**The Tragedy of Climate Change**

By *Jennifer Wallace*

【1】Tragedies on the stage take place over a limited period of time. The protagonist is presented with a dilemma. He makes a choice. Terrible consequences rapidly ensue. As soon as Macbeth kills King Duncan, he is damned – his drunken porter turns his castle into hell, and unnatural signs of turmoil, such as horses eating each other, follow that same night. So swift is the action in the Scottish play that Macbeth and his wife want to speed up time, doing the deed “quickly”, feeling the “future in the instant” or willing to “jump the life to come”. The play hurtles towards its conclusion as the prophecies of the three witches come to pass, with devastating neatness.

【2】But the tragedy of environmental disaster unfolds along a much more extended timescale. The bleaching of the coral reefs, the shrinking of the Arctic polar ice, the extreme droughts and floods taking place worldwide, are symptoms and portents of decisions already taken whose full consequences have not yet been felt.

【3】There is a time lag between carbon emissions and temperature rises: the one-degree increase in the global average temperature is a result of carbon emissions released 40 years ago, while the levels of carbon in the atmosphere right now – about 412 parts per million (ppm) and rising – are enough to cause two degrees of warming by the middle of the century.

【4】This trajectory is also complicated by the so-called climate-change feedback loop. Once the Earth is warmed by more than 2˚C, the capacity of plants to absorb carbon dioxide through photosynthesis will be affected and they will start to puff the gas out instead of taking it in (the carbon feedback loop), causing temperatures to rise further.

【5】The tragic narrative of climate change is much lengthier than tragic plots in the theatre, and stretches the connections between cause and consequence, transgression and punishment. It resembles Prometheus, nailed to his rock in Aeschylus’s play, knowing that centuries in the future his defiance will ensure the toppling of his enemy, Zeus. He knows the secret cause of Zeus’s overthrow from prophetic signs he can detect in the here and now, but is reluctant to divulge it. So the immovable fate of Zeus and Prometheus turns out to be based upon Prometheus’s will, and upon the brinkmanship between the two.

【6】Climate change is not our problem, we tell ourselves. It is for future generations to worry about. But if we view climate change as a tragic narrative that can be read and interpreted in the same way as an Aeschylean or Shakespearean play, then we might think about time, fate and individual responsibility differently.

【7】Tragic plots revolve around the moment when the hero makes the wrong choice. Macbeth kills the king; Oedipus murders his father; Prometheus steals fire from the gods. Fate plays a part in determining these decisions but each man also has free will and voluntarily enters into his chosen course of action. In Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, Agamemnon willingly puts his head into the “yoke of necessity”, uniting free will and destiny. Prometheus revels in his free will and capacity for defiance. These tragic narratives forge the connections between the individual and the world, between the small choices we each make and the huge, inevitable consequences they unleash.

【8】According to the writer and former soldier Roy Scranton, we have to treat existence as a tragedy to which we are stoically resigned. “We can learn to see each day as the death of what came before, freeing ourselves to deal with whatever problems the present offers without attachment or fear,” he writes.

【9】Nevertheless, there exists an alternative way to think about climate crisis. Aeschylus does not shy away from confronting the weakening power of human agency in the face of the vast inhuman forces of time, place and destiny. But still he leaves room in his dramatic vision of the world for contingency, for resistance and responsibility. Progress is dependent upon each character’s knowledge and acknowledgement of the vagaries of self-deception or engagement.

【10】We are not “free” to detach ourselves, but rather remain vitally attached, through tragic witness, to those “crawling glaciers”, to those signs of the past, present and future and to our own capacity for action.