

Sweet

VIOLENCE

THE IDEA OF THE TRAGIC

TERRY EAGLETON



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In memory of Herbert McCabe

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Introduction

Tragedy is an unfashionable subject these days, which is one good reason for writing about it. It smacks of virile warriors and immolated virgins, cosmic fatality and stoical acquiescence. There is an ontological depth and high seriousness about the genre which grates on the postmodern sensibility, with its unbearable lightness of being. As an aristocrat among art forms, its tone is too solemn and portentous for a streetwise, sceptical culture. Indeed, the term hardly scrapes into the postmodern lexicon. For some feminists, tragic art is far too enamoured of sacrifice, false heroics and a very male nobility of spirit, a kind of high-brow version of ripping yarns for boys. For leftists in general, it has an unsavoury aura of gods, myths and blood cults, metaphysical guilt and inexorable destiny.

The odd leftist who does write about tragedy today usually takes for granted a highly reactionary version of the form, which he or she then proceeds to reject. This is a marvellously labour-saving manoeuvre. It is rather like assuming that all non-Marxist philosophy denies the existence of a material world, thus saving oneself the tedium of having to read it. Jonathan Dollimore seems to assume that tragedy is invariably about fatalism, resignation and inevitability,¹ while Francis Barker speaks disapprovingly of tragedy's 'celebration of sovereign presence in the form of lost plenitude'.² Barker sees tragedy as inherently unhistorical, a quality which is truer of his own view of it than of the thing itself. Both he and Dollimore essentialize the form; it is just that while others have done so affirmatively, they do so negatively. Barker, rather grudgingly, ends his excellent study by acknowledging that 'The situation in which we who inhabit a seemingly common earth do not all do so with the same space, validity and pleasure may properly be described as tragic'. Indeed so; in fact, if this does not merit the title, it is hard to see what does. But Barker nevertheless feels constrained to enter an instant caveat: 'But not [tragedy] defined as an inescapable and irremediable given, an unrelievable historicism, or a mysterious condition'.³ No, to be sure; but why have

we allowed our political antagonists to monopolize the definition of the form to the point where, like Barker, we are wary of using the term at all? And this, unbelievably, in an age when more men and women have been killed or deliberately allowed to die than ever before in history.⁴ A recent estimate of the twentieth century's 'megadeaths' is 187 million, the equivalent of more than one in ten of the world population in 1900. Yet tragedy remains a word of which the left is distinctly nervous.

If some postmodernism is rather too shallow for tragedy, some post-structuralism takes it altogether too seriously. A recent collection of essays entitled *Philosophy and Tragedy*,⁵ a volume of admirable power, range and intricacy, has scarcely a critical word to breathe of such classical tragic notions as fate and heroism, gods and essences, Dionysian frenzy, the ennobling role of suffering, the character of the Absolute, the need to sacrifice the individual to the whole, the transcendent nature of tragic affirmation, and other such high-minded platitudes of traditional tragic theory. The role of poststructuralism, it would seem, is to reinterpret the concept rather than to change it. For all its undoubted depth of insight, the volume's implicit politics of tragedy are entirely acceptable to those scholars who would reach for their timeless Sophoclean wisdom at the faintest mention of the floating signifier. From one end to another, the collection scarcely has a word to say of tragedy as human distress and despair, breakdown and wretchedness. As we shall see later, it runs the persuasive thesis that in the modern epoch tragedy has been a continuation of philosophy by other means; but it does not seem aware that its own lofty theoreticist disdain for the historical represents the less alluring side of this complicity between the two.

Not that the present book is itself an historical study of tragedy.⁶ It is, rather, a political one. The two terms are not synonymous. Indeed, I am almost tempted to say that they are today in some danger of actually becoming opposites. I have argued elsewhere, though hardly to much effect, that to historicize is by no means an inherently radical move.⁷ Much historicism, from Edmund Burke to Michael Oakshott, has been politically conservative. The left is deluded if it believes that it has a monopoly on historically contextualizing. To historicize is indeed vital; but there is in vogue today a brand of left-historicism which seems more indebted to capitalist ideology than to socialist theory. In a world of short-term contracts, just-in-time deliveries, ceaseless downsizings and remodellings, overnight shifts of fashion and capital investment, multiple careers and multipurpose production, such theorists seem to imagine, astonishingly, that the main enemy is the naturalized, static and unchanging. Whereas the truth is that for millions of harassed workers around the globe, not many of them academics, a respite from

dynamism, metamorphosis and multiple identities would come as a blessed release.

A faith in plurality, plasticity, dismantling, destabilizing, the power of endless self-invention – all this, while undoubtedly radical in some contexts, also smacks of a distinctively Western culture and an advanced capitalist world. Indeed, it smacks more specifically of a particular corner of Western culture – the United States – in which ideologies of self-fashioning, along with a strenuously self-affirmative moulding of Nature, have always gripped the imagination more compellingly than in the more sceptical, self-doubting, deterministic cultures of Europe. It is just that, in a later stage of capitalist production, we are now confronted with the singular spectacle of self-fashioning without a subject. An openness to cultural 'otherness' comes pre-wrapped in ideas of the protean, provisional and performative which may strike some of the cultural others in question as distinctly foreign goods. But it is scarcely surprising that those most sensitive to cultural difference should unwittingly project the ideologies of their own piece of the world on humanity at large. It is, after all, what their rulers have been up to for rather a long time.

At its starkest, then, it is a choice between suffocating under history in Lisbon and stifling for lack of it in Los Angeles. In what sense, however, is this rather upbeat brand of historicism at risk of becoming the opposite of radical politics rather than its intellectual ally? Simply because it is embarrassed by much that such a politics must address: age-old structures of power which are still obdurately in place; doctrines which seem to have all the intransigence of a tornado; deep-seated desires and resistances which are not easily amenable to change. If the more callow sort of historicism is right, how come we have not long since reinvented ourselves out of such dreary continuities? Moreover, those who insist with suspicious stridency on the malleability of things, and for whom 'dynamic' is as unequivocally positive a term as 'static' is unambiguously negative, tend to forget that there are kinds of change which are deeply unpleasant and undesirable, just as there are forms of permanence and continuity which are to be affirmed and admired. Capitalism may be justly upbraided for many defects, but lack of dynamism is hardly one of them. One thinks of Walter Benjamin's wise dictum that revolution is not a runaway train but the application of the emergency brake. It is capitalism which is anarchic, extravagant, out of hand, and socialism which is temperate, earth-bound and realistic. This is at least one reason why an anarchic, extravagant poststructuralism has been rather wary of it. Anyway, if it is indeed the case that human subjects are always historically constituted, then here at least is one vitally important non-historical truth.

