Introduction

There Will Be Blood: Antinomies of Democracy

> Democracy is the pride and the hope of modernity. It also contains danger. The danger does not flow merely from forces hostile to democratic institutions. It resides within the ideal itself.
>
> William E. Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity*

> Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically.
>
> D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

Democracy engenders magical thinking. It suggests a world (to be) transformed. It empowers people to create and recreate the world in their own image. Nothing seems to lie beyond their demiurgic reach. Calls for freedom, justice, equality, fairness, and dignity must remain unfulfilled in its absence. In democracy, dreams can and do come true. Democracy is associated with life and its possibilities.

Ironically, democracy rarely leaves people satisfied, let alone pleased. If anything, the introduction of democracy signals the onset of new predicaments as much as the redress of prior dilemmas. Violence, exclusion, injury, sacrifice, and cruelty abound in democracy. It tends to subvert, from inception, its founding norms and principles, its fundamental goals and purposes, its own feats and creations, including when it claims to be introducing, pursuing, or defending them. In short, democracy promises much, but faced with its exacting standards and open-ended imperatives, it cannot deliver what it promises. This is one reason democracy seems to specialize in resentment, perhaps the most common good among citizens. Democracy is linked, rightly so, to limitations, to violence, to death – especially its own.

Tragically, democracy starts killing itself at birth, and the killing continues throughout its lifetime. These deaths, large and small, often go unrecognized – but not unfelt. Promises broken, possibilities obstructed, and injustices inflicted generate disaffection, anger, perhaps violence, each directed at democracy itself. In a sense, people must perpetually hope for and mourn the democracy (always being) taken from them. Political loss, in other words, necessarily shapes the democratic experience: power taken; sovereignty denied; values profaned; faith undermined.[1] Democracy thus loses, on a regular basis, precisely what it can never lose, which means its legitimacy – and viability – always seems at stake.

Can democracy amount to more than the return of the same political story: failure, defeat, death? Yes. Democracy's self-inflicted deaths also provide opportunities from which renewed life can spring. The successful practice of politics, in other words, comes with serious costs attached (lives damaged, interests ignored, beliefs trampled), yet these costs, if taken seriously, can be converted into openings, even welcome obligations, and furnish the raw material of a revivified politics. Democracy is always in position and enjoys the ability to reanimate itself. Reanimation, in turn, comes with its own tragic price, for some of the political practices, including democratic violence by citizens, required for democracy's restoration and rejuvenation simultaneously can tarnish it.

Do people expect too much from democracy? Yes, but this does not mean that people are wrong to expect it, let alone complain (or worse) about its myriad infirmities. Democracy itself is to be assigned responsibility for the troubles it faces. Given commitments to mutual self-rule, equality before the law, respect for difference, openness to plurality, public responsibility, and shared duty, democracy suggests a brand new day in politics. It inspires. It inspires because it promises a system of rule of, by, and for the people themselves in which violence is said to have no proper place in the common life; the security and dignity of citizens against instrumentalization and disposability are guaranteed through basic rights and liberties; robust discourse, contestation, and opposition enable truth and candor rather than official stories and self-serving fictions to circulate and flourish; abuses or injuries suffered due to political institutions are considered incidental, regrettable, and correctible; and constitutional mechanisms are provided that ensure formal public accountability regarding the exercise of power in the name of basic foundational values.

Still, democracy routinely undertakes courses of action and generates results through its customary workings that ought to be considered problematic at best. Yet these results are understood, experienced, and considered acceptable thanks in part to democracy's reigning principles, practices, and understandings, perhaps especially its procedural norms. We are told that a law, policy, or issue can always be revisited and subjected to revocation or alteration. Fortunes can be reversed by winning the next election – or the one after that. Citizens can appeal to the media or take to the streets to advocate peacefully for change. Nothing need be permanent in a democracy, unless the people will it – and not even then.

Democracies also produce highly dubious outcomes in emergency circumstances or extraordinary times, though citizens often seem less concerned about such developments given a perceived sense of necessity or inescapability. Shortcuts would not be tolerated when times are good, they tell themselves, but expediency is often required in times of crisis. This doubles democracy's troubles, again indicating that it constitutes its greatest adversary. Democracy tells a number of stories that enable it to gloss over or cover up its evident deficiencies, which in turn serve to perpetuate and prolong them, much to its detriment and discredit. Democracy can show signs of health and vigor though it is in fact already dead or dying.

