

TDR Comment

Endgame Earth Clinging to Optimism Richard Schechner

As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the son of man. They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day when Noah went into the ark and the flood came and destroyed them all. (Luke 17:26–27)

1.

NAGG: [...] (Raconteur's voice.) An Englishman, needing a pair of striped trousers in a hurry for the New Year festivities, goes to his tailor who takes his measurements. (Tailor's voice.) "That's the lot, come back in four days, I'll have it ready." Four days later. (Tailor's voice.) "So sorry, come back in a week, I've made a mess of the seat." Good, that's all right, a neat seat can be very ticklish. A week later. (Tailor's voice.) "Frightfully sorry, come back in ten days. I've made a hash of the crutch." Good, can't be helped, a snug crutch is always a teaser. Ten days later. (Tailor's voice.) "Dreadfully sorry, come back in a fortnight, I've made a balls of the fly." Good, at a pinch, a smart fly is a stiff proposition. [...] (Raconteur's voice.) Well, to make it short, the bluebells are blowing and he ballocks the buttonholes. (Customer's voice.) "God damn you to hell, Sir, no it's indecent, there are limits! In six days, do you hear me, six days, God made the world. Yes Sir, no less Sir, the WORLD. And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!" (Tailor's voice, scandalized.) "But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look— (disdainful gesture, disgustedly) — at the world— (pause.) — and look— (loving gesture, proudly) — at my TROUSERS!"

— Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (1958:22–23)

There's a lot going on in Beckett's parable from *Endgame*. The world the tailor disparages, the world God made in six days then turned over to human beings, is polluted, its climate warming, deserts expanding, forests chopped down, mineral and liquid resources wantonly extracted, glaciers melting, seas acidifying and rising. The human population increases while millions of other species go extinct. But Beckett speaks also of a second world, those trousers, a world we feel pinched in, needing many revisions, but perfectible. A world of our own conceiving, gestating, rehearsing, and performing: artful.

Tragedy's theme is the rule of law, and from that, obedience to properly constituted authority: Destiny, the fates, God, nature, human government. People get in big trouble when they go against the law. From Oedipus and Antigone to the collective catastrophes of global warming, overcrowding, and mass extinction. Today's tragic problem is that the constituted authority of nature is ignored or assaulted by the constituted authority of governments and corporations. Comedy operates from a different premise. No authority is "properly constituted" because power corrupts. Authority is exposed and mocked, turned upside down. Laws need to be broken, a lot depends on accident and chance (not quite the same). Gods play dice and/or descend in machines to reverse the inevitable. Youth defeats old age, wins the endgame, and is happy. Which world do we live in? Both, and at the same time.

Hollywood screenwriter Charles MacArthur and Charlie Chaplin were discussing comedy. MacArthur: How could I make a person, walking down Fifth Avenue, slip on a banana peel and still get a laugh? Do I show first the banana peel, then the person approaching, then she slips? Or do I show the person first, then the banana peel, and *then* she slips? Chaplin: Neither. You show the person approaching; then you show the banana peel; then you show the person and the banana peel together; then she steps *over* the banana peel and disappears down a manhole

(adapted from Fadiman and Bernard [1985] 2000:112). So are we, who've collectively stepped over plagues, famines, and nuclear war, to vanish into the consequences of our ingenuity?

2.

The endgame is an old story. Seers, prophets, and crazies have predicted the apocalypse untold times—by fire, flood, rapture, cosmic collision, you name it. This time, it's not the Beast of Revelation or an asteroid, but we who are to blame: the manhole Chaplin placed after the banana peel is of our own making. And this time, scientists—our Tiresias—see what's coming and are warning us, yet our hubris guides our steps into the manhole. But it's not the end of the world, not even of *Homo sapiens*. It's the extinction of species, the submerging of coastlines and island nations, and the spoiling of habitats. It's overcrowding, mass migrations, border wars, and pandemics.

The most recent comprehensive Tiresias is the May 2019 report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). The report is worth quoting at length:

The biosphere, upon which humanity as a whole depends, is being altered to an unparalleled degree across all spatial scales. Biodiversity—the diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems—is declining faster than at any time in human history.

Nature across most of the globe has now been significantly altered by multiple human drivers, with the great majority of indicators of ecosystems and biodiversity showing rapid decline. Seventy-five per cent of the land surface is significantly altered, 66 per cent of the ocean area is experiencing increasing cumulative impacts, and over 85 per cent of wetlands (area) has been lost. [...]