Most of the left-historicism of our day is reductionist. It does not recognize that history is striated with respect to rates of change. If there is the speedy temporality of the 'conjuncture', there is also the *longue durée* of a mode of production, which sometimes seems to shift no more perceptibly than the planet itself, and somewhere in between the two the medium-range time of, say, the political state. A particular historical event – a strike, for example – may involve all three. To attend only to the first of them, as Francis Mulhern has argued, is to reduce history to change.⁸ But there is also much in the human record which does not change, or which alters only very gradually, which is one reason why radical politics are in business. Most of any present is made up of the past. History, as Mulhern insists, is for the most part continuity. It belongs to its complex material weight that it cannot be perpetually refashioned. And even when we do manage to transform it, its weight may still be found resting like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

This is a recipe for sober realism, not for political despair. Materialism is concerned with the sudden shock of political conjunctures, dramatic shifts in the balance of political forces. Who would have expected, only a few years before the event, that the Soviet bloc would be overthrown almost overnight, and with a minimum of violence? But a genuine materialism, as opposed to an historicist relativism or idealism, is also attentive to those aspects of our existence which are permanent structures of our species-being. It is concerned with the creaturely, ecological dimensions of our existence, not only with cultural value and historical agency. And among these is the reality of suffering. As Theodor Adorno famously remarked, 'The One and All that keeps rolling on to this day – with occasional breathing spells – would teleologically be the absolute of suffering'.⁹

There is no occasion here for the predictable culturalist or historicist riposte that such suffering is always contextually specific. How could the man who lived through the genocide of his own people have failed to notice this? It is as though someone were to point out the curiousness of the fact that everyone at the party is wearing thick green goggles, only to be witheringly informed that they are wearing them for quite different reasons. The point that Adorno is making is not that torture and affliction are non-contextual, but that they crop up with such alarming regularity in so many contexts, from the neolithic age to NATO. Is not this fact, 'unhistorical' though it is, worthy of note? Is not its transhistoricality precisely the point? If some on the left are instinctively alarmed by the thought of the transhistorical, it is partly because they fail to grasp the fact that *longues durées* are quite as much part of human history as pastoral verse or parliaments, and partly because the only alternative they

can imagine to historical change is the timeless essence. Why their imaginations are so gripped by idealism in this respect is a different question. They will not allow that materialism itself offers some rather more plausible alternatives to this contingency/essentialism couplet because they are fearful of a reductive biologism. But they appear quite unfearful of a reductive historicism. Nor do they seem to recognize that the distinction between change and permanence is not the same as the contrast between culture and nature. It is proving rather more feasible in our age to alter certain genetic structures than it is to tamper with capitalism or patriarchy.

Radicals are suspicious of the transhistorical because it suggests there are things which cannot be changed, hence fostering a political fatalism. There are indeed good grounds for suspicion here. But the truth is that there *are* things which cannot be changed, as well as some which are highly unlikely to change, and in some cases this is a matter to celebrate rather than lament. It is reassuring that not ritually slaughtering all those over the age of forty seems to be a reasonably permanent feature of human cultures. There are other situations which cannot be changed, but to no particular detriment. And there are some which cannot be changed much to our chagrin. Tragedy deals in the cut-and-thrust of historical conjunctures, but since there are aspects of suffering which are also rooted in our species-being, it also has an eye to these more natural, material facts of human nature. As the Italian philosopher Sebastiano Timpanaro points out, phenomena such as love, ageing, disease, fear of one's own death and sorrow for the death of others, the brevity and frailty of human existence, the contrast between the weakness of humanity and the apparent infinity of the cosmos: these are recurrent features of human cultures, however variously they may be represented.¹⁰ However left-historicism may suspect that universals are governing-class conspiracies, the fact is that we die anyway. It is, to be sure, a consoling thought for pluralists that we meet our end in such a richly diverse series of ways, that our modes of exiting from existence are so splendidly heterogeneous, that there is no drearily essentialist 'death' but a diffuse range of cultural styles of expiring. Indeed, perhaps we should speak of death as a way of being 'challenged', a mode of being which is neither inferior nor superior to breathing or love-making, simply different. Perhaps the dead are not really dead, just differently capacitated. But we die anyway.

Cultural continuities, Timpanaro points out, 'have been rendered possible by the fact that man as a biological being has remained essentially unchanged from the beginnings of civilization to the present; and those sentiments and representations which are closest to the biological facts of human existence have changed little'.¹¹ However culturalists may

wince at this cheek-by-jowl consorting of 'sentiments and representations' with 'biological facts', it is surely true that to ask, say, why we feel sympathy for Philoctetes is a pseudo-problem bred by a bogus historicism. We feel sympathy for Philoctetes because he is in agonizing pain from his pus-swollen foot. There is no use in pretending that his foot is a realm of impenetrable otherness which our modern-day notions can grasp only at the cost of brutally colonizing the past. There is nothing hermeneutically opaque about Philoctetes's hobbling and bellowing. There is, to be sure, a great deal about the art form in which he figures which is profoundly obscure to us. We are, for example, bemused and mildly scandalized by Antigone's declaration that she would not have broken the law for a husband or a son, as opposed to a brother. It is not the kind of thing a good liberal would say. But as far as his agony goes, we understand Philoctetes in much the same way as we understand the afflictions of those around us. It is not that such a response is 'unhistorical'; it is rather that human history includes the history of the body, which in respect of physical suffering has probably changed little over the centuries. No doubt this is why the body in pain, despite a few splendidly perceptive accounts of it, has scarcely been the most popular of topics in a body-oriented academia, hardly able to compete with the sexual, disciplined or carnivalesque body. It confirms much less readily a certain case about historical pliability. And the suffering body is largely a passive one, which does not suit a certain ideology of self-fashioning. It is of no particular consolation to the victims of torture to be told that their anguish is culturally constructed, as it is, perhaps, to be told that one's lowly place in the hierarchies of gender or ethnicity is a changeable historical affair.

The current preoccupation with the body grew up in part as a reaction against a rationalist, objectivist outlook. This is ironic, since the human body is what gives us an objective world. It is what objectivity is rooted in. There is, to be sure, a whole galaxy of cultural worlds, all claiming some sort of objective status; but they are possible only within the matrix formed by the 'species-body' as such. There could not be a cultural world in which people regularly toasted one another's achievements in large doses of sulphuric acid, one in which there were no social relations whatsoever, or one in which there was no concept of something being the case. Even if such worlds could come into being, which they could not, they would quickly pass out of it again. This, perhaps, is what Ludwig Wittgenstein has in mind when he comments cryptically in the *Philosophical Investigations* that if a lion could speak, we would not be able to understand what he said. Even if we could, we would not be able to

pick an argument with him over what was the case, since what is the case for a lion is not what is the case for us.

For all that we venerate ferrets and respect the ontological autonomy of weasels, speciesism must hold epistemologically, if not morally; whereas the concept of objectivity means that we can always argue with each other over what is the case. Because we share a form of material body, in other words, conflict is built into our existence, as it is not built into our relations with badgers. The body is itself a kind of sign, in which we are present rather as the meaning is present in a word; but it also sets the outer boundaries to signification as such. Historicism is right to insist that the world given us by our species-being is by no means always the most significant or exciting. The universal can be supremely trivial. It is not the fact that Orestes has to sleep or that Cordelia has knees which claims our attention. But it is illogical to deny the significance of the species-body altogether while making rhetorical claims about materialism.

