limits of sociality. If love takes on the allegorical form of an exposition of sociality, it is because it exposes, writes Nancy, 'the unworking and therefore the incessant *incompletion* of community. It exposes community *at its limit*' (38). I mention this in closing for two reasons. First, because *Late Night*—aside from its reports of political violence and its description of the permanent exception—is also, above all, an elegy to the inoperative community. It is composed out of poetic fragments derived from love's own broken discourse, insofar as love constitutes the limit condition of our fundamental sociality—something that is revealed through the stories of failed rendezvous, momentary trysts, and last encounters. The elegiac refrain of lovers, 'It was the last time I saw you'—that intolerable allocution—is repeated on several occasions toward the end of the performance.[11] Here love is both exposure and exposition, demanding visibility: its need to reveal itself to the world, to attest to its devotions, to disclose its ecstasies, as much as lament its sufferings, sorrows, and anguishes. It is exposure to an insuperable loss: the loved one is lost forever, never to be embraced again. But love is also exposition of that exposure—precisely, a theatre of *allegorisis*: the presentation of the transcendence that breaks open the subject's enclosure in immanence, even as they are destined to return to it in the bitter form of recriminations, and through the paradox of radical forsakenness that only lovers can endure—to endure that which is unremittingly unendurable. In love the subject finds itself 'exposed to the crossing [...] and this is nothing other than finitude' (Nancy 1991, 98). Indeed, love, says Nancy, 'offers finitude in its truth; it is finitude's dazzling presentation' (99). For the subject in love encounters the truth of love not in the plenitude of total possession, as mystical communion with God, or in the profession of a shameless patriotic sentiment, but through embracing love's calamitous reversals and setbacks: when the heart is torn, broken, shattered— then love as 'limit', as the evanescent exposure of our very being to one another, as our compearing, 'happens' (104). The exposition of love's crushing exposure of the heart belongs to

the broken discourse of love. It is woven into the citational matrix of *Late Night*, at the very outset, when the spoken narrative blends almost imperceptibly with the lyrics of an old French Chanson to which the performers dance:

> At the tower of Notre Dame. There where you gave me your love. There, where you made me love you. That's where I'm still waiting for you. This is what Maria is thinking of. She is now dancing with Fidel. But time… time… time that destroys everything took you away from me, my lost love. And I am left alone and in love… there, where you gave me your love. At the tower of Notre Dame. But time, time, time that destroys everything… took you away from me. At the tower of Notre Dame. From here, I can see the whole city. At the tower of Notre Dame. It is from here that I will jump. For you.

What this fractured and wounded discourse indicates, leads to my second and final point: that the lovers themselves exemplify the encounter with the limit, an encounter with the impasse, which resides at the heart of the immanence of community—they are its allegorical representatives: 'Lovers touch each other,' writes Nancy, 'unlike fellow citizens […] This banal and fairly ridiculous truth means that touching—immanence not attained but close, as though promised […]—is the limit' (39). Is impasse not precisely the name of the limit that can be broached but never breached? Through the touch of lovers, immanence is both revealed and at that very moment forever 'deferred'. What escapes the touch of lovers is the possibility of the total convergence with the other, the immersion of two in one: a confabulated and fabulous union that each must nevertheless believe in with all their ardour—this confabulation constitutes the very mode of being of 'being' in love. But a lover's touch is a touch that never quite touches; it is a touch that is frustrated by the failure of transcendence to span the divide it seeks to traverse. And it is also, precisely, this insuperable division to which lovers are abandoned that makes touch what it is: a communication whose final consummation is promised but never realised; touch suffers a fatal diremption at the very moment it is enjoyed. In love, one is touched by grief in the most extreme way. Love's futility bears witness, nonetheless, to this operation of communalisation: through the abject failure of lovers to achieve their desired consummation through the medium of the body with its skin, flesh, organs, bones, and tissue, and through the correlative failure of the community to discover itself as itself in the state of its pure immanence to self as a 'political body', as unpolluted self-presence. It is this fatality of touch that produces the lament of those lovers who, finally, in their despair, abandon all hope of joy and instead seek unity in death, through the narcissistic fantasy of suicide—as if the unbearable promise of love can only be redeemed through the annihilation of the body that is the bearer of an accursed singularity. But here, too, we should understand death as another name for the catastrophe of the impasse.

In this way the lover presents us with an image of the limit of sharing; the lover is the exemplar of the impossibility of accomplished totality inscribed at the heart of originary sociality, and the dance of lovers, the play of compearing bodies caught up in an unending 'La Ronde', a testament to the inviolable fact of our being ceaselessly exposed to one another. It is this constant exposure, finally, that is revealed through *Late Night* as the secretive and 'gnostic' truth of the allegorical theatre of the impasse.