Democracy, then, finds itself in need of a tragic sensibility so that it can appreciate the ways in which it enacts and thereby deconstructs itself. It is both life-giving and death-inducing. It must rededicate itself to giving life precisely because it engenders extensive death. It must acknowledge death in life. It must discern life in death. Democracy excels at celebrating itself. It needs to learn to reproach itself with equal skill. Most of all, it needs to learn the art of reanimation, including through violence, to make the potential real. A tragic ethos can both capture the agonizing dilemmas a democracy occasions and proffer creative responses to them. Tragedy, understood in Nietzschean fashion, does not entail resignation, a docile acceptance of damnable results. Rather, it fosters new bursts of innovation that previously escaped the imagination.[2] It can also trigger a spirit of daring and adventure against the odds, perhaps involving forms of democratic violence by citizens, not because we believe ourselves masters of our fate but precisely because we know otherwise. We act knowing that success *and* failure await us – at least to some degree and to some extent. The two cannot be separated. Brilliant failure defines democratic aspiration. It suggests that great things can happen. Think of the young Oedipus who leaves his home in Corinth determined to defy the gods

and cheat death. Along the way, he dispenses life – and thus more death. Apollo's prophecy may have come true, but only in part. Oedipus also beat it, if only in part. A democracy, then, must have grand pretensions even though it knows, sooner or later, that they will be punctured – a comeuppance is always waiting.

A tragic sensibility entails, accordingly, a newfound approach to remedial action and responsibility – a capacious sense of responsibility. Rooted in a deep sense of duality, this notion starts with the assumption that doing well in politics, with the best of intentions, offers no immunity from doing harm. To have a tragic sense of action and responsibility is to assume that democratic life involves taking on what I call the burden of success.[3] Insofar as victory represents the general goal of political undertakings, it does not mean the end of politics for the victor, even when it's the people themselves. We cannot rest on our laurels, however well-deserved they may appear to be. Just the opposite – success mandates the immediate continuation of politics. Obligations ensue from winning. Why must this be the case? The short answer: victory is made possible by those who suffer defeat, loss, injury, and death insofar as they accept and absorb their costs and consequences.[4] Political success, then, is rife with ambiguity. Those who lose (often) deserve better than what they get. Even if the fabled rules of the democratic game allow for or even guarantee losers, this does not mean contentment should follow achievements – not in a democracy, anyway. It cannot, in good political conscience, ignore the pain for which it is responsible. Nor can it resort to and rest content with Rousseauean bromides (to vote against the general will is to be mistaken). Alas, democracies do not tend to understand themselves as tragic endeavors, informed by misfortune, suffering, and damage. This needs to change. And in order to change it, democracy must be forced to reflect on itself, which can be fostered, as I argue in the chapters to come, through the introduction of new public rituals (an American Dionysia), novel civic commemorations (Admission Day, Democracy Day, and Resistance Day), alternative monuments and memorials (a redesigned Vietnam Memorial complex), and augmented political institutions – all of which address democracy's self-induced tragic ambiguities.

Tragedy, then, seems ideally suited to democracy. It can recognize, acknowledge, and accommodate democracy's character, including its inherent failures, without bad faith. Tragedy does not seek to put a

happy face on democratic realities. Rather than mollification, it is a discourse of candor and respect – for hard truths regarding life and world, which democracy requires given its (often) unbearable combination of commitments made and failures produced, good realized and harm inflicted, justice delivered and injustice secured. Democracy can endure absent a tragic public philosophy, but it cannot flourish. Reanimating democracy entails confronting its perverse, morbid, at times warlike character. Let us think of democracy as a double – not alternately, episodically, covertly but concurrently, persistently, conspicuously.