Historicism is mistaken to believe that what belongs to our species-being must invariably be politically retrograde or irrelevant. It can indeed be this; but one would expect such devotees of cultural relativity to be a little less inflexibly universalist in their opinions. It is true that there is much about our species-being which is passive, constrained and inert. But this may be a source of radical politics, not an obstacle to it. Our passivity, for example, is closely bound up with our frailty and vulnerability, in which any authentic politics must be anchored. Tragedy can be among other things a symbolic coming to terms with our finitude and fragility, without which any political project is likely to founder. But this weakness is also a source of power, since it is where some of our needs take root. If these needs are rebuffed, then they have behind them a force rather more intractable than the purely cultural. The champions of the protean fail to appreciate that intractability is sometimes just what we need. If we can successfully confront death-dealing, oppressive forces, it is not because history is mere cultural clay in our hands, or (a more vulgarized version of the same ideology) because when there's a will there's a way. It is because the impulse to freedom from oppression, however that goal is culturally framed, seems as obdurate and implacable as the drive to material survival. Which is by no means to say that it is everywhere evident or that it will always triumph.

I have touched on several senses in which some aspects of tragedy cut against the grain of cultural left orthodoxy. It is not that these aspects define the form in general, which, as I seek to show, is not totalizable as a whole. And there are elements in the form which run directly counter

to these concerns. But I am interested in this book in how some tragic art highlights what is perishable, constricted, fragile and slow-moving about us, as a rebuke to culturalist or historicist hubris. It stresses how we are acted upon rather than robustly enterprising, as well as what meagre space for manoeuvre we often have available. This recognition, indeed, is the positive side of a mystified belief in destiny. What for some suggests fatalism or pessimism means for others the kind of sober realism which is the only sure foundation of an effective ethics or politics. Only by grasping our constraints can we act constructively.

The aspects of tragedy I have in mind take with the utmost seriousness the lethal as well as life-giving inheritances of which the present is partly made up, and which an amnesiac postmodernism has conveniently suppressed. If we cannot fashion ourselves as we choose, as Henrik Ibsen knew, it is because of the burden of history under which we stagger, not only because of the restrictions of the present. This truth is perhaps least understood in those societies with the least history. But it is a universal one, even so. And where tragedy is concerned, the question of universality cannot be side-stepped by a glib particularism. In one sense, to be sure, all tragedies are specific: there are tragedies of particular peoples and genders, of nations and social groups. There is the destruction of the English handloom weavers, the long degradation of African-American slavery, the day-by-day indignities of women, not to speak of those hole-in-the-corner calamities of obscure individual lives which lack even the dignity of a collective political title. And none of these experiences is abstractly exchangeable with the others. They have no shared essence, other than the fact of suffering. But suffering is a mightily powerful language to share in common, one in which many diverse life-forms can strike up a dialogue. It is a communality of meaning. It is a sign of how far many so-called radicals today have drifted from socialism, if they were ever anywhere near it in the first place, that for them all talk of communality is an insidious mystification. They do not seem to have noticed that difference, diversity and destabilization are the *dernier cri* of the transnational corporations. But a community of suffering is not the same thing as team spirit, chauvinism, homogeneity, organic unity or a despotically normative consensus. For such a community, injury, division and antagonism are the currency you share in common.

Tragedy disconcerts some on the cultural left by its embarrassingly portentous 'depth'. Indeed, some readers will no doubt find this book rather too metaphysical for their taste, with its talk of the demonic and the Satanic, its unfashionable use of theological jargon to throw light on political realities. The political left's silence about religion is curious, given that in terms of compass, appeal and longevity, it is far and away the

most important symbolic form which humanity has ever known. Even sport pales in comparison with it, not to speak of art. Yet those eager to study popular culture pass embarrassedly over this global, longest-lasting, most supremely effective mode of it, while those leftists who take seriously, say, Spinozist rationalism or Schellingian idealism dismiss it in the crudest of gestures as mere false consciousness. One of the few exceptions is the suggestive body of historical work on the relations between capitalism and Protestantism. As for postmodernists, it is rather odd that they should be so respectfully attuned to other cultures, yet such stereotypical Western liberals in their indifference to the religious beliefs which often bulk so large in them. Intellectuals who pride themselves on an informed understanding of, say, Aboriginal cosmology are quite unashamed to display the most red-necked, reductively caricaturing of responses when it comes to Christianity. Those accustomed to discussing almost any other question with admirable dispassionateness can become extravagantly irrational on this one.

In one sense, this is entirely understandable. Religion, and perhaps Christianity in particular, has wreaked untold havoc in human affairs. Bigotry, false consolation, brutal authoritarianism, sexual oppression: these are only a handful of the characteristics for which it stands condemned at the tribunal of history. Its role, with some honourable exceptions, has been to consecrate pillage and canonize injustice. In many of its aspects, religion today represents one of the most odious forms of political reaction on the planet, a blight on human freedom and a buttress of the rich and powerful. But there are also theological ideas which can be politically illuminating, and this book is among other things an exploration of them. So it is perhaps worth alluding at the very beginning to what I argue at the very end – that even if it is not exactly a metaphysical, theological or foundational discourse that the cultural left stands in need of, it would certainly profit it to broaden its theoretical sights and extend the narrow, repetitive circuit of preoccupations in which it is currently caught. Those preoccupations should by no means be abandoned, simply deepened in resonance. This study is among other things a contribution to that end.

Chapter 1

A Theory in Ruins

In everyday language, the word 'tragedy' means something like 'very sad'. We speak of the tragic car crash of the young woman at the busy crossroads, just as the ancient Greeks used the same epithet for a drama about the slaying of a king at a similar place. Indeed, it may well turn out that 'very sad' is also about the best we can do when it comes to the more exalted realm of tragic art.

But surely tragedy involves more than this. Is it not a matter of fate and catastrophe, of calamitous reversals of fortunes, flawed, high-born heroes and vindictive gods, pollution and purgation, deplorable endings, cosmic order and its transgression, a suffering which chastens and transfigures? In any case, isn't this to mistake the tragic for the pathetic? Tragedy may be poignant, but it is supposed to have something fearful about it too, some horrific quality which shocks and stuns. It is traumatic as well as sorrowful. And doesn't the tragic differ from the pathetic in being cleansing, bracing, life-affirming? Susanne K. Langer speaks of the 'sad but non-tragic character of the French classical drama'¹ – non-tragic in her view because such drama deals in misfortune rather than destiny, lacks any rich realization of individual personality, and is rather too enamoured of the rational. Racine and Corneille, she suggests, write 'heroic comedies' rather than tragedies, which will no doubt come as a surprise to anyone who has sat through *Andromache* or *Polyeucte*. The French must have a strange sense of humour.