III. Afterward: On Impasse and Political Theology

I have argued for a concept of 'suspension' with respect to the idea of a political theology of the stage. This 'Kierkegaardian' formulation should be understood as being quite distinct to what has also been termed, notably by the German theologian, Erik Peterson, the 'theological closure' of the possibility of any political theology whatsoever. I would like to touch on what is at stake in this distinction, even if only briefly, in a few closing remarks. At the end of his life, Carl Schmitt returned to the problem of his political theology, written in 1922, in a tract that sought to answer Peterson's objections to it. Peterson had argued that it was *theologically* impossible for Christians to consider a 'political theology' on the grounds that it contradicted the Trinitarian dogma. I will not go into the nuances of that dispute here, except to summarise Peterson's basic position by saying that from a theological perspective no human reality—political or otherwise—can be considered as the mundane realisation of God's will. This conceptual distinction was already operative in St. Augustine's writings, where the city of God is seen to be irreconcilable with the Roman state: thus the thesis of 'two kingdoms' emerges as an inviolable theological barrier that prevents the very possibility of a political theology—hence its absolute 'closure'. The contradictions in Peterson's thesis are forensically dissected by Schmitt, and in one of the most abrasively critical passages, he asks:

> How should a theology, which explicitly separates itself from politics, be able to put an end, theologically, either [to] political authority or a political claim? If *the theological* and *the political* are two substantially separate spheres—*toto caelo* [completely] different—then a *political* question can only be dealt with *politically*. The theologian can reasonable declare the closure of issues of political significance only by establishing himself as a political voice which makes political claims. Whenever he gives a theological answer to a political question, either he simply ignores the world and the sphere of the political or he attempts to reserve the right to impact directly or indirectly in the sphere of the political. (Schmitt [1970] 2017, 113)

To argue for the closure of political theology on theological grounds is either to render theology meaningless for 'this' world, or it is to covertly reassert the very thing that is to be denied. On such a basis, one must accept that political theology, and along with it, the possibility of a decision that claims transcendental justification for itself, cannot be dissolved by conceptual means alone. It is in relation to this problematic that I have suggested the idea of a 'teleological suspension' of decision, as the distinguishing feature of the theatre of the impasse. I have argued that impasse renders decision materially 'undecidable': it is neither possible nor impossible, but rather 'nullified' by the crisis engendered with the world's collapse into immanence (the state of impasse). A quite different dispute with Schmitt emerges here—one alluded to throughout this chapter and which I would now like to explicitly name: I have in mind, of course, the Schmitt-Benjamin controversy, which was articulated around Benjamin's distinction of the *Trauerspiel* from tragedy proper; and, more specifically, and to the point, was made explicit in their respective readings of Hamlet. Where

for Schmitt, Hamlet opens up a 'horizon' in which the 'source of the deepest tragedy [is] historical reality' ([1956] 2009, 52)—Hamlet is thus a cipher for the tragedy of James I and Mary Stuart—and thereby acts as a kind of supplement to actual political sovereignty; in Benjamin, Hamlet's melancholy and indecision testifies to a different historical reality: the incapacitation of political representation and the end of religious authority over the world at the dawn of secular modernity. It is in the latter's reading of Hamlet that impasse is first identified as possessing a peculiar meaning for the theatre; and it is a meaning that takes on renewed urgency at a time when dangerous political absolutes, once again, are seen as the answer to the despair of disenchanted populations. Political disenchantment is the great danger of the impasse—what comes with it, as Schmitt's own life and historical circumstance reveals, is a corrupting and perilous passion for the charismatic leader.

Notes

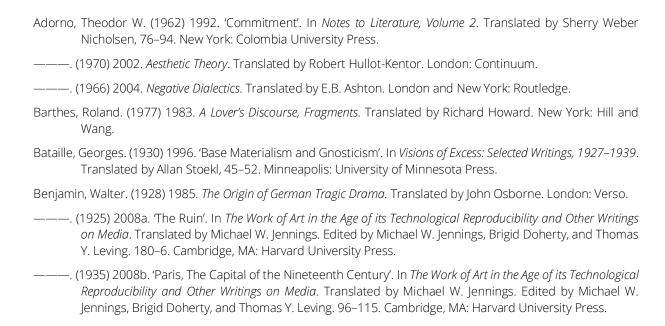[1] In a full-blown crisis, one looks for political leadership—in this sense, although crisis and impasse are in many senses isomorphic, crisis is always understood from the transcendent perspective, at the centre of which is the question: "who can decide?"