What might it mean to imagine democracy as a double, a self-creating, self-consuming regime? On the one hand, democracy is the warp of life: it executes its ambitions, mobilizes its citizens, protects its people, and defends its principles to great effect. On the other hand, democracy is the woof of death: it executes its ambitions, sacrifices its citizens, harms its people, and violates its principles to great effect. At its best, democracy blooms and in doing so kills itself. It dies, if a little, with every move it makes. Democracy, then, cannot be what we want it to be, nor what we think it could be (if only), nor what it tells us it might be at its finest. Bonnie Honig conceives of democracy through a modern Gothic lens, featuring "a mood of … unease, suspicion, and mistrust." On this reading democracy's identity is undecidable, perhaps a regime of freedom, perhaps a regime of newfound domination: "We may passionately support certain heroes (or principles or institutions) in political life while also knowing that we ought not take our eyes off them for fear of what they might do to us if we did."[5] Honig's concern is well placed. Yet, on a tragic reading of democracy as a double, the undecidability fades and it does not matter whether democracy remains under the people's steady surveillance. Democracy is going to do both substantial good and serious ill – because *it cannot not* do so. Certainty replaces suspicion. Nevertheless, democracy seduces through its notable successes. We fall for it – rightfully so. It has its moments. And then it disappoints, that is, kills – again. Democracy's reanimation requires taking life (back) from death, to act with an urgent sense of necessity coupled with a chastened sense of possibility in the face of political realities indifferent, often resistant to our best efforts. Ironically, reanimation also involves death, a turn to violence, the production of loss. The tragedy of democratic politics, however, can save us from its truth. We cannot dwell in death and still live democratically.

HOW GREEK DO WE NEED TO BE?

Democracy conveys, perhaps summons, a tragic perspective, but such a political sensibility seems more or less absent from or even alien to the contemporary scene. How can this make sense? How is the tragic not a part of everyday democratic life and discourse? The short answer is that a tragic sensibility would place considerable demands on polity and citizen, and neither seems aware of, let alone ready for, the challenge, especially with a beguiling alternative present that obscures tragic necessities and disables tragic possibilities: patriotism. Patriotism lets democratic polities off the tragic hook with a network of ready-made collective narratives, understandings, and attitudes that tell us all is well in *our* democracy, if not now, then one day. Patriotism also relies on a web of institutional commitments, communal rituals, commemorative ceremonies, and architectural forms that reiterate the same message, even if they no longer serve democratic purposes (assuming they once did). The old ways (accountability through voting; change via electoral, legislative, and judicial mechanisms; unity by virtue of holidays such as Independence Day, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, etc.) do not work and need to be recovered or replaced.

Patriotism is not an intermittent problem, confined to elections or wartime when vehement passions, both volatile and manipulable, emerge. Patriotism creates problems permanent and deep-seated. It stands in the way of a tragic sensibility. Some might claim that it exemplifies such a sensibility given its own preoccupation with sacrifice and death (freedom is not free, as one popular patriotic mantra proclaims), but patriotism is in love with death as the fount of meaning and significance in life, which is why it is not, ultimately, tragic. If anything, patriotism insulates democracy from the panoply of tragic phenomena it would otherwise have to address while enabling it, brilliantly, to tell itself it confronts hard social and political truths. This is the artificial need patriotism fills for democracy. On the reading offered here, patriotism regularly disrupts democracy and tragedy's creative synergy – hence it must be perpetually revisited, including by those who think they have dealt with or might be immune to it. Patriotic culture is omnipresent, and we all tend to be patriots, whether we recognize it or not. As George Kateb claims, "almost no one can help being a patriot of some kind and to some degree."[6] Kateb makes the claim to disconcert. And it does disconcert – not so much because one might wave a flag on the Fourth of July; sing the Star-Spangled Banner at a football game; cheer American athletes in the Olympic; cry at a national