Tragedy, some will claim, is surely a *technical* term, whereas 'very sad' is plainly not. One can, in fact, use the word in both senses together, as in a sentence like 'What is really tragic about Beckett is that tragedy (heroic resistance, exultant self-affirmation, dignified endurance, the peace which comes from knowing that one's actions are predestined, and the like) is no longer possible'. And one can call something very sad – the peaceful, predictable death of an elderly person, for example – without feeling the need to dub it tragic. One can also be sad over nothing

in particular, in the manner of Freud's melancholia, but it is hard to be tragic over nothing in particular. 'Tragic' is a more transitive term than 'sad'. Moreover, 'tragic' is a strong word, like 'scum' or 'squalid', whereas 'sad' is embarrassingly feeble. Geoffrey Brereton notes that it is hard to come up with a synonym of 'tragic',² a truth stumbled on by a fellow-student of mine at Cambridge, who realized that a suitably withering utterance of the word 'Tragic!' could effortlessly trump almost any other comment, however witty, acerbic or impassioned. The problem is how not to rob the word of this peculiar charge while not being jealously exclusive about it either.

'Tragic' and 'very sad' are indeed different notions; but this is not because the former is technical while the latter is drawn from ordinary language. 'Sad but not tragic' is not the same kind of distinction as 'erratic but not psychotic', 'cocky but not megalomaniac' or 'flabby but not obese'. The long-standing spouse of the expired elderly person might well feel the event as tragic, even though it is neither shocking, fearful, catastrophic, decreed by destiny or the upshot of some hubristic transgression of divine law. 'Tragic' here means something like 'very very sad' for the spouse, and just sad or very sad for everyone else. R. P. Draper tells us that 'there is an immense difference between the educated and uneducated intuitions of the meaning (of tragedy)',³ but it does not follow, as he seems to imagine, that 'educated' intuitions are always the most reliable. One might still protest that tragedy involves more than just sorrow, and in a sense one would be right. But so does sorrow. Sorrow implies value. We do not usually grieve over the fading of a bruise, or feel the scattering of a raindrop to be a melancholic matter. These are not destructions of what we rate as especially valuable.

This is why there are difficulties with Paul Allen's definition of tragedy as 'a story with an unhappy ending that is memorably and upliftingly moving rather than simply sad'.⁴ We shall see later that not all tragedies in fact end unhappily; but it is also hard to know what 'simply sad' means. Can a work be sad but not moving? Perhaps 'upliftingly' moving makes the difference; but it is not clear that *Blasted*, *Endgame* or *A Farewell to Arms* are exactly that, which is no doubt why conservative commentators would refuse them the title of tragedy in the first place. But they would probably confer it on *Titus Andronicus*, *The Jew of Malta* or *Antonio's Revenge*, whose edifying effects are almost as questionable. And Aristotle says nothing of edification. For one kind of traditionalist, Auschwitz is not tragic because it lacks a note of affirmation. But how far is the invigorating quality of a good tragedy that of any successful work of art? And are we enthralled by the sadness, or despite it? Doesn't sadness in any case depend on a sense of human

value which tempers it, so that 'simple sadness' is a somewhat spurious entity?

The truth is that no definition of tragedy more elaborate than 'very sad' has ever worked. It would, to be sure, be false to conclude from this that works or events we call tragedies have nothing significant in common. Nominalism is not the only alternative to essentialism, whatever post-modern theory may consider. On the one hand, there are full-blooded essentialists such as Paul Ricoeur, who believes that 'it is by grasping the essence [of tragedy] in the Greek phenomenon that we can understand all other tragedy as analogous to Greek tragedy'.⁵ For Ricoeur, one assumes, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is best illuminated by the *Agamemnon*. On the other hand, there are nominalists such as Leo Aylan, who declares that there is no such thing as tragedy: 'There are only plays, some of which have always been called tragedies, some of which have usually been called tragedies'.⁶ But this, as with most nominalism, simply pushes the question back a stage: why have these plays always or usually been called tragedies? Why have some of them not been called pastoral or pantomime instead? Raymond Williams notes that 'tragedy is . . . not a single and permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions'.⁷ But though this is true enough, it fails to answer the question of why we use the same term of *Medea* and *Macbeth*, the murder of a teenager and a mining disaster.

In fact, tragedy would seem exemplary of Wittgenstein's 'family resemblances', constituted as it is by a *combinatoire* of overlapping features rather than by a set of invariant forms or contents. There is no need to languish in the grip of a binary opposition and suppose that because the members of a class lack a common essence, they have nothing in common at all. As early as 1908, the American scholar Ashley Thorndike warned his colleagues in his work *Tragedy* that no definition of tragedy was possible beyond the egregiously uninformative 'all plays presenting painful or destructive actions', but few seem to have taken his point. Aristotle's description of tragedy in the *Poetics* in fact makes little reference to destruction, death or calamity; indeed he speaks at one point of a 'tragedy of suffering', almost as though this might be just one species of the genre. The *Poetics* is well into its argument before it begins to use words like 'misfortune'. As an early instance of reception theory, the work defines tragedy rather through its effects, working back from these to what might structurally best achieve them. A wicked person passing from misery to prosperity, for example, cannot be tragic because the process cannot inspire either pity or fear. This leaves open the question of what one calls a work which is structured to arouse pity and fear but in fact doesn't. Is a comedy which fails to arouse the faintest flicker of amusement a poor comedy or not a comedy at all?

The more laconic one's definition, the less chance it has of inadvertently passing over whole swathes of tragic experience. Schopenhauer claims that 'the presentation of a great misfortune is alone essential to [tragedy]',⁸ and such cautiousness is well justified. It is a pity, then, that he goes on to claim that resignation and renunciation are of the essence of the form, a case which forces him to downgrade the ancient Greeks and implausibly upgrade some more stoically minded moderns. Samuel Johnson, no doubt equally eager to sidestep a whole range of thorny issues, defines tragedy in his dictionary as 'a dramatic representation of serious actions', which for all its studied vagueness comes close, as we shall see in a moment, to how the medievals understood the matter. 'Serious', for all its apparent lack of exactness, is a key component of the whole conception, from Aristotle to Geoffrey Chaucer. The former makes what he calls *spoudaios* central to the whole business. Indeed, it is still central as late as Pierre Corneille's *Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique*, which describes tragedy as '*illustre, extraordinaire, sérieuse*'. Horace remarks in 'On the Art of Poetry' that 'tragedy scorns to babble trivialities'.⁹ For a long time, tragedy really means nothing much more than a drama of high seriousness concerning the misfortunes of the mighty. It makes no necessary allusion to fate, purgation, moral flaws, the gods, and the rest of the impedimenta which conservative critics tend to assume are indispensable to it. As F. L. Lucas puts it: tragedy for the ancients means serious drama, for the middle ages a story with an unhappy ending, and for moderns a drama with an unhappy ending.¹⁰ It is hard to get more imprecise than that.

