

INNOCENCE & TRAGEDY

Prolegomena to a psychoanalytic reading of
Innocence, an opera by Kaija Saariaho

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πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδ' ἐν
ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει.
Sophocles (*Antigone*, v. 334)

An der Psychoanalyse ist nichts wahr
als ihre Übertreibungen
Theodor W. Adorno

Innocence: it is the title of the 2021 opera by the Finish composer Kaija Saariaho (1952-2023).¹ It is a strange title, if only because it is about all but innocence. It's about guilt, deep guilt, deeply terrible guilt shared by almost everyone on stage.

For that is what the plot of the opera tells us. At a wedding party, the truth behind a tragic event from years ago comes to light, which abruptly ruins the lives of the celebrating family members. At the beginning of the wedding party, we see the bridegroom, Tuomas, and his parents quite nervous. Ten years before, in a school shooting that will remained burned into the collective memory, Tuomas's brother had killed ten of his fellow students. A few days before the wedding, the family is informed about his release from prison. He is not invited to the wedding party, if only because his very existence has been kept silent for the bride, Stela.

¹ This essay is an intervention at a symposium on this opera (libretto Sofi Oksanen, in a bilingually adapted libretto by Alexi Barrière)) hold in *Perdu*, Amsterdam, October 15, 2023). The symposium was organized by *Stichting Breukvlakken* (platform on the relation between psychoanalysis and culture) together with de *Stichting Psychoanalyse & Cultuur* and the *Dutch National Opera*, that performed Saariaho's opera during these October days.

Innocence?

The nervousity of the family gets worse when they discover that the waitress serving the festive table happens to be the mother of one of the victims of the their son. That is what, bit by bit, she understands from the whispering conversations among the three family members. In an unguarded moment, the waitress cannot resist the temptation to inform the bride about the existence of the other son in the family. All this brings the trauma, repressed for years, openly back in the center of the family.

And from then onwards all (except the bride) lose their innocence. The waitress has neglected to see that her adored daughter, Markéta, has been guilty of heavily bullying the son who was her classmate, and of making all other classmates complicit in her wicked behavior.



One of the students that survived turns out to have been the companion of the killer, assisting him in preparing the lethal revanche on their classmates. And at the height of the drama, the bridegroom reveals that he was the third one in the conspiracy team that planned the school shooting. He was present at the moment when the killing raid was launched, but at that very instant, he betrayed his brother and instead of shooting those who tried to escape, as planned, he fled just like them. Neither does one of the others escape his or her moment of admission of guilt. The father should not have introduced his son into handling weapons; the mother should have seen the problems her son was facing; the priest should have warned the parents when he observed the brother in his childhood torturing animals. Each one turns out to be guilty.

And the title of the story is: innocence. Where, then, is the innocence? It is absent, that is the least one can say. Innocence is *tragically* absent, and this is what makes the opera a tragedy.

A “tragedy”, this is at least how the protagonists name that what has happened on that horrible morning ten years before. That is the word the mother uses in one of the whispering family conversations, when she refers to the shooting.² And so does the father in two other of such conversations,³ as well as the priest, the only friend the parents still have.⁴ They all talk about the shooting as a “tragedy”. That is what the opera is about.

Tragedy?

However, is the opera itself a tragedy? If it is, the tragic character – as suggested – lies also and above all in the fact that victims, survivors and family, too, are far from being innocent. The tragic event is not a mere accident. It the result of something wrong in the behavior or the mind of all those we see acting on stage (except, as mentioned, the bride). Of course, the killer has done wrong, unforgivably wrong. But this wrong is not without a link to the wrong done to him, for instance the bullying by Markéta and the other classmates. It doesn’t justify his act, but it helps to understand how things could have come so far. And so, the parents surely have done all they could, but they could have done better, so they tragically realize.