monument or memorial ceremony; or (not so) secretly root for American troops at war – even in a dubious military enterprise. Rather, Kateb's claim disconcerts because patriotism can insinuate itself into our consciousness of ourselves as citizen-subjects. We can unwittingly possess the romanticized sensibility that is patriotism. We find ourselves moved by its code of sacrifice, especially the ultimate sacrifice, death. We posit a gap between what is and what ought to be and struggle to close it, experiencing pride and gratification as we proceed even if we know the gap can never be fully closed. We believe movement, however, is a sign of progress and greater things to come. We live with an unarticulated yet profound sense of affinity for our country given the power and possibility it signifies, though both may regularly misfire. Love of country, whether active or dormant, enables a political culture not only to explain, ignore, deny, rationalize, contextualize, or obfuscate a seemingly endless litany of national shortcomings but also to accept and affirm them. Kateb argues that patriotism appeals to people because it helps them, thanks to group membership, "carry the burdens of selfhood, of individual identity. The greatest part of the burden is the quest for meaningfulness, which is tantamount to receiving definition for the self."[7] Patriotism also appeals to people because it helps them carry another load as citizens, namely, the burdens of democracy, including in particular the web of immorality, violence, and tragedy in which it necessarily implicates them. Thus, even if patriotism assumes a somewhat more critical form, it still allows a country, in advance, to forgive, forget, and move beyond its deficiencies, however grave. If anything, a partial or provisional acknowledgment of deficiencies can actually foster self-celebration. It may even enhance it. Shortcomings can range from institutional inadequacies to imperial atrocities. Any country, it is said, combines good and ill, but good, in the long run, far outweighs ill. No country is perfect, it is said, and perfection is a perpetual project anyway. Just as we embrace family and friends despite or even because of their obvious faults, we ought to align ourselves to country, appreciating its ambiguous character. To be drawn to such views, which implicitly deny democracy as a double, is what it means to be a patriot – not a tragedian.

Patriotism, then, might appear sophisticated, worldly, in a word, tragic, insofar as it acknowledges ambiguity and confesses ambivalence. Does this self-consciousness suggest that patriotism amounts to a tragic sensibility and thus the kind of ethos democracy requires? I do not think so. Still, it is important to articulate the reasons why patriotism cannot fill the tragic bill. Patriotism might flirt with the tragic, but, in the end,

it scorns consummation. Patriotism can accommodate an initial sense of ambiguity about country. To be compelling, patriotism must skirt naiveté or innocence about a country's identity. It even benefits from a country's troubled past and marred present, both of which give patriotism something to struggle with and against. An initial affirmation of ambiguity can make love more mature but also more intense, more concentrated. Nevertheless, if ambiguity means something can be understood in more ways than one, patriots will always fasten on a favored interpretation, what they take to be – beyond this or that mere appearance – the true picture of their country. The country to be loved is not – not *ultimately* anyway – indistinct or indecipherable. Exit ambiguity – and tragedy.

Ambivalence poses greater difficulties than ambiguity. Isn't it a tragic affect par excellence? Didn't Athens's City Dionysia embody precisely this emotional complexity, a volatile combination of excessive celebration and stinging critique? Perhaps, but patriotic love, as I mentioned, is permanent and perpetual, not intermittent, let alone optional. Regardless of evidence (evidence misses the point), patriotism does not allow for a stance that might *eventually* move from conflict, equivocation, or uncertainty to rejection. Ambivalence is unstable. It names an affect that might turn decisively to repudiation. For patriotism there is always something about a country that can be recuperated or redeemed – that can save it from rejection. If all love is about the art of illusion, love of country may be the fancy that perfects the practice. No patriot is ambivalent – *not in the end*. This outcome is lethal to a tragic sensibility.

THE TRAGEDY OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Democracy cannot be neatly severed from patriotism, as if the latter were separate and distinct from, even alien to it. Democracy cultivates and exploits patriotism as it struggles to conceal alarming truths about its own identity. Thus, democracy must confront its tragic character, which patriotism works to obscure and thereby aggravate and accentuate.[8] Democracy requires a tragic perspective, in short, to address and resolve its demons, including patriotism. Resolution, though, remains partial, incomplete, in need of reiteration. After all, democracy's constitutive tragedies would perdure in the absence of patriotism. Admittedly, a tragic sensibility needs to work some of the same ground as patriotism, not only to contest its efforts to colonize the political life-world for its own narcoticizing purposes but also to develop alternative democratic possibilities – oftentimes from the same political matter. It is easy to misunderstand