[2] This kind of analysis was developed in great detail by Jürgen Habermas in *Legitimation Crisis*—for instance: 'Because the problem of world complexity has assumed the leading position, the problem of rational organization of society in conjunction with formation of motives through norms that admit of truth has lost its object' (1976, 133.)

[3] For Benjamin, the Baroque period—and in particular the *Trauerspiel* of the period—bears witness to a profound sense of melancholy, a spiritual loss, malaise, or affective emptiness, in which worldly actions no longer find justification in a providential or divine schema.

[4] The phrase 'contemporary theatre' no doubt invites questions of historicisation: what theatre, when, and so on. This is an interesting, perhaps crucial question, for further work. Here I will restrict myself to the following observation: the theatre of the impasse, as I have described it, is not limited to 'postdramatic' aesthetic forms, although the latter has clear affinities with the former. Equally, theatres of the impasse must be thought in relation to the specific historical conjunctures in which they appear—as I argue here—Benjamin's identification of Baroque *Trauerspiel*, might serve as an example of an historical theatre of the impasse, and a theatre that is obviously quite distinct to that of our 'postdramatic' stage.

[5] Schmitt writes: 'The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology' ([1922] 2005, 32).

[6] One can hardly assume that the context of Greek theatre, in the years following the debt crisis, with loss of state subsidy and increasing precariatisation of the workforce under conditions of extreme austerity, is in any sense equivalent to that of the context of the Barbican theatre or its audiences.

[7] The problem of poverty might be thought in the following sense: that the European polity is impoverished due to its manifest failure to deal with real, interlocking, and ongoing crises: the refugee and migration crises, the most prominent perhaps, but also the failings of social democracy, and its political consequences; the rise of the populist right, which threatens to break that polity apart by returning it to the old redoubts of nationalist entrenchment and a politics based on fear and resentment; or the failure to deal with the immense economic and social inequalities created by the marketization of the European project over the past 30 years via the European Union, rendered starkly visible through austerity policies. In this sense, it would be presumptuous, not to say vulgar, to claim that the theatre of the impasse, or any theatre for that matter, was able to 'reveal' that which is clearly made visible on a daily basis through the stark and barbaric facts that constitute ongoing reality. This does not mean

that theatre must ignore those facts however. And as I am attempting to suggest here, what I have called the theatre of the impasse uses the representational poverty of theatre—the inadequacy of its means—to 'stand in' for the poverty of the world, without attempting to 'redeem' it or reconcile its contradictions. Here, Adorno's description of Beckett—written against the 'committed' art championed by Sartre—will be of help. Adorno writes: 'Beckett's ecce homo is what has become of human beings. They look mutely out from his sentences as though with eyes whose tears have dried up. The spell they cast and under which they stand is broken by being reflected in them. The minimal promise of happiness which they contain, which refuses to be traded for consolation, was to be had only at the price of a thoroughgoing articulation, to the point of worldlessness' ([1962] 1992, 90). It is this sense of 'worldlessness', contained in Adorno's locution, that poverty must be understood as a metonymic showing of that which our representations lead us to overlook on a 'daily' basis: that the 'failure' of the European polity to address the crises that assail the European idea might be understood precisely as a crisis of sociality—a crisis of sociality that reveals, not simply that which limits sociality, but in doing so the limits by which it is constituted. At this 'limit', I argue, the theatre of the impasse can 'reveal' the poverty of the European project in this more fundamental and constitutive sense, and in doing so provide insight into the forms of sociality that constitute the community of the impasse, a community that has reached its limit, and that consequently gives expression to that profound sense of 'spiritual' exhaustion to which it must nevertheless adapt itself.

[8] Karl Borinski quoted in Benjamin ([1925] 2008a), 180.

[9] Benjamin also writes: 'In the field of allegorical intuition, the image is fragment, rune. Its symbolic beauty evaporates when the light of divine erudition falls upon it. The falsely lustrous appearance [*Schein*] of totality is extinguished. For the eidos is extinguished, the simile perishes, the cosmos within it is desiccated' ([1925] 2008b, 177).

[10] It is also implied in the fact that the choreography in the performance employs only social dance forms.

[11] In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes observes: 'Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the beloved's absence; actually a preposterous situation; the other is absent as referent, present as allocutory. This singular distortion generates a kind of insupportable present; I am wedged between two tenses, that of the reference and that of the allocution: you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you). Whereupon I know what the present, that difficult tense, is: a pure portion of anxiety' ([1977] 1983, 15).

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Biography

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