Studies in Genre

Louise Cowan, *General Editor*

The Terrain of Comedy
The Epic Cosmos
The Tragic Abyss

The Tragic Abyss

edited by

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with an introduction by

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To the memory of Donald A. Cowan

'A was a man, take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.
Hamlet

The final section of this volume takes up the vexed question of what has happened to tragedy in modernity, and in particular, its destiny with respect to the emergence of other popular forms, such as opera and the novel. Robert S. Dupree explores a divergence that begins in about 1600, resulting in the rise of popular opera, which engages the crowd at the expense of the theater's real communal power, and the northern turn (ultimately issuing in the works of Ibsen and Strindberg) toward dark, personal drama without a collective emphasis. Paul Connell accounts for the "strange upward draft" of affirmation and re-sacralization of the world that keeps novels with apparently tragic actions, such as *Madame Bovary* and *The Possessed*, from being ultimately tragic in effect. Gregory Marks examines Lorca's successful appeal to Andalusian folk traditions that sustain the tragic view in *Blood Wedding* but that evaporate in *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*. In his essay on Faulkner, Larry Allums recovers Faulkner's tragic vision from those who decry the offensive aspects of Southern culture that become most visible precisely in his tragic actions. Kathleen Kelly Marks concludes the section and the volume by meditating on the apotropaic dimensions of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in their fertile tension with tragedy—a tension that goes back to the earliest origins of the genre itself.

This book, long in gestation, would not have come about at all without the play of ideas that those of us in the Teachers Academy of the Dallas Institute have shared over the years with the teachers in our Summer Institutes. We thank them, as always, for their great spirit of generosity and their dedication to a noble calling. Joanne Stroud, the founder and director of Dallas Institute Publications, has given us the timely encouragement and support necessary to complete the book. Patricia Mora's professional expertise took us past many rough spots in the production of the volume, and the skill of Kathryn Smith brought this endeavor in tragedy to a comic conclusion at last.

Introduction

The Tragic Abyss

LOUISE COWAN

So blind, in so severe a place
(All life before in the black grave)
The last alternatives they face
Of life, without the life to save.
Allen Tate, "The Cross"

Despite its sinister revelations, tragedy stands virtually unchallenged in the Western world for moral and artistic supremacy. And though its pure lineaments surface only rarely, it remains in the poetic canon a privileged model, if only as an unattainable ideal. Aristotle lists it in the Poetics as one of the four "kinds" and assumes its superiority over the other three in artistic economy and power (Butcher 116-117). But his authoritative analysis of its formal elements, almost slavishly adopted in every epoch since the fifteenth-century rediscovery of his treatise, left the meaning of tragedy essentially undefined. What are its dark secrets that even the rumor of them so fascinates and enthralls? For, despite its few appearances, this most absolute of genres seems always hovering in the background in Western society. It manifests its presence as a potentiality of the psyche, and though seldom embodied—and then, apparently, only in drama—appears like a kind of fractal design in the margins of our music, our films, our news media. It punctuates our conversations; it governs our relationships and exhales in our dreams what Max Scheler calls tragedy's "heavy breath" (249). It is one of the supreme human icons, borne with us on the shared journey of civilization, much as Aeneas carried his household gods—or, it might be more appropriate to say, as Perseus carried his shield. Despite the critical disagreements it spurs, its infrequent manifestations are

universally recognized. Only by some sort of theoretical timidity do we stop short of acknowledging behind them the presence of a tragic essence, an archetypal idea that takes on form at intervals throughout history.

Unlike the other modes of which Aristotle speaks, tragedy cannot really be said to be a *mimesis* of a *praxis*, an imitation of an action. Certainly it has a plot, characters, and the other elements he names as imitating an action "serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (Butcher 63). In both epic and comedy, however, that action, the underlying "movement of spirit," as Francis Fergusson expresses it (Introduction 4), is an image of some such movement in life. It is in this large analogy that those genres are mimetic, not simply in their characters and plots. But tragedy, rather than being a model of life experience, seems absolute—like a diagram or a recipe. It evokes something rather than reminds us of something. As raindancers strive in their ritual not so much to imitate human action as to make gestures that, reaching beyond the human, cause rain to fall, so tragedy bends all its efforts toward producing a result. And in this purpose it stands in contrast with comedy, whose long-drawn-out episodic turns mimic in distorted guise the trials and narrow escapes of daily living. Viewed in this light, tragedy is less a simulacrum of human action than a liturgical confrontation of a deep-seated dread which, when brought to light, can be borne only through the medium of poetic language. Its plots, then, should be recognized for what they are: not really, as Aristotle would have it, structures with a complication and resolution—with a beginning, middle, and end—but dramatizations of single moments of unmasking, accompanied by whatever is necessary to reach that chilling and epiphanic event. For a moment in the tragic vision one looks beyond the boundaries of ordinary awareness and glimpses the caverns of a lightless abyss. The tragic protagonists who find themselves in this severe place—Job, Prometheus, Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth, Ahab, Joe Christmas, among others—discover that they are transfixed, as though caught in a trap. They face the immediacy of an ultimate choice. For, in the dead air of this unmoving time, they are unable to go forward or backward. They have reached a point of no return. These chosen protagonists *qua* victims confront the final alternatives. This is the tragic moment.