And this goes even more – and even more tragically – for the bridegroom, the older son. He loved his brother, for sure, but was that a legitimate reason to follow him in his pathological inclination leading to the criminal act he planned? Why didn’t he prevent his brother from thinking so, from “studying the lives of serial killers’s religiously” (as he says in scene XV)? Why didn’t he warn his parents, his brother’s schoolmates, the school direction? In that sense, the older brother is the most tragic one, for he does not only feel guilty for what he has not done to stop the murderer, he feels guilty as well for still loving his murderous brother. At the end of

² In scene IV, the father put forward: “we still should have told the bride”. To which his wife replies” If Stela knew about the tragedy, would she still see Tuomas as a father for her children, thinking there is something wrong with us, some filth that could contaminate her?”.

³ In scene VII, the mother expresses her intention to call the brother who did the shooting to still invite him for the party. The father replies: “Have you forgotten whose fault it is? Have you forgotten how we were looked at after the tragedy, how people started avoiding us?”. In scene XIV, the father tells his son, the bridegroom: “Do you see that waitress over there who is acting weird? She is the mother of that girl. The girl who died in the tragedy.”

⁴ In scene XII he says: “I have guided many a soul through the gorges of distress, I have seen famines and mass graves. And none of that could undermine my faith. But after that one tragedy I looked like a priest but I wasn’t a priest anymore. I was but an empty shell for people to cling on but I deceived them all.”

the penultimate scene (XXIV), in the last words before the Epilogue (scene XXV), he confesses: "I love my brother. I love him still".

No one is innocent: this is the tragic message of the opera.

And yet, if this is the opera's message, is that message *tragic*? Is it not too "evangelic" for that? Excuse me for the question, but is the situation the opera confronts us with, on a merely *formal* level, not incomparable with a situation we find in the Gospels, more precisely the one described in the Gospel of John (8:1-10)? There, Jesus is confronted with someone whom all his contemporaries consider as morally abject: a woman caught committing adultery. Jesus is asked if it is not our moral duty, as the Mosaic Law prescribes, to stone her to death. To which Jesus famously answers: "Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her." (8:7) Jesus believes in innocence. That's what God's Kingdom to come is about. Yet, this is why – so is the suggestion here – we, humans, should not judge one another: such judgement is to God. No human is innocent. On our mortal earth, innocence is absent. But this is said only to put forward that there *is* innocence, in heaven or elsewhere, and that here, in our earthly world, innocence *should not* be absent, that it is *wrong* that innocence is absent, and that we, unfortunately, are all sharing in that wrong. That we are all guilty in the fact that innocence is not here, that it is absent.

This is, more or less, the message formulated by *Innocence*, the opera. And in that sense, the title is not so contradictory as mentioned in the beginning of my talk.

Tragedy

But, again, is that message tragic? And what is *tragic*? What is *tragedy*?

We have the word from a specific kind of theater played in ancient Athens in the fifth century BC during the Spring festivities around the god 'beyond good and evil': Dionysus. Time and space lack here to extensively go into that matter, but a few things can be highlighted. For instance, the way 'innocence' is treated. Let us stick to *Oedipus Rex*, a tragedy by Sophocles.



Did the Athenian audience attending a performance of *Oedipus Rex* face a case of innocence? Not unlike what is the case in our opera, that audience, too, faced the opposite: Oedipus turns out to be guilty of tremendous crimes: he has killed his father and made children with his own mother. He is a father killer and a mother fucker – in the strong sense of the word. But does the play, like *Innocence* does, suppose a situation where Oedipus does not commit such crimes, where he is released from all that makes him guilty, where he is what he should be: innocent?

Here we meet the feature that distinguishes *Innocence* from *Oedipus Rex* and, consequently, from a genuine tragedy. King Oedipus does what he does, and what he does is terrific, tragic, but the ancient Greek audience in no way supposes that what it sees performed on stage is the 'negative' of how it should be – or, what amounts to the same thing, of how to be human fundamentally is. The play shows Oedipus guilty, but not as something he *should not be*, but as something he *is*, regardless of what he does. It is his destiny. *To be* is not to be innocent. To be is to be guilty.