Human actions threaten more species with global extinction now than ever before. [...A]round 1 million species already face extinction [...T]he global rate of species extinction [...] is already at least tens to hundreds of times higher than it has averaged over the past 10 million years. Globally, local varieties and breeds of domesticated plants and animals are disappearing. This loss of diversity [...] poses a serious risk to global food security. [...]

The rate of global change in nature during the past 50 years is unprecedented in human history. [...Yet] most international societal and environmental goals [...] will not be achieved based on current trajectories. [...] The negative trends in biodiversity and ecosystem functions are projected to continue or worsen [...] in response to indirect drivers such as rapid human population growth, unsustainable production and consumption and associated technological development. (IPBES 2019:3–5)¹

The UN scientists see a way out:

Nature can be conserved, restored and used sustainably while other global societal goals are simultaneously met through urgent and concerted efforts fostering transformative change [...]

Achieving a sustainable economy involves making fundamental reforms to economic and financial systems and tackling poverty and inequality as vital parts of sustainability. (IPBES 2019:8, 33)

1. Since the IPBES report, many other reports and articles continue the theme. To give but three from a long list: Fletcher and Schaefer, "Rising methane: A new climate change" (2019); Plumer, "The World's Oceans Are in Danger" (2019); Schneider, "We Must Prepare for the Next Pandemic" (2019).

Do you think we humans will make such a “transformative change” and effect “fundamental reforms”?

The root problem is population. Too many people wanting the good life, or in many desperate instances, any life. In 1800, the global human population was 1 billion; in 1960 it was 3 billion. Today there are 7.7 billion—with 10 billion forecast by 2057 (Worldometers 2019). Thomas Malthus in his 1798 “Essay on the Principle of Population” foresaw the exponential growth clearly:

I have read some of the speculations on the perfectibility of man and of society with great pleasure. I have been warmed and delighted with the enchanting picture which they hold forth. I ardently wish for such happy improvements. But I see great, and, to my understanding, unconquerable difficulties in the way to them. [...]he power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man.

Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second. [...]

This natural inequality of the two powers of population and of production in the earth, and that great law of our nature which must constantly keep their effects equal, form the great difficulty that to me appears insurmountable in the way to the perfectibility of society. All other arguments are of slight and subordinate consideration in comparison of this. I see no way by which man can escape from the weight of this law which pervades all animated nature. No fancied equality, no agrarian regulations in their utmost extent, could remove the pressure of it even for a single century. ([1798] 1998:3–5)

Malthus’s forecast has been forestalled by evermore efficient and productive farming and a seemingly endless store of lands, seas, rivers, and lakes to settle, strip, cultivate, dam, mine, and fish. Under the aegis of imperialism and scientific rationalism, humans collectively operate as if there is always a somewhere to conquer, extract, exploit, and profit from. But it’s time to listen to Malthus—because we no longer live in an endlessly bountiful world for humans to take from and use. We need to recognize that *Homo sapiens* is an invasive species approaching an end point.

3.

What if humans went extinct? Would that be an Aristotelian tragedy? Philosopher Todd May took up the question in a 2018 *New York Times* op-ed:

In theater, the tragic character is often someone who commits a wrong, usually a significant one, but with whom we feel sympathy [...]. Here Sophocles’s *Oedipus*, Shakespeare’s *Lear*, and Arthur Miller’s *Willy Loman* might stand as examples. In this case, the tragic character is humanity. It is humanity that is committing a wrong, a wrong whose elimination would likely require the elimination of the species, but with whom we might be sympathetic nonetheless [...].

To make that case, let me start with a claim that I think will be at once depressing and, upon reflection, uncontroversial. Human beings are destroying large parts of the inhabitable earth and causing unimaginable suffering to many of the animals that inhabit it. [...]

If this were all to the story there would be no tragedy. The elimination of the human species would be a good thing, full stop. But there is more to the story. Human beings bring things to the planet that other animals cannot. For example, we bring an advanced level of reason that can experience wonder at the world in a way that is foreign to most

if not all other animals. We create art [...]. We engage in sciences that seek to understand the universe and our place in it. Were our species to go extinct, all of that would be lost. [...]