But it seems less an analogy of anything that happens in life than an unconcealing of the substratum of human existence. Thus in the tragic world, for all its otherness, one is somehow in familiar territory—the setting of dreams and nightmares. But tragedy presents a nightmare from which the dreamer cannot awake. Its vision has a finality that leaves not only the protagonist but the audience changed. It rends the curtain of intelligibility to reveal another kind of reality, so deep that it seems to the viewer an abyss. For the spectator, what remains is not the specific action represented onstage so much as the drama aroused in the underworld of the spirit, that deep well of darkness in the human psyche in which joy and pain are mingled. Many twentieth-century thinkers have been concerned with this hidden aspect of the person. Freud has directed his attention to the "dark, inaccessible part of our personality" (19:36); and Jacques Maritain has spoken of "the nocturnal kingdom of the mind" (94). But tragedy goes even deeper than these statements would indicate: it dredges up something from the bottomless pit. Like the gorgon's gaze, what it brings up ought not be faced directly, as one knows instinctively, but is better viewed at a slant, through a mask or an image. To see the thing itself could mark the fulfillment of the *dies irae*, the day of wrath, the whisper "Thou art the man." And because this final accusation is never quite realized in actual life, no matter how dire one's circumstances, it is likely to be kept in abeyance as an undischarged fear in the back of consciousness, its terror and pity doled out in small doses.

An impressive number of twentieth-century thinkers have attempted to isolate tragedy in one of its elements, such as suffering,[1] paradox,[2] the destruction of a value,[3] or the confrontation with the irremediable.[4] Others consider it to issue from the ritual of sacrifice,[5] the boundary situation,[6] or the incarnation of political order.[7] These theories—and there are hundreds more—advance single elements as keys to the tragic. Yet no one of them completely captures its forbidding though oddly exhilarating power. In seeking the sources of this power, however, one must first acknowledge that tragedy seems not to have a definable content or a specifiable structure. As we have been suggesting, it presents itself almost as a kind of mechanism—or a sacrament—something that *does* something, that has an effect *ex opere operato*. And though what it does may be fearfully important for the *polis*, as Aristotle

made clear twenty-five hundred years ago, it channels its power through the medium of one protagonist—the scapegoat, victim, tyrant, or hero—who must go alone to face the abyss. It is as though tragedy opens the door to Tartarus, activating the pattern of the soul's possibility and exposing the threat buried at the bottom of consciousness. But it is a threat from another realm and hence represents something beyond the human, something essentially metaphysical, rather than the distillation of actual experience.

But without its art form, the tragic is likely to be kept in abeyance, an undischarged terror in the psyche. And the creation of tragedy is not simply subject to the author's will: modern tragedy, for instance, has been infrequent and, when it occurs, incomplete. It is hardly evocable in the novel. As readers of novels, we lack the viscera for tragedy; we are all minds and sensibilities. However terrible, Kurtz's famous cry, "The horror! The horror!" stops short of the genuinely tragic, even though it is the dying voice of a tormented soul that has exceeded human bounds in "stepping over the edge." But, as readers, we do not see with him what he sees but are told about the experience retrospectively. "Heart of Darkness" is a superb novella about the abyss, but it is not tragedy. It wisely makes no attempt to trace the grammar of Kurtz's vision. We are not present at the moment that the trap springs.

Such a sight as Kurtz saw, unless it is to overwhelm entirely, would have to be brought into consciousness as communal experience in full view of an audience. There, secure within the tragic form, and not as solitary reader, one might look directly upon the face of the gorgon and live to tell the tale. Otherwise a Marlow must interpret for us—or, in *Absalom, Absalom!* a Quentin Compson, who goes with Miss Rosa Coldfield into the deserted Sutpen mansion, the house of death, to find Henry Sutpen, his brother's murderer, locked away in darkness. Horrifying as this moment is, however, it is still questionable as tragedy. Quentin *reports* the experience to us, and our minds and sympathies give assent to it. We recognize it and thrill in vicarious horror. But what we experience is removed from the fullblown tragic experience. For in the confines of the novel, we are shielded by mediation from the unfathomable contradictions of the act. It happened somewhere else, to someone whose interiority we do not know. We know *of* it intellectually and can contemplate it in

complete safety. Another person is telling us about it, which is another kind of experience entirely—possessing its own *frisson*, no doubt, but not the full-bodied pity and terror that come of being there, or even when we read the Greeks or Shakespeare, of *feeling* that we're there. Unalleviated tragedy provides no protection for us, no way out by means of psychological detachment. In its authentic appearances, the tragic experience is irreducible, inexplicable, offered directly to the audience.

