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*Chapter 1*

# Approaching the subject

Tragedy is the art form created to confront the most difficult experiences we face: death, loss, injustice, thwarted passion, despair. From ancient Greek theatre up to the most recent plays, playwrights have found, in tragic drama, a means to seek explanation for disaster. Questions about the causes of suffering, which are raised in each culture, are posed powerfully in tragedy. Indeed, the rules and conventions of tragic drama arguably make the dramatisation of those questions possible. Tragedy, we might say, attempts to stage what might otherwise, by virtue of its extreme, harrowing nature, be considered unstageable. Tragedians have traditionally used the pattern and order of aesthetic form in order to test whether such order exists in the world they represent or whether surplus, inexplicable suffering somehow eludes them. So the theatre (literally 'the place for watching things') allows us to bear witness to the worst and most exemplary moments of sorrow and desperation that face us as human beings. This activity is something which we are prepared to pay money for, something that we traditionally admire, for the aesthetic and moral good which tragic representation can afford us.

But tragedy is also a word we continually encounter in the media. Just this week, as I write this paragraph, a five-year-old child has died in Cornwall in a 'beach tragedy', an investigation into the 'tragic police shooting' of an innocent Brazilian man in London has been made public, two 'tragic planes crashes' in Greece and Venezuela have been reported, and the world is witness to the private anguish of families forced from their homes in the Gaza Strip. These are individual tragedies, but meanwhile wars, genocide and natural disasters kill thousands of people every year, on a scale which is almost unimaginable to those not involved. While the 'beach tragedy' of Abbie Livingstone-Nurse has grabbed tabloid headlines, for instance, the fatal bombing of forty people in Baghdad this week barely merits a mention. And this is not even to begin to describe the forgotten millions who are wiped out yearly by disease, starvation and the effects of poverty. Yet these events too are described as 'tragedies', if and when reports are published.



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How can we reconcile these different senses of the term, 'tragedy'? The common use of the term suggests that it is the event (the death, the loss) which is tragic. But the dramatic sense of the term suggests that it is the attempt to give the event aesthetic form on stage which lies at the heart of tragedy. Moreover, the common use of the term suggests that there are few rules – other than the media's responsibility to protect public sensibilities from the horrific and shocking – and that a tragic event is simply devastating in its emotional power. The dramatic sense of the term, on the other hand, suggests that there are generic expectations which give a pattern to the representation on stage and make it bearable.

So a book on tragedy, first and foremost, raises the issue of the relationship between literature and life. This is a matter which has long been debated among writers on the subject. Arguing for a narrowly aesthetic definition, W. B. Yeats differentiated between the profound tragedy of a Greek or Shakespearean hero and merely 'some blunderer [who] has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road'.[1] Following this tradition, George Steiner argued that tragedy, or, in other words, the concept of 're-enact[ing] private anguish on a public stage' is narrowly ancient Greek and that, 'till the moment of their decline, the tragic forms are Hellenic'.[2] More recently Timothy Reiss has reiterated this distinction between tragedy and the tragic, quoting the French philosopher Henri Gouhier in his support: 'Tragedy belongs to literature and to theatre, the tragic belongs to life'. Tragedy, Reiss goes on to argue, is 'a kind of discourse, intended for stage performance', which is designed to mitigate the potential 'absence of significance' found in everyday life.[3] In other words, each period of history has been faced with new experiences which might challenge understanding, but the sense of bewilderment is contained by the staging of tragic drama. Tragedy, therefore, must not be confused with experience.

Countering this aesthetic definition, the Marxist critics Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton charge those who are prepared to divorce the term 'tragedy' from its normal, everyday usage with being elitist and indifferent to ordinary suffering. In order to deny the fact that the demise of ordinary people might be termed tragic, critics like Steiner make a distinction between what they consider 'universal principles' of tragedy (that is, models based on classical tragedy) and the 'merely accidental'. But Williams shows that events which are dismissed as 'merely accidental' actually arise from widespread conditions of social injustice and exploitation. 'The events which are not seen as tragic are deep in the pattern of our own culture: war, famine, work, traffic, politics', Williams writes. 'To see no ethical content or human agency in such events, or to say that we cannot connect them with general meanings . . . is to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy.'[4] Eagleton, meanwhile, points out that

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the 'lunatic' distinction between aesthetic tragedy and merely terrible events in life is based on the false assumption that 'real life is shapeless and art alone is orderly'. This so-called orderliness allows the tragedies on stage to end in a positive manner, since, as Eagleton comments sarcastically, 'only in art can the value released by destruction be revealed'.[5]

At the heart of the debate is the question of whether the definition of tragedy ultimately depends upon its content or its form. Is it enough, in other words, to say simply that tragedies are sad, that they deal with misery and despair and fear? Or should we rather seek structural features which seem to recur in the plots of tragedies and which therefore might appear to be essential to the genre? According to Reiss, for example, tragedy is a formal, aesthetic structure, a 'machine' for making sense of things. 'Our emotions are not to be confused with that machine', he maintains. But Williams, writing in 1966, rejected the coldly academic approach to the subject represented most recently by Reiss, and argued instead that tragedy is defined by its effect on people, by the normal, commonplace but still unbearable emotions of grief and devastation. 'In the case of ordinary death and suffering, when we see mourning and lament, when we see men and women breaking under their actual loss, it is at least not self-evident to say that we are not in the presence of tragedy', he maintains (p. 47). Williams' interpretation of tragedy implies that there is not a narrow canon of tragic drama, utterly separated from our experience of tragic events in everyday life. Instead his analysis of tragic drama or novels is informed by his understanding of the structures of political, social life and how we are shaped by them; our response to aesthetic tragedy shares important correspondences with our response to particular crises – political, ethical, social – which occur in history.