This does not contradict the idea that, in a way, the title *Innocence* might better suit *Oedipus Rex* than Saariaho's opera of that name. For, unlike the characters in the opera and despite his crimes, Oedipus is innocent. For the crimes he committed, he did not do them deliberately, consciously. Not

deliberately, after all he did everything he could to avoid committing them. And *conscious* is what he was of the possibilities of such crimes, and of the fact that he could commit them. That is what Apollo's oracle in Delphi had told him: 'you will kill your father and be yourself the father of your own brothers and sisters', the Pythia had screamed. But despite that 'consciousness', he did commit his crimes – unconsciously, non-deliberately, innocently. However, does this make him less guilty? Not at all. Even innocence is guilty. All are guilty, all is guilty, including innocence.

Here we face the real tragic. Oedipus is guilty of having committed *ἁμαρτία*, *hamartía*: the Greek term for a tragic mistake, a wrong deed, a 'sin' (be it not in the Christian sense of the term, precisely not, although *hamartía* was early Christianity's word for 'sin'). On Athene's theater stage, this *hamartía* is shown – and looked at – without any suggestion of a way out, of a possible release. Oedipus is not a bad person. By accident he has become the king of Thebes and he has done what he could to be a good ruler of the city. Also by mere accident, he has become the husband of Iocaste with whom he had his children. And the response he gave to the Sphinx's enigmatic question was simply right. So, the message of the tragedy is that, precisely in his quality of good and intelligent person, Oedipus is marked by *hamartía*. *Hamartía* is not the indication of the opposite condition, the one where man has been released from it. *Hamartía* is man's destiny, the *ἀνάγκη*, *anangkè*: the destiny for all of us, including the good ones.

Do we really understand what is at stake in such a 'tragedy'? Do we truly grasp what an Athenian spectator saw when he was looking at Oedipus's drama? Did he see the truth?

Here is, for our modern gaze, what might be the most difficult thing to grasp: that truth is not involved here. Unlike what is the case with us, moderns, truth does not organize the gaze of an Athenian spectator from the fifth century BC, i.e. of a spectator not yet penetrated by the philosophical dispositive that at that time had only just *started* its victory march. What an ancient admirer of a tragedy saw on stage was not seen through the lens of the truth-criterium. He did not interpret the horror he sees as truth, be it *via negativa*, i.e. as showing how life *should not* be, and *fundamentally* is not. What he saw is *anangkè*, destiny – or what refers to something similar, the work of *Ἄτη*, *Atè*, the goddess of blind folly, mischief,

delusion, reckless impulse.⁵ No, he did not see the truth of Atè or destiny nor the truth *as* Atè of destiny; if he might have seen anything like ‘truth’, he would have seen how even truth is irretrievably struck by destiny, by Atè.

Psychoanalysis

Looking at something of which, if it ever should have anything to do with truth, the truth would be struck by destiny. It would be a truth escaping the tools to decide about truth.

Sorry for the awful lack of elegance in my formulations, but is it, in spite of this, not an adequate description of what psychoanalysis is about? For is psychoanalysis not what we should come up with, here, in a symposium organized by *Breukvlakken*? Freud was fascinated by tragedy. Especially by *Oedipus Rex*. Because he recognized a similar drama in the hidden desires of his patients. Of course. But there is more. He, as psychoanalytical theorist, understood himself to be like Oedipus. Intending to *know* the truth of the unconscious, he had to face that very intention to know to be *struck* by the unconscious, by an obstinate impossibility to know, by the tragic condition of his “will to know” (as Foucault would call it).

Freud’s knowledge, his theory, psychoanalysis in general: it is a tragedy. Not only on the content level (it is all about trauma’s), but on the strictly formal level as well: its knowledge is inherently traumatic. The unconscious is and remains unconscious *also for a theory about the unconscious*. Psychoanalysis knows what it is talking about: the unconscious. But it knows as well that the unconscious is the very condition of its knowledge (even its knowledge of the unconscious) and that, consequently, its knowledge is incurably traumatized by what it knows. Again just like Oedipus: he knew that he was a motherfucker and a fatherkiller, and even at the moments themselves he was turning that knowledge into practice, he had no clue what he was doing.