During the two epochs of its generally agreed-upon appearance in Western history, it was within the safety of cities that the tragic epiphany occurred. The tragic pattern was harrowed up into the light of recognition, with all levels of the populace looking on in the same fascinated horror and *jouissance*. And the dramas produced during those two epochs are still capable, centuries later, among strangers, of generating the tragic event. Like the Bible, these Greek and Shakespearean texts remain potential sources of unmediated catharsis in ages and climes far removed from their origin, belonging to succeeding eras as much as to their own. Even solitary readers can experience the shared pity and terror arising from their pages. For in their essence, these works were conceived communally and expressed in language that carries with it primordial implications, recognizable—even longed for—in whatever medium. But the Greek and Shakespearean dramas do not exhaust the tragic; they *educate* us about it. They have shown us that it is a pattern in reality, not of our own making; hence we can recognize in works of art its partial appearance as well as oblique patterns signifying its presence, hieroglyphics that we would otherwise miss. For, though not every age can or even should try to produce full-blown tragedy, a *sense* of the tragic seems a necessary ingredient of the Western mind.

Tragic Theory

Tragedy in itself is unarguably communal, but its relation to the *polis* has frequently been considered problematic. Plato saw it as the poetic kind most dangerous to the city, a condemnation Aristotle attempted to offset in his *Poetics*, with his emphasis on the ethical and the ameliorative. In the Aristotelian view, the tragic action results from a castigable blindness—*hamartia*, the same word Christians were later to use for *sin*—a myopia affecting the

judgment and will of an otherwise predominantly virtuous leader. Further, a reversal of fortune and its consequent recognition brings about a counterpoint of pity and terror leading to insight and effecting a catharsis, with a subsequent restoration of order. This conception of tragedy dominated the poetics of the Middle Ages, even though, steeped in Horace and Cicero, medieval writers were familiar with Aristotle only through a Latin translation by the Arabic philosopher Averroes.

After the late fifteenth-century rediscovery of the *Poetics* in a Greek manuscript, it became almost the sole arbiter of tragic drama, though it was blended with an already established Roman didacticism.[8] For a couple of centuries afterward, neoclassical theorists tended to view tragedy in the light of poetic justice, conceiving of tragic conflict as the dramatization of a threat against not only morality but decorum, ending, however, with the ultimate vindication of right order. Not until the nineteenth century, when Hegel advanced his philosophy of the conflict of good with good, or *kollision*—his term for the painful attempt of Spirit to embody itself in space and time—was there a theory to rival Aristotle's, though, unlike the Greek philosopher, Hegel was chiefly concerned with the significance of tragedy rather than its art form.[9] Hegel considered certain human powers as making up an ethical substance binding a person to various "goods." The most poignant situation in which one can find oneself, according to Hegel, is to encounter these goods in conflict with each other in one's own life.

Nietzsche continued this view of tragedy as representing forces in conflict with each other—as he expressed it, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian poles in human culture and in individual persons (Birth 143). As Gerald Else comments, Nietzsche saw the rise of tragedy "out of the dark womb of the 'Dionysian,' that indispensable, all confounding Primal Unity of joy and pain which lies at the heart of life itself" (9). And in the twentieth century, Max Scheler, building on Hegel and Nietzsche, reiterates the idea of tragedy as representing a conflict between two values in which, though such a clash generates new meaning, it nonetheless destroys something keenly valuable. Scheler is adamant about the necessity of acknowledging a potential tragic presence in the depths of existence. As he comments, "it is impossible to arrive at the phenomenon of the tragic through the art product alone... The tragic

is rather an essential element of the universe itself. The material made use of by the art product and the tragedian must contain beforehand the dark strain of this element" (249).

The tragic, then, according to Scheler, "is not the result of an interpretation of the world and the important events of the world" but inheres in events, in people, in fortunes. It is given off by them "like a heavy breath, or seems like an obscure glimmering that surrounds them." Scheler continues, "In it a specific feature of the world's makeup appears before us, and not a condition of our own ego, nor its emotions, nor its experience of compassion and fear." What he calls the "tragic knot" occurs in the "inner entanglement between the creation of a value and the destruction of a value as they take place in the unity of the tragic action and the tragic event. When we can see the catastrophe as a "species of transcendent necessity," for which no blame can be attached, then and only then do we have tragedy (262).

