Talking like a Book: Exception and the State of Nature in Benjamin and Molière.

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Walter Benjamin confides to his friend Hugo von Hofmannsthal that “I sometimes think about writing a book on French tragedy as a counterpart to my Trauerspiel book,” noting that his “plan for the latter had originally been to elucidate both the German Trauerspiel and the French tragic drama in terms of their contrastive nature.” However, to do so “something must be added” that the book he wrote failed to supply. The aim of this essay is twofold: to reconstruct what Benjamin might have said about French classical tragedy and to identify the mysterious addition. Why does the effort to “elucidate” the two forms “in terms of their contrastive nature” demand a supplement? What would the supplement have been, and how might it illumine Benjamin's own project as well as tragedy and Trauerspiel? My hypothesis is that Benjamin remains silent on these points because he was temperamentally and philosophically unable to think them through. Benjamin's focus on tragedy is itself an indicator of this psychic resistance. Benjamin clearly assumed that, whatever deeper features of German tragic drama a contrast with the French version might bring to light, Trauerspiel constitutes a sovereign law unto itself, whose wider metaphysical as well as historical authority needs no argument. As a result, his interpretation of the nature of French tragedy inevitably would have confirmed his core theses about the German baroque, a fact that in turn draws attention to what Benjamin truly needed to add to both accounts: the perspective of comedy.

I propose, then, to counter Benjamin's argument by exploring the ways in which comedy challenges the underlying metaphysics to which tragedy appeals. To this end, I argue that the greatest tragedy of the French classical age is its greatest comedy, Molière's Dom Juan, ou le festin de
pierre. Reading Molière's play alongside French and German tragedy reveals not only how deeply both versions of the “mourning play” are implicated in the political ideology of royal absolutism but also the availability of a quite different model of social and political association grounded in the historical ontology of modernity against which absolutism sets its face. In addition to opening new sightlines on seventeenth-century tragedy and comedy alike, the result raises questions about the metaphysics underlying both Benjamin's thought and the tradition of critical theory from Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Weber down to Benjamin's rivals and epigones, Adorno, Schmitt, and Agamben.

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