Doesn't the existence of those practices outweigh the harm we bring to the environment and the animals within it? [...] To address that question, let us ask another one. [...] Suppose a terrorist planted a bomb in the Louvre and the first responders had to choose between saving people in the museum and saving the art. How many of us would seriously consider saving the art?

So, then, how much suffering and death of nonhuman life would we be willing to countenance to save Shakespeare, our sciences and so forth? [...]

It may well be, then, that the extinction of humanity would make the world better off and yet would be a tragedy. I don't want to say this for sure, since the issue is quite complex. But it certainly seems a live possibility, and that by itself disturbs me.

There is one more tragic aspect to all of this. In many dramatic tragedies, the suffering of the protagonist is brought about through his or her own actions. It is Oedipus's killing of his father that starts the train of events that leads to his tragic realization; and it is Lear's highhandedness toward his daughter Cordelia that leads to his demise. It may also turn out that it is through our own actions that we human beings bring about our extinction or at least something near it, contributing through our practices to our own tragic end. (May 2018)

Of course, just as a tree falling on an uninhabited island makes no sound because no one hears it (except an all-hearing God), The Tragedy of Homo Sapiens is no tragedy because there are no spectators—unless one regards as audience the species who survive us (and, again, God).

Or maybe it's not a tragedy, but a comedy, farce even: we humans step over the banana peels of war and disease, and plummet down the manhole of climate change.

But even worse than what's happening on earth, is the fate of Gaia's twin sister, Venus. Nearly the same size and composition as earth and also within the solar system's habitable zone, let us suppose that Venus once thrived with life, including intelligent beings like us, very smart, highly evolved. Scientists believe that Venus once had abundant surface water, as earth does, but long ago it evaporated. Maybe that's because also like us the Venusians enjoyed a carbon-based energy system that they let get out of hand. A runaway hothouse effect resulted in the Venus we observe today: a CO₂-methane-sulfuric acid atmosphere cloaking the planet whose surface temperature is 870 degrees Fahrenheit. Earth is a blue planet because of her bountiful oceans; Venus is orange-red because of her deadly greenhouse gas atmosphere.

4.

Not so fast. Hope springs eternal. What can we do about the world? How can we make that perfect pair of pants? Sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg is leading a children's army demanding deep structural change. On 20 September 2019 millions of young people around the world took to the streets to demand that their elders act on behalf of coming generations.

Whether this global action solves the problem that the protesters have identified—arresting greenhouse gas emissions to stave off a climate catastrophe—now depends on how effectively climate advocates can turn Friday's momentum into sustained political pressure on governments and companies that produce those emissions. (Sengupta 2019)

A tall order. Another longshot is what entomologist-naturalist Edward O. Wilson proposed in 2016: that humans withdraw from half the world's land surfaces, with a comparable reduction of ocean fishing, in order to insure not only our own survival but the survival of millions of other species. In *Half-Earth*, Wilson writes:

The only hope for the species still living is a human effort commensurate with the magnitude of the problem. [...] The only solution to the “Sixth Extinction” [now in full rampage] is to increase the areas of inviolable natural reserves to half the surface of the Earth or greater. This expansion [...] requires a fundamental shift in moral reasoning concerning our relation to the living environment. [...] There are true wildernesses around the world that, if simply left alone, will endure as wildernesses. In addition, there are mostly wild places whose living environments can be returned close to their original condition, either by the removal of a few invasive species or the reintroduction of one to several extirpated keystone species—or both. At the opposite extreme are landscapes so degraded that their original life must be restored from the ground up, by inserting soil, microorganisms, and eukaryotic species (algae, fungi, plants, animals) in certain combinations and in particular sequences. [...] There won’t be an immediate drop in the total world population. [...] The shift to lower fertility can happen during one or two generations. [...] In every country where women have gained some degree of social and financial independence, their average fertility has dropped by a corresponding amount through individual personal choice. [...] The United Nations [...] projected [...] that by 2100 the world population, even as it decelerates toward zero growth, will reach between 9.6 billion and 12.3 billion. [...] That is a heavy burden for an already overpopulated planet [...but] a turn downward in the early twenty-second century is inevitable. (2016:167, 175, 187, 190–91)

Wilson points out that as of 2015, 15% of the earth’s land surface and 2.8% of its oceans were “protected.” He notes these percentages are far below 50%. Also, poachers invade protected land and sea reserves; one in five fish sold globally is caught illegally. As for population reduction, how do we collectively get from where we are to Wilson’s 22nd century? Already, population pressure, global inequality, political unrest, and the first impacts of global warming force people to migrate in ever-increasing numbers. The time will come, and not so long from now, when Donald Trump’s wall keeping the Global South out will be as nothing compared to ever more brutal instruments of exclusion. Indeed, what kind of social force will be necessary to bring about the restoration Wilson calls for? And who will benefit from the restoration? Most probably, those already in power. If reproduction is controlled, children will increasingly become a commodity the rich have access to—as happened during China’s “one child” policy (1979–2015). But for the moment, let’s put these horrors aside and embrace Wilson’s proposal.