Lionel Abel in America and Roman Ingarden in Poland proceed in this vein, viewing tragedy with an ontological rather than an ethical, psychological, or aesthetic concern. For Abel, tragedy provides a vision of the irremediable. The tragic vision, he maintains, results from a direct act of seeing rather than from holding any particular view. The tragic writer provides the noblest view of human adversity, portraying a world wherein supreme values collide, "one in which we know we could not live" (187). Ingarden is openly metaphysical in his conception of the literary work of art in general. The tragic, in his view, is among those essences which "are not properties in the usual sense of the term, nor are they in general 'features' of some psychic state but instead they are usually revealed... as an atmosphere which... penetrates and illumines everything with its light" (291). In realizing them, Ingarden maintains, "we enter into primal existence..." (292). We have a secret longing "for their realization and contemplation—even if they are to be frightful" (293). Tragedy, both of these writers would say, is primarily concerned not so much with examining philosophical ideas or ethical standards as with discerning a tension at the heart of being, to which mortals resonate in their depths.

The Tragic Art Form

If the tragic vision has given rise to great diversity of interpretation, the tragic structure, in contrast, has been regarded throughout history with a surprising rigidity. Of course the Aristotelian "rules" dominated the theory and practice of tragic artistry for several centuries. But even after the nineteenth-century break with the unities, critics (and dramatists themselves) have constantly felt the need to demand certain specifics of the tragic art, giving rise to basic imperatives concerning the proper form for tragedy. Many have thought there is a prescribed shape to its plot—that it should be condensed, limited in time and space, with a *peripeteia*, a reversal, and an *anagnorisis*, a recognition, ending in the death of the protagonist. But then questions have arisen: Is the protagonist necessarily male? Must he commit a "terrible deed," make an egregious mistake? Should he always be guilty of hubris? Is he a scapegoat—Isaiah's "rejected, despised of men"? Or should he be a public leader, a magnanimous soul, our highest representative, our bravest contender? Are divine presences essential to tragedy? Does it need a chorus?

These questions are, of course, unanswerable if not perhaps irrelevant. All one can say is that if the tragic action means ending in a certain place—a black hole—then any way one gets there seems sufficient. We have been suggesting that the tragic, rather than being a primarily aesthetic phenomenon, is a metaphysical occurrence given form, to be judged by its ability to call down upon its viewers a certain response. Admittedly, in its infrequent appearances throughout the centuries, one can observe certain strategies it has employed to secure its effect, certain themes and situations, images and symbols. Whatever constants we find, however, are neither necessary nor sufficient, even though many of them have recurred with notable regularity in the tragic canon. Largely Greek in their origins, they are absent from the Book of Job, for instance, as from *The Iliad*, Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, Faulkner's *Light in August*, Allen Tate's lyric poem "The Cross," Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, all of which are in some measure versions of tragedy. Hence, one must infer, the traditional themes and conventions of tragedy are not its absolute essentials. However we may analyze the parts of a tragic drama, the conviction persists that something

beyond its separable elements is responsible for its tragic nature. It takes place in a tragic world, for one thing; and in that world no action, even if comic in itself, can dispel the ominous shadow. For all his quips, Hamlet must die the death.

Some of the observables one can note from examples of the tragic tradition could be regarded as purely dramatic conventions; yet they are perhaps clues to the essence we seek. In all the paradigmatic models, for instance, tragedy takes place in a disturbed realm that has only recently begun to question its established *doxa*. It makes use of few characters and even fewer incidents in the unfolding of the plot; it tends to observe an inexorable cause and effect, single out a lone—and in most instances, male—protagonist and move toward a shattering conclusion, usually concluding with his death and the deconstruction of the established regime that has revolved around him. It moves with extraordinary rapidity: tragic time is brief, swiftpaced, demanding immediate action, leaving little room for alternatives for those moving to destruction. Yet somewhere in it there is leisure for lamentation: the chorus or one of the victimized characters manages to stop time and utter cries and protests that in rising from the depths demand a lyric, primordial language. Its wailing has something always to do with lost unity, with the earth, with the gods. Further, tragedy tends to portray the victimization of the feminine; to concern the relation of fathers and children, down-playing or ignoring the maternal. Its total effect is usually to portray the collapse of the myth of order; and, though it may offer some sort of reconciliation, it leaves its audience with the vision of a denuded world and only a faint hope for any possible far-off restoration of civil harmony.

