

Melancholic in the Theatre: Allegory, Tragedy, and History

after *Trauerspiel*

by

Hong Liu

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Centre for Comparative Literature
University of Toronto**

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Abstract

This dissertation explores Walter Benjamin's theorization of the *Trauerspiel*, or "mourning play," and considers tragic theatre as a site for the critical "resuscitation" of the past. The chapters consider five limit cases of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*—Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, two *Trauerspiele* by Andreas Gryphius, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Richard II*, and Friedrich Hölderlin's unfinished *The Death of Empedocles* project. Each chapter explores a defining aspect of *Trauerspiel*—allegory, lament, externality, sovereign interruption, and the problem of "untragic" sacrifice—while engaging comparatively with classical and idealist models of the tragic. Through these analyses, *Trauerspiel* emerges as a genre distinguished for its equivocal image-writing, sonorous lament, materialist stage, melancholic eloquence, and a consolatory horizon paradoxical to its earthbound form.

The dissertation is organized into two parts. Part One examines Benjamin's examples of the historical German Baroque, recontextualizing *Trauerspiel*'s stockpiling and patchwork within the rise of print and reading culture in post-reformation Germany, which shaped early modern

views of history into an ever-accumulating yet inexhaustible collection. Part Two turns to Benjamin's more oblique references—William Shakespeare and Friedrich Hölderlin—to trace the translatability of *Trauerspiel* across theatrical traditions and philosophical horizons. Taken together, these case studies demonstrate how the Trauerspiel framework affords us deeper insights about the nature of language, secularization, and the representation of history in theatre, which continue to be relevant for contemporary aesthetics and historical thought.

Throughout, I engage with Benjamin's early writings on language and theatre to argue that *Trauerspiel* is not only a historical genre, but also a conceptual tool for rethinking the aesthetic and political stakes of tragic form in an increasingly secular world. By reading tragedy through the lens of mourning as well as play, the dissertation unsettles some of our society's long-held assumptions about the legitimacy and legibility of lament, and reconsiders how theatrical forms register historical ruptures.

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