Inherent in Wilson’s plan is the recognition of a paradigm shift of what humans are in relation to nature. This shift has been happening over the past several centuries, accelerating greatly in the past 50 years. For most of the 200,000 years or so *Homo sapiens* has existed, we have been “in” nature: the nonhuman environment was dominant; large human settlements were relatively scarce and scattered. It took courage and risk to “explore”—to climb mountains, cross seas, “conquer” nature, even migrate. But as the number of people increased in the positive feedback loop of food production and population so did the amount of land given to farming, grazing, mining, and drilling. In a flash relative to the age of our species, networks of rails and paved roads radically multiplied. Land, sea, and air routes opened for millions from everywhere to go anywhere. Even the most formidable places became accessible—witness the climber jam at the summit of Mt. Everest. Is there anywhere some safari booker, cruise line, or people smuggler doesn’t go? Restrictions when they exist are political and economic, not ecological. For enough money, you can rocket into orbit. Whatever land is deemed useful, is used and overused. So-called nature—the wild where animals are more or less left to themselves—soon will no longer exist. Where previously people needed protection from animals, now the animals need protection from us. Plant species too are in decline. The process is irreversible. Even if some species are minimally repopulated by cloning or restored genes, the vast herds, flocks, schools, and pods of wildebeests, elephants, bison, birds, whales, and dolphins are

all but gone. Wilson's noble plan notwithstanding: nature is becoming a simulation of itself, of what is enacted in parks, reserves, and zoos.

Which brings me to the second scenario for a "better" outcome to the crisis of the Anthropocene: the tech fix. Tech is what people do very well—and have been doing throughout the evolution of our species: finding and/or inventing the means to solve problems. In the tech fix, we humans learn to transcend our political, social, religious, and ideological conflicts. We concentrate our skills on hydroponic land farming and de-desertification; on desalinization; on ocean cultivation of fish, seaweeds, and algae. We replace fossil fuels with solar, wind, water, and safe fusion nuclear. We protect key coastal cities with seawalls and pumps; relocate people whose land cannot be saved; settle territories made habitable by global warming; and so on, by whatever means human genius devises. If this is what we do, the whole world will be profoundly humanized, much of it urban because there will be twice the number of people as now. Are iPhones and their progeny the best we can hope for? Yes, one could argue, "human nature" is biologically coded to become wholly artificial, to evolve AI, cyborgs, robots, and the rest. In such a world, the sunsets may still be beautiful, but the world over which the sun sets will be artificial.

Then there's the extraterrestrial fix. The first humans came out of Africa in waves, slowly but systematically taking over the world—hunting, gathering, diversifying, and expanding. Then, as populations increased, settling, cultivating, and building. This soon led to conquering, colonizing, and exterminating each other and nonhuman species. Driving species to extinction is not a modern trait; it's just that there are so many more of us, and our means of killing have improved. And for the first time, we are taking notice, deciding it's a bad thing. For most of the ages that humans have populated the world, killing other animals for food, sport, to demonstrate courage (the Hemingway ethos), and to make room for people has been the norm. Now that the world is overcrowded with people, some are aiming for the stars. Elon Musk is not alone in conceiving of the solar system and beyond as the "new frontier." Operating from a primeval conceptual model common to our species, once a group runs out of space and/or resources, or is driven by an urge to adventure, it moves into "new territory." So why not terraform the moon, live on Mars or on one of Jupiter's or Saturn's moons, and then launch ourselves into the vastness of galactic space?