As the tragic action has been conceived in Greek and Shakespearean drama (its two high points), it describes an arc divided into three parts. Francis Fergusson, basing his analysis on Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, has designated these three portions of the action as purpose, passion, and perception (Fergusson, Introduction 10-13). The Greek trilogies themselves testify to this tripartite structure, though we have to extrapolate somewhat from the *Oresteia*, the only complete surviving trilogy, in order to discern the underlying action of the triple structure in other Greek cycles. In the first stage of tragedy, as we can see in the *Agamemnon*, the first drama of the *Oresteia*, the catastrophe occurs at the end,

producing a violent reversal, a fall from happiness to misery. This is the portion of tragedy described in the *Poetics*, with the more than ordinarily good man coming to misery; his *hamartia* causing the tragic misstep that leads to *atē* (madness) and finally, to a *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* (reversal and recognition), with pity and fear producing a *catharsis* (purgation). Aristotle analyzes Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* as the paradigmatic example of tragic art, but, in fact, rather than encompassing the entire range of tragedy (as we can see from an encounter with *Oedipus at Colonus*), this play represents only the first "moment" of the tragic movement, the stage in which the "terrible deed" is done. In Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the opening drama, *Agamemnon*, traces out this movement; and one might be justified in speculating that the lost play of Prometheus (*The Firebringer*) takes place in this stage, like *Oedipus the King*, *The Bacchae*, and *Othello*.

In the second stage, the catastrophe occurs at the beginning or has just occurred: this is a time of stasis, marked by tension, conflict, suffering, paradox, indecision. Tragedies that fit this category are *The Libation Bearers* (the second drama of the *Oresteia*), *Job*, *Prometheus Bound*, *Electra*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and the Oedipus play that Sophocles did not write, which would have had to depict the time between Thebes and Colonus, his hero's period of helpless wandering after blinding himself. In the third stage, the catastrophe has occurred long before; the movement of the plot is upward, *de profundis*, toward redemption and reconciliation. One finds this pattern in the third part of the *Oresteia*, the *Eumenides*, as well as in the lost *Prometheus Unbound*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *King Lear*.[10]

Looking back over the tradition, one can see that, in contrast with comedy, tragedy has an immediate and powerful impact on the reader or viewer. The effect of comedy is developmental, lifting spirits and enlightening intellects, so that the audience can see better how to compromise and endure in a damaged world. Tragedy in contrast is cataclysmic, granting its recipients a terrible and exalted kind of wisdom then and there, at that very moment. And in any profound questioning of tragedy, it is the character of this revelation that one seeks to know. What is it, one wonders, that the viewers of—or, perhaps more accurately, *participants in*—this most mysterious of genres see and understand? Is it at base what Wole Soyinka claims for Yoruban tragic ritual,

a taming of the abyss? (Myth 2). Or is it a surrender to it? Are participants in tragedy being swallowed up for a moment in "outer darkness"? a glimpse of uncreation?—of *nihil*? a *Blick ins chaos*? Is it that their being is contingent, that they did not create themselves; that they stand convicted before a primal power unimaginable in its grandeur? Is Kafka's *Trial* a proper delineation of the tragic fear?—that one is accused of a nameless crime by a faceless judge, to be tried at a time and place, with evidence of which one is kept ignorant?

We should have to say, rather, that Job's, Oedipus', or Lear's situation is much worse. What each confronts is something that elicits his *self*-condemnation—something that makes him "repent in dust and ashes," or dash out his eyes, or take leave of his reason. "I am bound / Upon a wheel of fire," the old king declares to his daughter Cordelia, "that mine own tears / Do scald like molten lead" (4.7.45-47). He is carried, in Yeats's words about tragedy in general, "beyond time and persons, to where passion living through its thousand purgatorial years, as in the wink of an eye, becomes wisdom" (239). But to attain this wisdom the hero must go down into the abyss, and the audience is brought as near as possible to its brink.

The Borderland of Tragedy

What is first discernible in the no-man's-land that surrounds the abyss is its menacing and horrid aspect. When one comes finally to the dark tower (as Browning would have it in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"), it has been by enduring "ugly little rivers," containing possible corpses of infants. Ancient memories of human sacrifice, long hidden out of sight, remind the audience of a shared communal guilt. Cassandra in the *Oresteia* acknowledges this liminal region and intuits the abyss beyond it, when—caught like an animal and prodded to go in to her own slaughter—she looks up at the rooftop and makes out the apparitions of horror: the mutilated children, their bodies half-eaten, their blood staining the palace roof. She cries out against "the house that hates god, / an echoing womb of guilt, kinsmen / torturing kinsmen, severed heads, slaughterhouse of heroes, soil streaming blood" and calls upon the murdered children:

> See, my witnesses—I trust to them, to the babies
> wailing, skewered on the sword,
> their flesh charred, the father gorging on their parts.
> (Aeschylus, *Agam.* 1095-97)