the dangers patriotism poses, especially if it is divorced from democracy. Compelling apologias have been made on patriotism's behalf, making it appear vital to democracy. Still, it is democracy's exceptionalism that is at issue. It is *in democracy* that patriotism honors and celebrates a code that sanctions the elimination of other peoples, even other species, in the name of freedom. While marking sacrifice, patriotism invariably situates it within a broader context informed by pride. This enables democracy to make war against its own citizens as it conducts particular wars such as Vietnam and against all manner of animals as it wages war generally, the subjects of Chapters 2 and 3. It is *in democracy* that patriotism can re-cover anything – however horrific – and make it noble, beautiful, glorious. The National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York is but the latest example, as seen in Chapter 6. Democracy, the double, cheers as patriotism adds to democracy's inherent violence by cultivating an ethic that affirms killing and death, especially its own, regardless of scale. This provides democracy with political license – encouragement it cannot resist and does not need. Insofar as tragedy and patriotism traverse and excavate much of the same political terrain, however, tragedy possesses the resources to contest it. To cultivate a tragic ethos in democratic politics is to be entangled with patriotism, at least initially. It is also to take from patriotism precisely what it seeks to monopolize, namely life, violence, and death.

The elaboration of a tragic sensibility cannot wait. Democracy's vaunted self-conception needs to be challenged given its tendency to induce complacency. Violence, Machiavelli and Weber noted, is an ineliminable part of politics. It takes many forms. Running counter to the Rousseauean tradition, the subject of Chapter 4, democracy's everyday injustices and cruelties need to be pinpointed and owned, not rationalized, denied, or evaded. Candor and repair are the least that democratic citizens ought to expect. A tragic sensibility entails attentiveness to grievance, maltreatment, suffering, and damage, but it also resists and refuses, unlike patriotism, to moralize the pain endemic to democratic political life. Moralization is inappropriate insofar as injury is both inevitable and unavoidable. Injury does not necessarily result from bad or interested actors with questionable intentions. It flows from the incompatibility of equally worthy goals. It flows from the clash of competing forms of life. It flows from the injustice that justice often entails. It flows from the unpredictable character of action-in-concert. It flows from the stubborn nature of things. Moral self-restraint is essential to minimize resentment and backlash, predictable reactions when a polity's self-understandings

are subjected to pressure. To identify and decry shortcomings can easily be confused with simple condemnation. Democracy, however, is an ambiguous regime with multiple sites and sources of agency and action. It cannot be all things to everyone. It specializes in both the marvelous and the ugly, the desired and the unwanted. It is double. A tragic sensibility thus entails a commitment to action rooted in a cheerful yet defiant resignation, which might seem paradoxical given tragedy's understanding of action as fraught. A tragic approach to action folds an appreciation for limits and consequences into its ethos. Democracy has to act – at times through the state, at other moments through democratic citizens pursuing their own initiatives. It has to act, to whatever extent possible, to be able to affirm, in the greater fullness of time, what it has done, what it has achieved, what it has brought into being for good and ill. When a democracy acts it has to assume it is about to cause harm and make amends if possible – if not now, then perhaps later. At its best it anticipates the harm it is about to cause and addresses it, in some fashion, in advance. A reactive politics, however finely tuned, is necessary but not sufficient. Thus tragic action continually attends to its ledger. A tragic sensibility is always anxious, unsettled, dissatisfied.

A tragic sense of responsibility befitting a democracy runs counter to the ethos of sacrifice at the heart of patriotism. Tragic responsibility flows from the generosity that can, if cultivated, accompany success, especially given the compromised character of (so many) political achievements. And generosity flows from gratitude, not just the gratitude of success but also from knowing how contingent things are. They might have turned out otherwise – soon they will. Tragedy, then, pulls on us. It spurs us on to become worthy of an accomplishment, to become equal to its greatness and terribleness. Rousseau may not have pursued this duality, but he devised institutions that can be supplemented to address it, as seen in Chapter 4. Democracy does not honor or celebrate itself as it enacts such an ethos, however. It is a debt incurred and imposed, willed and mandated. It is a debt of necessity. Yet the debt is not to be invoked to justify debt ad infinitum. The wounds, injuries, sacrifices, and deaths that democracy wreaks are not to be instrumentalized, reduced through glorification to political tools for political purposes. Instrumentalization strips death of its tragedy and finality. Death cannot be redeemed, but this does not mean a kind of atonement is not called for. Democracy's death-dealing enables and engenders its reanimation.[9]

To illustrate the distinctiveness of a tragic sensibility, consider Athens's Great Dionysia. Before the city's dramatic competition began,