Both the tech and extraterrestrial scenarios are performative imaginaries in which we find ways to keep doing exactly what we've been doing from the origin of our species: expanding and dominating. The tech fix is possible, while the extraterrestrial scenario is science fiction. Expanding into habitable regions, or transforming minimally habitable regions, is what humans are equipped to do. But can we adapt to or adjust the profoundly hostile environment of any planet other than earth? Maybe for a few hundred people, even a million or two. But not billions. As for people zipping along near, at, or faster than the speed of light—which would be necessary to reach another galaxy or even other planets in our own Milky Way—ask Einstein about it.

5.

So, what to do here and now? And how can art generally and performance especially do its part? If we are not just selecting tunes for the orchestra of the Titanic to play, what might we do? We can be like Greta Thunberg and demonstrate, strike, and intervene. We can fly to fewer conferences because airplanes pump mighty amounts of CO₂ into the atmosphere. We can avoid plastics; use cloth shopping bags; walk, bike, and hop on public transportation instead of cabs and private cars; we can eat vegan, or at least cut down on meat...the list is very long, things we can do or stop doing that make a difference while raising our own and others' consciousness. And, of course, we can make art about the animals, about mass extinctions, about our existential situation. We can admire the Yes Men for exposing and sending up the bad guys, Critical Art Ensemble for linking art, technology, and activism; and myriad other artists, too, who are doing powerful, excellent work.

But can we drive enough pressure to fundamentally change governments and corporations? It's more than a tough question. Take New York University, home of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance & Politics. I taught at NYU for 50 years (1967–2017)—including five semesters at NYU's Abu Dhabi campus. That campus cost about \$1 billion to build (Jimaa 2014) and as of 2017 was operating on an annual budget of \$163.7 million (*Pro Publica* n.d.). All the construction and 99% of the operating budget is paid for by the United Arab Emirates (Porcelli and Maharishi 2019). The money is petroleum dollars. Will I go back to Abu Dhabi if invited? Yes. Is NYU in New York implicated? Is *TDR*? Of course. The whole thing is a system. There's nothing outside the "corporation," broadly defined. Remember, for examples, that the Rockefeller Foundation money is derived from oil, the Ford Foundation from automobiles, and the Carnegie Corporation from railroads and steel. More recent fortunes come from software, merchandise, and pharmaceuticals: Microsoft, Amazon, and Purdue Pharma for examples. Bill and Melinda Gates have a foundation, Jeff Bezos not (yet), and many recipients embarrassed by oxycontin dollars have returned Sackler family money. But where is the line? How many years of not-for-profit.org does it take to launder dirty money? Why isn't foundation money supporting good causes considered reparations?

Take a deep breath. Let's go back to art. This Comment began as a keynote for the Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics gathered in Mexico City in June 2019. The stated purpose of the Encuentro was to: "theorize and instrumentalize satire, humor, laughter, music, and noise in their broadest senses in order to make visible, unfold, denounce, fracture, and revert the assemblages of power behind these alarming processes" (Hemi n.d.). Hemi participants were instructed to bite the many hands that feed us. Can we really do this—or must we be satisfied with playing at doing it? Can we really respond to the call to "fracture [...] the assemblages of power"?

Novelist P.D. James saw the Sixth Extinction coming in 1992 when in *The Children of Men*, she wrote:

After all, of the four billion life forms which have existed on this planet, three billion, nine hundred and sixty million are now extinct. We don't know why. Some by wanton extinction, some through natural catastrophe, some destroyed by meteorites and asteroids. In the light of these mass extinctions it really does seem unreasonable to suppose that *Homo sapiens* should be exempt. Our species will have been one of the shortest-lived of all, a mere blink, you may say, in the eye of time. (1992:12)

But back then—and it does seem long ago, doesn't it, although it's only 27 years—James foresaw extinction by natural causes, not murder or maybe suicide (though she was a crime writer). And I detect a wink rather than a blink in James's eye. She was talking about what she thought wouldn't happen anytime soon. However, not so Elizabeth Kolbert, author of *The Sixth Extinction* (2014), who put it this way at Princeton University in February 2019:

I always say, if you're not pessimistic, you're not paying attention. [...] It's very hard to look at the trend lines and the numbers and the political situation and not be extremely disturbed right now. I know there's a lot of energy, and I'm hopeful that some of that energy will translate into action. But if you look at what's actually happening, it's pretty bleak. [...] If I were king of the world, I would say we should try to put pretty big swaths of the Earth that are still relatively intact aside for those creatures that currently reside on them. I think that's our best hope at this point. (in Snyder 2019)

Wilson's half-earth. Gaia's "best hope." Unlikely to happen.