Human sacrifice and torture are border images implied in all the tragedies, sometimes made overt, as in the *Oresteia*, sometimes hidden, as in the *Oedipus*. Robert Miola, speaking particularly of Renaissance revenge tragedy and "the *disiecta membra* of hands, tongues, and other bodily parts," makes clear that "the expression of such *thymos* in action rends the human body and the human soul" (12). But even further, in this shadowy no-man's-land verging on the abyss lie not only human sacrifice and torture, but that most unspeakable *sanctum sanctorum*, cannibalism—the ritual eating of human flesh—at once the most sacred of practices and the most heinous of crimes. This is a portion of the tragic knowledge shared by the human race in its Great Memory. But even the horror of torture, child murder, and cannibalism—only a few of the unspeakable things mortals have done to each other—cannot entirely account for the tragic response. Cassandra not only apprehends this fearful past but at the same moment recognizes the power of the gods: she herself is inexorably to be slain, along with the man who has captured and violated her. In *King Lear* we witness onstage an atrocity beyond language in the blinding of Gloucester and then later, a mute acceptance in the calm eloquence of Cordelia's dead body. Yet an abiding presence hovers over these unspeakable acts and modifies their horror. An open-eyed view of necessity characterizes the tragic vision and gives it a willing acquiescence to what has been and what must be. Standing on the brink of the abyss, Oedipus commands the herdsman to relinquish the final bit of information that will send his king hurling into the darkness. "Oh God, I am on the verge of frightful speech," the hapless shepherd protests. "And I of hearing," Oedipus replies. Then later, emerging after he has put out his own eyes, "Darkness! / Horror of darkness, enfolding, resistless, unspeakable," he exclaims, to our pity and our mesmerized joy. "Look there!" are the dying words of the old and maddened Lear.

Peering over from the edge, the chorus and the audience watch the inescapable, transported to the realm of the unsayable. Authentic experience of the tragic threshold, in its enactment before us,

is so stark and so demanding as not to be governed by the imagination, that ingenious mediator between spirit and flesh. The devastating effect of tragedy, in fact, may be related to the utter separateness in it of the mind and the senses. Tragedy, as it is experienced, is of the innards, as Ruth Padel translates the Greek word *splanchna* (the brain, the liver, the heart, the bowels). "Tragedy's language," she writes, "stresses that whatever is within us is obscure, many-faceted, impossible to see" (77). And it is this impossibility that tragedy takes as its challenge. Its task is to transport us to this inside-outside and to strip away the veil concealing the dread secret. Greek tragedy in particular, according to Padel, "with its dialectics of seen and unseen, inside and outside, exit and entrance was a simultaneously internal and external, intellectual and somatic expression of contemporary questions about the inward sources of harm, knowledge, power, and darkness" (77).

But its damage is perceived not only by the body; the spirit, too, is deeply implicated in tragic knowledge. When the hidden is brought back from the abyss, revealed in the art form of tragedy, the mind recoils in pity at the body's suffering; and the body is wracked by fear at the mind's recognition. The imagination, which is essentially a comic alleviator, has no part in unifying the experience and hence is paralyzed by what seems inevitable. In the tragic realm, the protagonist cannot triumph, can only submit. The trap is sprung, the jig is up. The audience stands on the rim, so to say, and participates in the peculiar doubleness of the moment of discovery, wherein the realization remains unassimilated and unresolved, retaining the full force of its painful contradiction.

The Tragic Abyss

But if the chorus and the audience remain on the rim, the tragic protagonist has to descend into the deepest crevices of the universe—into Tartarus itself. Caught in its depths, he can go neither forward or backward. He finds himself in a pit at the bottom of an underworld where gravity is so heavy that nothing can escape. In this no place—this stony cliff, this bloody ground, this blasted heath, this dungheap, this pit for beasts (poets have exhaustively explored the variety of metaphors that can express the absoluteness of the tragic *khora*, this place that is the final end

of all things), the laws of the land dictate that one is in an ultimate situation, that everything hangs on the next few seconds. Time has run out, in direct contrast to comedic time, which is elastic enough to allow sufficient leisure for working things out or slipping by and evading the consequences. But in tragedy, suddenly *no time at all* exists and hence no escape is possible. When Birnam Wood can be seen coming to Dunsinane, nothing can be done but to arm oneself for a battle one is fated to lose. Comedy, in contrast, has recourse to an alternative world, so that, instead of heading straight for disaster, one can avoid it long enough to dream up narrow escapes—to don a disguise, or leave a misleading note, or hide behind a bush.