Let us look again at *Innocence*. Do we know what we see? Surely. We see evil. Evil not only done by the offender, but in one way or another shared by everyone. But do we *know* the evil we see? Psychoanalysis starts

⁵ In the *Iliad* (XIX, 91-94), Atè is described as the goddess “that blindeth all—a power fraught with bane; delicate are her feet, for it is not upon the ground that she fareth, but she walketh over the heads of men, bringing men to harm, and this one or that she ensnareth.”

when we distrust that knowledge, when we know that we do not really know what we see. This, however, does not imply that this knowledge is wrong: what we see is evil, and remains evil also for a psychoanalytic gaze. But that gaze is aware of something in that evil that is beyond our knowledge of it, something beyond good and evil. This is the unconscious.

The psychoanalyst must listen to his patient and hear, in what he says, what is beyond the good and evil he talks about. He must hear the desires, drives, and wishes hidden behind what the patient is saying. Is this to say that the analyst has knowledge of the patient's hidden desires, drives and wishes?

Here we meet the most critical point in an analytic cure. For the penchant is huge to think that, as analyst, one has knowledge of his patient's unconscious drives and desires. Genuine psychoanalysis only starts when one realizes one has *not*. Of course there is his diagnosis of the patient's psychic trouble, of course he has – and must have a correct insight in that – but he must be aware that knowledge in the strong sense of the term is impossible. From Oedipus a psychoanalyst has learned that his knowledge is tragic; that, being the knowledge of the tragic unconscious, it is itself marked by *Atè*, i.e. by the blindness, the 'unknowing' of the unconscious. And subsequently he cannot give his patient knowledge about his unconscious.

Aware of the tragic condition of both his own and the patient's knowledge, he can lead the latter to a point where he faces that tragic condition and becomes able to deal with it. Or, to put it in Lacanian terms, the analyst can lead his analysant to a point where he finds himself back as the subject of his desire – a desire which is inherently tragic.

Does the opera *Innocence* lead to that point? It is possible, but it is not necessarily so. The scenario of the opera doesn't seem to push the spectator's gaze in that direction. To lead to that point, the spectator has to rely on the creativity of his own gaze. A psychoanalytic approach can help here. For such an approach trespasses the 'evangelic' gaze we spontaneously have with respect to what is shown on stage. We instinctively see the evil presented through the lens of a moral judgment. Gazing at the evil, we immediately see its negative, the good. To see the tragic, we have to defer that judgment.

We ourselves must, in some way or another and without justifying him, identify with the bridegroom who, tragically, confesses that, although

hating his brother for his crime, he loves him, “loves him still”. That proximity of love and hate, this is one of the basic insights of psychoanalysis; it is the core of what it tries to conceptualize in the notion of the Oedipus complex – which is, rather than a ‘phase’, a condition: we do not relate to reality in a ‘simplex’ but in a ‘complex’ way, in a oedipally complex way: consciously loving on the base of a repressed unconscious hate.

When the groom desperately confesses he still loves his brother, the priest, the father, the mother, the bride, one by one they leave the room. Except the spectator: he cannot but assist to that cry of a human fellow from ‘beyond good and evil’. And, if ever he was in the situation to be there, the psychoanalyst: he must listen to that voice coming from the beyond of good and evil. If there is such thing as an “ethics of psychoanalysis”, here it is to be situated.

“We share a secret”, the bridegroom says in that same moment that he expresses his tragic love for his hateful, murderous brother. Entering into that secret: this is where psychoanalysis starts. Pretending to possess the truth of that secret: this is where it stops.

Here, I stop, aware of the fact that what I served you, is but a “prolegomena” to a psychoanalytical approach to *Innocence*. A *prolegomena*, not more than some preliminary notes, not a genuine analysis. Excuse me for that.

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