John Orr claims that 'the essential tragic experience is that of irreparable human loss', though he rather tarnishes the impressive terseness of this by going on to develop a more elaborate theory of tragedy as alienation.¹¹ Richard Kuhns speaks with airy anachronism of the conflict between the private, sexual and psychological on the one hand, and the public, political and obligatory on the other, as being central to all tragedy, including the ancient Greeks.¹² It is not clear in what sense the sexual or psychological were 'private' for classical antiquity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for tragedy 'extreme distress or sorrow', though ironically it goes on to illustrate this definition with the sentence 'the shooting was a tragic accident', which for some classical tragic theory would be an oxymoron. Tragedies, on this traditional view, cannot be accidental.

The *OED* also gives 'pity or sorrow' for 'pathos', thus bringing it close to the common sense of tragedy. There are, however, grammatical differences between the two terms. For the informal meaning of 'pathetic', the *OED* offers 'his ball control was pathetic', which one could hardly

replace with 'his ball control was tragic' even in the lower ranks of the football league. We say that someone looked sad but not, without a slight sense of strain, that she looked tragic, since the former term tends to denote a response and the latter a condition. But Walter Kaufmann, in one of the most perceptive modern studies of tragedy, refuses to distinguish between the tragic and the merely pitiful, and doubts that the ancient Greeks or Shakespeare did either.¹³ He does, however, suggest that for the classical view suffering has to be 'philosophically' interesting to qualify as tragic, which would no doubt rule out such philosophically trivial matters as having your feet chopped off or your eyeballs gouged out.

For all these grim caveats, critics have persisted in their hunt for the Holy Grail of a faultless definition of the subject. Kenneth Burke's definition of tragedy in *A Grammar of Motives*, like Francis Fergusson's in his immensely influential *The Idea of a Theater*, involves an essential moment of tragic recognition or *anagnorisis*,¹⁴ but while this may be true of Oedipus, it holds only doubtfully for Othello and hardly at all for Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. In the case of Phaedra, no such recognition is needed because everything has been intolerably clear from the outset. David Hume, by contrast, believes that an individual 'is the more worthy of compassion the less sensible he is of his miserable condition', finding something peculiarly poignant about a wretchedness which seemed unaware of itself.¹⁵ Georg Simmel observes that 'in general we call a relationship tragic – in contrast to merely sad or extrinsically destructive – when the destructive forces directed against some being spring from the deepest levels of that very being'.¹⁶ We shall have occasion to revisit this insistence on the immanent, ironic or dialectical nature of the tragic, in contrast with the purely extrinsic or accidental; but it is worth remarking now that, like every other general formula in the field, it holds only for some tragedy and not for the rest. The downfall of Goethe's Faust, or Pentheus in Euripides's *The Bacchae*, may be sprung in just this way, but it is hard to argue a similar case about the death of Shakespeare's Cordelia or Tolstoy's Anna Karenina.

A. C. Bradley holds that a tragedy is 'any spiritual conflict involving spiritual waste',¹⁷ while in a brave but imprudent flourish, Oscar Mandel offers as an all-inclusive definition of the form a situation in which 'a protagonist who would command our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering'.¹⁸ This, for all its White House bureaucratese and

judicious sub-clausal hedging, falsely assumes with Simmel and others that tragedy is always immanent or ironic, staking too much on what the Greeks call *peripeteia*. It also throws in for good measure an emphasis on necessity which, as we shall see later, is equally unwarranted. Aristotle, for example, is for the most part silent on the question. Leo Aylen believes that tragedy is largely about death, while generously conceding that some tragedies are not. In an insight of positively Kantian intricacy, he informs us that in the face of death, 'Certain things become much less important, others much more'.¹⁹ For Geoffrey Brereton, 'a tragedy is a final and impressive disaster due to an unforeseen or unrealized failure involving people who command respect and sympathy'.²⁰ This suggests that we do not find tragic those for whom we have limited sympathies, a common but debatable proposition of tragic theory. It also implies rather oddly that some disasters are unimpressive.

In *The Case for Tragedy*, a riposte to the death-of-tragedy school, Mark Harris defines the form rather maladroitly as 'the projection of personal and collective values which are potentially or actually put in jeopardy by the course of the dramatic action'.²¹ This tells us remarkably little, though the title of the book tells us rather more. It is revealing that critics like Harris should feel the need to claim, in defensive, mildly anxious tones, that tragedy can indeed still thrive in contemporary conditions, as though it would be an unquestionable loss if it could not. It might well prove a loss, but one cannot merely assume the fact. For some, this would be rather like insisting that it is indeed still possible to be cruel and rapacious in the modern era, despite the cynics who would demean the age by denying it. John Holloway tells us with laborious unhelpfulness that 'every tragedy or near-tragedy is a serious play, in which the characters, including the protagonist, are likely to speak earnestly about the world, or about how it works, or about how they would like it to do so'.²² It is not easy to see on this view how a tragedy differs from a congress on global warming. Walter Kerr offers us 'an investigation into the possibilities of human freedom' as his particular tragic essence, a view which may have rather more to do with American ideology and rather less with Büchner or Lorca than he suspects.²³ One threat to such freedom is the dogmatism which proposes it as the central *topos* of all tragedy. Tragedy, in Schlegelian fashion, allows us to pursue 'that longing for the infinite which is inherent in our being', and occurs 'when man uses his freedom without reservation'.²⁴ Its opposite begins to sound less like comedy than the Soviet Union.

Kerr is forced by his libertarian definition to dismiss as non-tragic works which do not affirm freedom, and where destruction is not part of an evolutionary process leading to new life. Since he can find precious

little of this in the modern period, he ends up denying the possibility of modern tragedy altogether. The modern epoch lacks finality and determinacy, both tragic prerequisites, and freedom has been undermined by both Darwinian and Freudian determinism. Gripped by a Western ideology of untrammelled liberty, along with a remorseless American upbeatness, Kerr sees tragedy as springing from 'a fiercely optimistic society', in need of 'arrogance', robustness and certainty.²⁵ Tragedy, in short, begins to sound a little like the US Marine corps. But tragic Man, self-confident, unquestioning and spontaneous, has now been subverted by various squalid determinisms; and in denying freedom, we have despatched tragedy along with it. Kerr is apparently in no doubt that tragedy is a thoroughly excellent thing, an injuriousness which must be endured if human progress is to thrive. The form, however, may be less extinct than playing possum: in a final rousing burst of New World hopefulness, Kerr suggests that the apparent demise of tragic art may itself be simply a stage in its evolution. We can thus look gleefully forward to more mayhem, misery and massacres on the stages of the future.