The prospects of tragedy are so thoroughly unsettling that—yet again—one must wonder at our fascination with it. What does the tragic protagonist accomplish in the abyss that is worth our attention? Why do we long so for tragedy; why do we watch it at all? Is it that we are fulfilled in this glimpse of the irremediable? Is it that matter itself is a triumph? That we cry out for the reality of blood? That darkness affirms life in ways that light and harmony cannot do? Whatever the answers to these questions, the one thing agreed upon in discussions of tragedy is that its effect is strangely therapeutic. As art form tragedy helps its viewers (not its protagonists!) look upon violence and turn away from it freed and content. It enables them to rise from the devastating experience with a sense of having been fulfilled and liberates them to shape their lives into the wisdom of comedy. But tragedy supplies the knowledge with which they shape that wisdom. Without the tragic there could be no comic resolution. Further, it is important to note that tragedy itself never simply turns into comedy. If it effects a reconciliation—as in the *Oresteia*—its harmony comes about still within a tragic terrain. And that terrain is elsewhere. For the situations and characters of the tragic world make us see not our own lives but rather something in the universe that, though it affects our world, has no counterpart in the daily lives we lead.

Is tragedy, then, simply a vision of human destiny and the dramatization of our dread at confronting it? Certainly there is a dread that lies dormant at the bottom-most portion of our psyches, suppressed throughout life, since life could not be lived if it were confronted directly. It has to do with our being caught

in the flesh, of daring to exist as a spirit incorporated in matter, of believing in the "blind hopes" Prometheus planted in the human race. Uncovered, it reveals itself as a dread of seeing in one fearful instant of *Aufklarung* the vast distance between temporal consciousness and the realm of essences. Yet something in the iconic gaze of tragedy evokes a corresponding image in our depths: for a moment we glimpse ourselves as full participants within the accused and splendid human race. And for a moment we see that the gods look on, with bright interest and admiration, watching the suffering of mortals that elevates them to an almost godlike standing.

To adopt so apocalyptic a vision of tragedy is of course to abjure the employment of the word in its ordinary usage as catastrophe, or disaster, or personal loss. For if the tragic consists, as I have been arguing, of the experience of the abyss, as if one had fallen into a black hole in inner or outer space, then it would seem unsuitable to speak of even the most severe actual suffering as tragic. If we adopt this distinction, it is with some wonder at how a form so remote and forbidding has assumed its supreme power over the art of poetry and the lives of mortals. The answer has to lie, of course, in the experience of the tragic art itself, which in some mysterious manner is *not* forbidding, not removed from daily life but rather lights it up from within.

A clue to the solution of this enigma is offered in Aristotle's doctrine of *catharsis*, which seems nearer the mark than his frequently cited *mimesis*. To emphasize the cathartic nature of tragedy implies that the tragic art accomplishes its task apart from any resemblance to life. That is, if its essence is to be located in what it *does* rather than what it *emulates*, then it is a kind of *leitourgeia*, a liturgy, a public ceremony; and its elements have to be assembled in such a manner as in the end to achieve the right effect, or, to change metaphors, to make the right kind of compound—a purgative remedy that discharges the poisons afflicting the psyche. Tragedy, then, as we have been saying, would have to be judged by neither its plot nor its characters but, like a cathartic, by its results, which, we are hazarding, effect a cleansing of the soul and a regeneration of the *polis*. The tragic effect is absolute and final. As Job laments, "What I feared has come upon me." And Oedipus can only stand in stunned silence as the last piece of the puzzle fits into its inevitable place.

Perhaps one might further hazard that the tragic work of art, as a ritual conveying the sudden intuition of outer darkness, surprisingly reveals that shadowy realm to be, not chaos as uncreation, as one might think, but a *ruin*—creation after the fall. In it order is confounded, goodness marred. Putting it simply, then, we could say that tragedy results from a final *anagnorisis*—a recognition of the harm done by some primordial event. But this vision is dependent upon an instantaneous revelation in which the tragic protagonist—and the viewers of tragedy—see what creation was like before its ruin and at the same moment recognize that they themselves have been responsible for the loss. Confronted with their imperfection, which they discern as an external depth into which they have fallen, and finding themselves to blame for everything, they are stunned into immobility as from a sudden blow.

But it is only from within the deep chiaroscuro of the divine, in the perspective of eternity, that this culpability can be apprehended. In ordinary life, human beings have a secret but unexamined awareness of an imperfection in the frame of things and of their own implication in it—along with the intuition that they will ultimately be held accountable for it. Tragedy dramatizes this potential judgment—a dreaded experience that in actual life can only be intuited. The reference point of tragedy is from the deeps. Humanity is viewed from the outer darkness, as in his *Comedy* Dante portrayed his characters from the outer light. But his view of them, being comic, was external, through observation and conversation. The view of tragedy is internal; through its agency one is made to see from within the soul a potential experience as though it were taking place.