6.

In 1992, not long before he died, and the same year as James's *The Children of Men* was published, John Cage read at Stanford University his mesostic poem, which at its vertical core

repeats the phrase “OVERPOPULATION AND ART.” Cage’s impetus was an unhurried and optimistic activism. Here is a selection from Cage’s poem:

abOut 1948 or 50 the number of people
liVing
all at oncE
equaled the numbeR who had ever lived at any time all added together
the Present as far as numbers
gO
became equal to the Past
we are now in the fUture
[...]
the deAd
are iN the minority
they are outnumbered by us who’re living
[...]
to stoP the estrangement between us
tO overcome
the Patriarchal thinking
the aUthoritarian structures
and the coLdness
humAn
noT togetherness
the necessItY
tO develop a culture
that coNsciously opposes the ruling culture
A culture which we create
we determiNe which overcomes the passive consumers
attituDes
And
which is not Ruled
by profiTearing
[...]
even thOUGH the future is already here
many are still liVing
in thE past
all goveRnments
are striking examPles
Of what’s out of date
and inaPpropriate
to oUr proper business
our evoLution though there’re more
of us All of us live in
The same place the planet earth
there Is
nO
differeNce between
whAt
happeNs to some of us
anD
whAt
happens to the otheRs
WhaTever happens happens

tO all of us our problems
 are not Various
 thEy
 aRe identical
 the Purifying
 Of water'n'air
 [...]

stOpping
 the remoVal
 of fossil fuEls
 fRom the earth
 develoPing
 sOlar energy
 [...]

eTc
 [...]

we begin by belieVing
 it can bE done
 getting Rid
 of Pessimism
 blindly clinging tO
 oPtimism
 [...]

the planet has becOme
 a single Person [...] ([1992] 1994:14–38)

After his 25-minute recital, Cage answered questions. He concluded:

I have tried to bring together my thoughts that are of an optimistic nature. And I have been unhappy in recent times with conversations and what I read and so forth that is so gloomy and that is so hopeless. So I brought together something that could give us reasons for hope. As much as I could. (in Ganza Polatzski 2017)

7.

Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who coined the phrase “identity crisis,” developed a theory of the human “life cycle”: eight phases, from infancy to adolescence to adulthood to old age ([1959] 1980). At each phase, a person—immersed in and to some degree determined by social circumstances—comes to a crisis, literally a crossroad, and makes a choice (often unconsciously). The crisis of old age is the choice between “despair/disgust” and “integrity/wisdom.” After Erikson’s death in 1994, Joan M. Erikson—his collaborator and wife of 67 years—completed the work on the life cycle, emphasizing the final stage. She pointed out that the root of the English word “wisdom” is the Sanskrit “veda,” to see, to know. But to see what? The destruction of the world as we’re experiencing it, or some better future? Urging humility, Joan Erikson wrote:

Old age demands that one garner and lean on all previous experience, maintaining awareness and creativity with a new grace. [...] Part of the human condition is to lack wisdom about ourselves and our planet. We must become aware of how little we know. ([1982] 1997:9)

But she didn’t stop there:

I made a further discovery. Thousands of years ago the word for “ear” and for “wisdom” in the Sumerian language seems to have been one and the same. [...] If wisdom is conveyed through sound as well as sight, then singing, rhythmic gesture, and dance are

included as its conveyors and amplifiers. [...] Now we can see that wisdom belongs to the world of actuality to which our senses give us access. It is with our senses that we understand through sight and hearing, enriched and supported [...] by scent, taste, and touch for all animals have these gifts and attributes. ([1982] 1997:7)

Joan Erikson further discovers that the word “integrity”—the partner to wisdom—is etymologically rooted in “tact,” as in contact, intact, tactile, tangible, and touch. The ancients understood that wisdom and integrity were actually felt, sung and danced, story-told, transmitted by all the senses performing in harmony. Harmony, yes, sometimes sweet, sometimes bitter, sometimes smooth, sometimes rough. If Beckett’s tailor worked by stitching textiles—making texts—until he accomplished his perfected endgame pants, then let us wear these trousers to our dances and fiestas, our dramas, farces, and tragedies.

And that is where I am. My brain is in despair, disgusted by how badly so many humans are behaving, while my belly—my integrated senses—offers me the wisdom of its appetites. With Cage, I blindly cling to optimism.

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