Dorothea Krook, who stands somewhere on the far right wing of tragic theory, holds that tragedy portrays an action of universal import involving a hero of some considerable stature who is flawed, who comes to grief on account of this deficiency, so that the play ends badly, and in doing so shows something of the power of the gods or destiny, while revealing human suffering to be part of a meaningful pattern.²⁶ Here, perhaps, is what we might call the popular conception of tragedy, if such a thing exists. Or if not exactly popular, then popular-academic. It is thus all the more unfortunate that, as we shall see, hardly a word of this definition holds generally true. It constrains Krook to conclude along with George Steiner that Ibsen, for example, does not write authentic tragedies, just as Mandel, absurdly, manoeuvres himself into denying tragic status to *Romeo and Juliet* and the plays of Webster and Tourneur.

I. A. Richards, who considers tragedy to be the greatest, rarest thing in literature, also believes that most Greek tragedy, and Elizabethan tragedy apart from Shakespeare, is 'pseudo-tragedy'.²⁷ Other critics rule out works in which the protagonist's downfall is accidental, or in which she deserves her doom, or in which she is merely a victim. It is rather like defining a vacuum cleaner in a way which unaccountably omits the Hoover. If one comes up with a supposedly universal definition of tragedy which turns out to cover only five or six plays, the simplest option is to proclaim that other so-called tragedies are bogus specimens of the genre. Samuel Johnson, on the other hand, doubted that what Shakespeare wrote was strictly tragedy, but thought the plays none the worse for that.

Another difficulty with defining tragedy is that, like 'nature' or 'culture', the term floats ambiguously between the descriptive and the normative. For most commentators, as we shall see in the next chapter, tragedy is not only a matter of value but, strangely, the supreme mode of it. But the word can also just mean a lot of blood, death and destruction, regardless of its moral connotations and without involving much complex interiority. In early modern times it could simply be a synonym of death or ruin, as in Thomas Kyd's 'I'll there begin their endless tragedy' (*The Spanish Tragedy*, Act 4, sc. 5). In this sense of the word, you can tell whether something is tragic just by looking at it, as you can tell whether a parrot is dead by prodding it. Even with the sound turned all the way down, one would know in this sense of the term that a television play was a tragedy. If the body-count, as at the close of *The Spanish Tragedy*, hovers around nine, exactly a third of the play's total cast, then the spectacle is as indubitably tragic as one with an enormous number of belly laughs is incontrovertibly comic. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, a play which seems quite non-tragic in outlook and sensibility, qualifies as a tragedy because of its bloodiness, even though the first part is not tragic at all and was written with no sense that it would have a sequel. Something of the same goes for Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, with its concluding havoc, or Marston's morbid, brutal and sadistic *Antonio's Revenge*. Aristotle thought epic could be tragic; but though it trades in death and destruction, it doesn't use them as the occasion for a reflection on justice, fate and suffering in general, in the manner of a Sophocles. It is thus tragic in the descriptive rather than normative sense.

Or think of the splendid extravaganzas of Seneca – *Thyestes*, *Medea*, *Phaedra* and the rest – with their bombast and carnage, their vision of the world as vile, bloody and chaotic and of men and women as betraying a bottomless capacity for cruelty. In this theatre of the grotesque, action takes precedence over meaning, rather as it does when comedy tilts over into farce. It is what Northrop Frye dubs 'low mimetic tragedy'.²⁸ For this vein of art, tragedy can just mean something sombre and sorrowful; it need not satisfy such normative demands as that the suffering be largely unmerited, preordained, non-contingently caused, inflicted on a pre-eminent figure, partly his or her responsibility, revelatory of divine order, exultantly life-affirming, conducive to dignity and self-knowledge and so on. Someone who clung to the normative sense of the word could always exclaim 'I don't regard *that* as tragic!' no matter how much blood was being spilt and torment inflicted. From the normative standpoint, only certain kinds of death, strife, suffering and destruction, treated in certain ways, qualify for the accolade of tragedy. Tragedy here is more a matter of response than of occurrence. And it is true that almost nobody views

destruction as inherently negative, that only the blander sort of liberal regards conflict as intrinsically undesirable, and that most people do not consider death to be *ipso facto* calamitous. For Aristotle and most other critics, the death of a villain would not be tragic, whereas for a certain strain of existentialist philosophy death is tragic as such, regardless of its cause, mode, subject or effect. All the same, 'normative' or 'moral' tragedy often betrays a certain sensationalist subtext, an aura of violence or exoticism, of sweetly heightened sensations and covert erotic pleasures, which links it reluctantly to its melodramatic sibling. As with most high-toned phenomena, it conceals some rather less reputable roots.

Even so, there is one significant contrast between 'descriptive' and 'normative' tragedy. The former type of art tends to be sombre, gloomy, even at times nihilistic, and this, for its more normative counterpart, is exactly what tragedy cannot allow. It is a curious irony that for much traditional tragic theory, wretchedness and despondency threaten to subvert tragedy rather than enhance it. The more cheerless the drama, the less tragic its status. This is because tragedy must embody value; but it is odd, even so, that an art form which portrays human anguish and affliction should have been so often brandished as a weapon to combat a typically 'modern' pessimism and passivity. Tragedy for a great many commentators is all about cheering us up.

A further problem of definition springs from the fact that 'tragedy' can have a triple meaning. Like comedy, it can refer at once to works of art, real-life events and world-views or structures of feeling. You can be comic without being optimistic, or comic but not funny, like Dante's best-known work. As far as the art/life distinction goes, we do, after all, inherit the concept of tragedy from a social order which made less of a hard-and-fast distinction between the poetic and the historical than we do, and had no conception of the autonomously aesthetic. Indeed, it was a civilization which once based a territorial claim on a verse from the *Iliad*. The modern age, by contrast, distinguishes more sharply between art and life, as well as between artefacts and ways of seeing. We would not generally speak of a poem as a tragedy, despite the writings of Milton, Mandelstam and Akhmatova, though we might speak of one as embodying a tragic world-view. For some death-of-tragedy theorists, we are now 'post-tragic' exactly because we are post-ideological, bereft of all synoptic vision. Tragic art, on this theory, presupposes a tragic vision – a bleak view of the world, an absolute faith for which you are prepared to die, or at least a dominant ideology to be heroically resisted. Like almost every other general view of tragedy, this one identifies the entire mode with one kind of action, and then proceeds to write off whatever fails to conform to it.

For obituarists of tragedy like George Steiner, only tragic world-views can finally sustain legitimately tragic works of art.²⁹ If the modern epoch has witnessed the death of tragedy, it is among other things because its two dominant *Weltanschauungen*, Marxism and Christianity, are judged by Steiner (mistakenly, as we shall see) to be inhospitable to tragic insight. Raymond Williams, in contrast, sees the twentieth century as under the sway of three essentially tragic ideologies: Marxism, Freudianism and existentialism.³⁰ Art and world-views, however, do not sit so neatly together as Steiner imagines. Aeschylus's general vision, unlike perhaps that of his two great colleagues, would not seem to be particularly tragic, to say nothing of the sentimental optimism which underlies the staggeringly popular tragic dramas of Voltaire, or the finest theatre-pieces of a Dryden. Scott, Edgeworth and George Eliot all bear witness to specific tragedies, while being for the most part progressivist in their general outlook. Scott, chronicler of the tragic downfall of Scottish clan society, is also a zealot of moderation, the *via media* and a more civilized future.