Perhaps we can begin to delineate what that potential experience consists of, that experience that lies behind and beyond tragedy: can we not say that it is the dread of eternal loss, along with a simultaneous recognition of one's full value? Lucien Goldmann quotes an anonymous seventeenth-century Jansenist text:

> There is in our heart so deep an abyss that we cannot sound its depths; we can scarcely make out light from dark or good from evil.... But the affliction that God, in his infinite mercy, sends down upon us is like a two-edged sword that enters into the very depths of our hearts and minds. There, it cleaves our human thoughts from those which God causes to rise up in our souls, and the spirit of God can then no longer hide itself. We begin to have so clear a knowledge of this spirit that we can no longer be deceived. (66)

Is it not this sudden switch from one universe to another that causes the vertigo in tragedy that we call catharsis? And is not the center of that alternate universe that we have suddenly glimpsed, the center from which all radiates, the "deep but dazzling darkness" of the divine, as in the *Commedia* it is its dazzling light? Tragedy might thus be seen as the *aporia* that allows a momentary glimpse of the ruined cosmos, whereas comedy provides, in contrast, a glimpse of its redemption. At the center of the tragic abyss, at the opposing pole from Dante's sun in comedy, is the event that staggers the imagination: the agony of a god, an event sensed preveniently from *illo tempore*. Thus the terror of tragedy stems from the sudden vision of our implication in this sacrifice, with its resultant imperative to choose for or against the bottomless abyss of love—which has to be witnessed as though it is from beyond this life.

Hence the tragic vision seems to have to do with facing both the origin and the end of things: the veiled Chaos and Old Night that surround the divine author of the cosmos. "I seed the beginnin and now I sees the endin," as Dilsey professes in *The Sound and the Fury*. The endeavor is something like the way in which Einstein conceived of modern physics, as bringing one "closer to the secret of the Old One." To become aware of a vast all-fathering darkness and a suffering god is to see something that reminds the audience, uncomfortably, of the act of creation—its own rootedness in matter and its gravity and guilt in the downward pull toward the ancient mother. Jahweh's answer to Job is to remind him of the secret ways of the earth; Oedipus's murky path leads him to the grove of the Furies, "ladies whose eyes are terrible"; Lear's wanderings in the storm teach him something repugnant but humbling about the reproductive fertility of nature.

Wole Soyinka laments the gradual loss in Western drama of the earth and cosmic consciousness, attributing its absence to Platonic and Christian thought (Myth 10), though such a radical shift seems more probably related to the dominant modern view of the universe as mechanism. In discovering the existence of a "dark energy" in the universe that devours whole galaxies,

postmodern cosmologists are coming to view our little planet as insignificant indeed, a small point in the blankness of infinite space. If a requirement for tragedy is guilt toward a precious earth and humility toward a vast outer darkness which, though we cannot comprehend it, beckons to us with love—along with a sharp awareness of the ruin we have made of the human enterprise—then twenty-first century writers may once again be able to evoke the necessary shared pity and terror that tragedy demands.

But not without the one secret ingredient. Without Job's lamentations, Oedipus' grave and noble protests, Lear's howls of remorse, Hamlet's anguished, theatrical meditations, there could be no tragedy. The tragic hero suffers not in silence but in the most opulent and expressive language the world has known. From these cries arising in the center of the soul, the secret dwelling-place of language—in a darkness corresponding to the abyss—bursts the poetry that raises human suffering to the level of contemplation and, to a stunned and gratified audience, conveys the liberation of tragic joy.

NOTES

[1] "Tragedy's one essential is a soul that can feel greatly. Given such a one and any catastrophe may be tragic. But the earth may be removed and the mountains carried into the midst of the sea, and if only the small and shallow are involved, tragedy is absent" (Hamilton 142); "The suffering of a soul that can suffer greatly—that and only that, is tragedy" (143).

[2] D. D. Raphael, passim.

[3] See Scheler 255.

[4] See Lionel Abel, "Is There a Tragic Sense of Life?" (Abel 177).

[5] See Fergusson, Harrison (Themis), and Muller.

[6] Originally Karl Jaspers' phrase, it was adopted by Tillich: "The human boundary situation is encountered when human possibility reaches its limit, when human existence is confronted by an ultimate threat" (197).

[7] See Voegelin (Order 143-147).

[8] For a thorough treatment of tragic theory after the Greek and Roman epochs, see Henry Ansgar Kelly.

[9] See Gellrich 23-93.

[10] Shakespeare combines all three stages in the single arena of each of his tragic dramas, though he may emphasize one stage and merely imply the others.