For Murray Krieger, by contrast, the problem is the reverse: we lack a tragic art because there is too much of a tragic outlook abroad, not too little. The role of tragic art in our time is to contain and defuse an otherwise perilously overweening tragic vision. A 'demoniac' world-view, existing in churlish defiance of all rational, ethical and civic order, currently lacks a tragic art which might discipline and absorb it. The taming of tragedy, the recuperation of the Dionysian by the Apollonian, the holding of the tragic and the civic in precarious tension, has become less feasible in our anarchic times, and this is a potent source of political anxiety.³¹ If social disaffection is to be managed, so Krieger's case implies, it must be sublimated; but since such disaffection also undermines the civic forms of such sublimation, tragedy is unable to repair tragedy, and we remain caught in a vicious circle.

There is also the question of whether tragedy is always an *event*. The word has resonances of cataclysm and disaster, and one dictionary definition speaks of a 'great and sudden misfortune'; Geoffrey Brereton thinks that it has to involve 'unexpected and striking circumstances', which would rule out a great many deaths.³² But it may also describe a more chronic, less ostentatious sort of condition than Brereton supposes. Tragedy as a matter of being knocked abruptly sideways evidently lends itself to effective theatre; indeed, such theatre enters interestingly into the very description of the mode, in the shape of sudden reversals, ironic backfirings, condensed, crisis-ridden action, a stringent economy of passion and the like. But there are steady-state as well as big-bang tragedies, in the form of the sheer dreary persistence of certain hopeless, obscure conditions, like a dull bruise in the flesh. One thinks of the

exacting Kantian duty which impels the heroine of James's *Portrait of a Lady* to return to her profoundly unlovable husband, or the desolate vistas of time stretching before the jilted Catherine Sloper at the end of *Washington Square*.

These less eye-catching, spectacular brands of tragedy, which George Eliot considered at least as excruciating as the more manifest forms of torment, are perhaps more appropriate to the novel than to the stage. But there is also, say, the love-lorn pathos of the raddled, alcoholic Blanche DuBois at the end of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or Lavinia Mannon at the close of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, whose problem is precisely that they will linger futilely on. If all of these examples are of women, it is doubtless because for them tragedy is typically less heroic crisis than inveterate condition, a blighted existence rather than a bungled action. There are those, in other words, for whom, as Walter Benjamin soberly reminds us, history constitutes one long emergency, for whom the exceptional (high tragedy) is the quotidian norm. As early as Euripides, so Adrian Poole comments, 'crisis is permanent'.³³ Emile Zola writes in *Nana* of 'the tragic climaxes of everyday life', and such extremities may be less tolerable precisely because they are routinely predictable, rather than abrupt, incalculable irruptions from some other world.

Alasdair MacIntyre once compared the wranglings of the modern age over moral questions to someone seeking forlornly to decipher fragments of writing inherited from some previous epoch and now almost wholly devoid of context.³⁴ Much the same can be said of the various laborious medieval attempts to reconstruct the idea of tragedy, given the absence at the time of Aristotle's *Poetics*.³⁵ Most medieval authors considered tragedy to be an obsolete genre, just as death-of-tragedy ideologues do today, and very few regarded themselves as making an addition to it. There was considerable, sometimes comic, confusion over what tragedy was all about. There were times when all the medieval era seemed to know was that it was an especially serious form – Ovid remarks in his *Tristia* that it surpasses every other form of writing in its solemnity – along with the fact that it concerned the misfortunes of the high and mighty. Theophrastus had defined tragedy as representing the fortunes of heroes, and this high-life emphasis is a constant factor in medieval accounts, often more important than notions of fate, downfall, transgression, innocence, irreparable injury and the like.

The grammarian Placidus writes around the turn of the sixth century of tragedy as 'a genre of poetry in which poets describe the grievous fall of kings and unheard of crimes, or the affairs of the gods, in high-sounding words'.³⁶ 'High-sounding' could make tragedy sound akin to

bombast, and this appears to have been one widespread meaning of the term. Thomas Aquinas seems to use it in this sense. This partly pejorative meaning survives at least as late as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, in which Wilhelm speaks of tragedy as 'representing high social station and nobility of character by a certain stiffness and affectation'.³⁷ Aquinas also appears to have thought that tragedy meant 'speech about war', whereas comedy was speech about civic affairs. Averroes, by contrast, seems to think the word synonymous with 'praise' – the praise of suffering virtue. That he was also a commentator on Aristotle's *Poetics* suggests a certain tragicomic failure of communication between antiquity and its aftermath, as though Marx had imagined that by 'dialectic' Hegel had meant a regional form of speech.

Dante seems to have thought tragedy neither invariably dramatic nor especially concerned with sorrow and disaster. Instead, he too defined it in terms of its high seriousness – of noble verse forms, elevated construction, excellent vocabulary and profundity of substance. The *Aeneid* he considered a tragic work of art, even though it contains more triumph than catastrophe and shifts from the latter to the former rather than (as Aristotle prescribes) vice versa. 'Horrific crimes of the great' would be a summary slogan of much medieval usage, rather as it would be of much of the tabloid press today. Tragedy was really a kind of exposé of ruling-class corruption, for the ideological purpose of rendering the lives of high-living villains abominable to the populace; and its stress, unlike that of Aristotle, falls accordingly on deserved rather than unmerited disgrace. 'Imposing persons, great fears, and disastrous endings' is the nutshell definition of the Roman commentator Donatus.³⁸ This tradition survives as late as George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesie* (1589), for which tragic art deals in the lust, infamy and licentiousness of the powerful, who are punished for their sins for the moral edification of the audience. It teaches the mutability of fortune, and God's assured vengeance on wicked lives. There is no question here of an iron fate, of Aristotle's tolerably virtuous hero, of a pitiful identification with him, of the good suffering excessively, or of the moral dubiousness of the higher powers. Tragedy dealt in sorrowful matters and great iniquities, and among the Romans sometimes took the form of a danced or pantomimed performance, in which both Nero and St Augustine are said to have taken part.

In the sixth century an apparently eccentric meaning of the word 'tragedy' springs up with Boethius, who uses it in the context of Christ's Incarnation to denote a kind of fall or come-down. He speaks of Christ's assuming flesh as 'a tremendous tragedy', no doubt in the Pauline sense of a *kenosis* or self-emptying rather than any sort of disaster. Boethius's quaint use of the word is true to the classical theological view that the

Incarnation involves a loss or self-estrangement on God's part as well as a fullness of presence. Hegel will later see Spirit's process of self-objectification in much the same tragic light. Perhaps such maverick uses of the word resulted in part from what was now its near-indecipherability. The medievals knew that the word 'tragedy' derived from 'goat', and that (since Horace says so) a goat was the prize for which ancient tragedians competed. It is not clear whether they were aware that there is no word for tragedy in any language other than ancient Greek, all other uses being adopted from this; and it does not seem to have occurred to them that, as Gerald Else suggests, the word 'tragedian' might originally have been a joke at the expense of the dramatists, meaning 'goat-bard'.³⁹ Some of them speculated with bizarre implausibility that the prize in question was a goat because of the filth of the artistic subject-matter, while others believed that a goat was actually sacrificed to the tragic poets, or that the word came from goatskin footwear which the actors wore in recital. A fourteenth-century commentator, Francesco da Buti, ingeniously speculated that the goat was a symbol of tragedy because it looks princely from the front, with its imposing horns and beard, but has a filthy, naked rear-end. We shall see later, in investigating the ambivalence of the tragic scapegoat, that this idea is not quite as fanciful as it sounds.

Medieval scholars were heirs to a tradition that tragedy evolved from prosperity to adversity, an emphasis which can be found in Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*. But this lineage said nothing à la Aristotle about the moral status of the tragic protagonist, as indeed Chaucer does not. John of Garland distils the received medieval wisdom around 1220 with his comment that tragedy is written in a grave style, sets forth shameful and criminal deeds, and begins in joy but ends in tears. But tragedy in medieval society could occasionally mean a complaint or song of lamentation (as in 'the tragedy of his miseries'), and this game of Chinese whispers from ancients to medievals reaches its surreal consummation with the fourteenth-century English scholar John Arderne, who calls the Bible a tragedy, probably meaning no more than a serious sort of book. In a final grotesque twist of misprision, Arderne recommends the scriptures and other so-called tragedies as a source of humorous tales.

In the twelfth century, Otto of Freising employs the term 'tragedy' of an account of real-life disaster, probably one of the earliest such uses, remarking of the report in question that it was 'written miserably and excellently in the manner of a tragedy'.⁴⁰ This conjunction of misery and excellence says much about a familiar paradox of the form, rather as one might commend a horror movie by stressing how disgusting it is. Otto's comment, however, implies that the real-life usage is derivative from the

artistic. William of Malmesbury also gives the word a real-life meaning in an account of the shipwreck and death of William the Conqueror's son, though perhaps with the theatrical sense of the term also in mind. Thomas Kyd, as we have seen, uses the word in *The Spanish Tragedy* to mean actual ruin, though the play draws several times on the artistic sense of the term as well. Indeed, Kyd's drama merges real-life and theatrical tragedy in its very structure, as Hieronimo uses a stage play to pursue his actual revenge, all of which is in turn given a choric framing. 'Tragedy', then, would appear to evolve in a three-step process from describing a play or piece of writing to denoting an account of historical adversity, and from there to designating historical adversities themselves. In the best Wildean fashion, tragedy begins as art, which life then imitates. And the earlier real-life uses of the word still retain a resonance of its origins in stage or story, which can later drop out altogether. The word thus progresses from art, to life with an echo of art, to life.

For most people today, tragedy means an actual occurrence, not a work of art. Indeed, some of those who nowadays use the word of actual events are probably unaware that it has an artistic sense at all; so that whereas some conservative critics claim that it is unintelligible to speak of real life as tragic, some of their fellow citizens who freely use the word of famines and drug overdoses might be puzzled to hear it used of a film or novel. Even so, when the *OED* speaks of tragedy as 'an unhappy or fatal event or series of events in real life; a dreadful calamity or disaster', it is careful to note that this is a merely *figurative* employment of the word, dating from no earlier than the sixteenth century. So real-life tragedy is a metaphorical derivation from the actual artistic thing, a view which converts an historical development into an ontological priority. For a host of exponents of tragic theory, there can be no more shameful naivety than confusing tragedy in art with tragedy in life, despite Freud's teaching that the most tumultuous crisis of our early lives is scripted by an ancient tragic drama. Indeed, for a good many critics, there can be no real-life tragedy at all. This is one major reason why 'tragedy' cannot mean 'very sad', since the former is an aesthetic term and the latter an everyday one. 'In real life there are no tragedies', declares W. McNeile Dixon, who as a cloistered academic might perhaps have been speaking for himself.⁴¹

But he certainly speaks for a whole raft of commentators. Even the radical Franco Moretti denies that the tragic exists in historical life, and reserves the term 'tragedy' only for representations of that existence.⁴² One reason for this restriction of the term is plain enough. If tragic art for conservative theorists is a supremely affirmative affair, and if this is not wholly on account of its artistic form, then they can avoid the embarrassment of having to extol real-life cataclysms as equally positive by the

barefaced but simple device of refusing to define them as tragic at all. It is not that one is being hard-hearted, so the argument goes; it is just that tragedy is a technical affair, quite different from run-of-the-mill calamity. Those who dissent from this proposition are then regarded as mildly obtuse, like someone who accuses a surgeon of sadism for extracting a diseased lung. All-out nuclear warfare would not be tragic, but a certain way of representing it in art might well be. Behind this apparently lunatic notion, which only the remarkably well-educated could conceivably have hatched, lie a series of false assumptions: that real life is shapeless, and art alone is orderly; that only in art can the value released by destruction be revealed; that real-life suffering is passive, ugly and undignified, whereas affliction in art has an heroic splendour of resistance; that art has a gratifying inevitability lacking in life.

In his *Experiments in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis writes in witheringly patriotic style of the 'uninterestingness of (real-life) grief', an 'uncouth mixture of agony and littleness' which is bereft of 'grandeur or finality' and strikes one merely as 'dull and depressing'.⁴³ Lewis's writings on the premature death of his wife do not seem to view the event as dull and uninteresting, though other people's real lives are perhaps more uncouth than one's own. A. C. Bradley agrees with Lewis's case: 'A tale, for example, of a man slowly worn to death by disease, poverty, little cares, sordid vices, petty persecutions, however piteous or dreadful it might be, would not be tragic in the Shakespearian sense'.⁴⁴ Lewis and Bradley have the enthusiastic support of Ulrich Simon, who gravely informs us that 'disablement, genetic malformation, crippling diseases, may torment the victims and destroy their families, but they are not tragic'.⁴⁵ No doubt this judgement would come as a blessed relief to the diseased and disabled, as one cross less for them to bear. It seems an odd note to strike in a work about Christianity. Simon proceeds to list other palpably non-tragic events such as floods, earthquakes which wipe out whole communities, genocide or the battle of the Somme. The Holocaust was not tragic, but rather the death of tragedy. Tragedy must be more than mere victimage; it must involve a courageous resistance to one's fate, of the kind we witness in the great tragic works of art.

There was, of course, heroic resistance to Nazism on the part of some Jews. And plenty of people battle bravely against floods, disease, disablement, genocide and the like. Along with many other commentators on tragedy, Simon makes the curious assumption that such resistance flourishes only in art; that without it there is no revelation of value; and that without such value there is no tragedy. Tragedy is held to be about the response to an event, not just the event itself; but this surely cannot mark the difference between art and life, since the distinction is as hard