There are certain features which seem to recur in different tragedies. Many plays work up towards a particular crisis and explore the subsequent feeling of irreversibility. Many tragic plays dramatise loss, whether that be the loss of life or simply the loss of hope. Most plays include some element of conflict, chiefly between one individual and the world, fate or the gods. But not all plays, which are universally regarded as tragedies, contain these features. And none of these plot features means anything if they do not stir emotion. To be mechanistic or rigidly prescriptive about it is to deny the power of tragedy and to fail to explain its recurring hold over the cultural imagination.

Although the definition of tragedy must take account of both form and content – and some tragedies derive their power precisely for their failure to meet these generic expectations – I believe that ultimately the source of tragedy lies in its capacity to elicit the audience's response. Indeed this is why tragedy has traditionally been contemplated in the theatre, since this is the place where

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1. Tractor displaying the victims of civil war in a breakaway region of Moldova, former USSR, 1992. © Robert Wallis

licensed witness takes place and is positively demanded. Even the response to real tragedies often is managed in ways which shares correspondences with tragic theatre. During the civil war in the former Soviet republic of Moldova, following the break-up of the Soviet Union, one local man confronted the savage slaughter of his family in a way that the ancient Greeks in their theatre in Athens would have recognised. Loading the bodies onto his farm trailer, he drove around the village to parade the corpses to its inhabitants. 'Look', he was saying, 'this is what was done to my family. This is the tragic result of this civil war.' His trailer became an improvised *ekkyklema*, the ancient stage machinery which allowed the bodies of the tragic heroes to be displayed to the audience. 'Do not seek to justify or explain their killing', the man was saying, 'but bear witness to this atrocity'.[6]

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According to the Spanish mystic philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, in *The Tragic Sense of Life*, written in the early twentieth century, the tragic sense arises in the opposition between experience and understanding. 'For living is one thing and knowing is another', he writes. 'As we shall see, perhaps there is such an opposition between the two that we may say that everything vital is anti-rational, not merely irrational, and that everything rational is anti-vital. And this is the basis of the tragic sense of life.'[7] Characters in tragedy are driven by the quest to reconcile this opposition, a reconciliation which the tragic form, by its structural order, seems to make possible, and then they are buffeted by the relentless realisation of the impossibility of this reconciliation. King Lear, for example, tries to understand rationally the nature of love or the notion of sovereignty or, indeed, the 'cause' of his suffering. But his quest is thwarted by the cruelty of events and the indifference of the elements to his questions, and by the end he can only barely survive, without rational understanding: 'I fear I am not in my perfect mind' (IV.vii.64). No wonder that the poet John Keats referred to 'the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay' in 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again', since 'dispute' between passion and damnation, or between meaningful understanding and meaningless annihilation, lies at the heart of the play's business. But, despite the title of Keats' famous poem, the play was created to be *watched*, not read. Indeed the play's insistence on knowledge and perception, from the king's declamatory first line '*Know* that we have divided in three our kingdom' (I.i.35–6 (my italics)) to the physical gouging of Gloucester's eyes on stage, ensures that Unamuno's 'opposition' remains at the forefront of the audience's consciousness, demanding that they bear witness both to the quest and its futility. Spectators have repeatedly testified to the unwatchability of *King Lear*, from Charles Lamb's 'to see an old man tottering about the stage . . . has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting', to A. C. Bradley's 'the mere physical horror of [the blinding of Gloster] would in the theatre be a sensation so violent as to overpower the purely tragic emotions . . . *King Lear* is too huge for the stage.'[8] However, the act of witnessing a play like *King Lear* – and acknowledging the difficulty of witnessing it – is, for Unamuno, also part of the tragic process, along with Lear's experience. 'The remedy', he writes of the tragic sense, 'is to consider our mortal destiny without flinching, to fasten our gaze upon the gaze of the Sphinx, for it is thus that the malevolence of its spell is discharmed'.[9]

If tragedy is deemed to be a matter of response, rather than purely aesthetic structure, then it immediately has implications for ethics. What is the purpose of stirring our emotions? We may feel sympathy for the hero's pain or shock at the cruelties inflicted on stage – Aristotle's pity or fear – but these feelings must have a function if the experience of tragedy is to offer anything other than a cheap thrill. Eagleton makes a passionate case for the politics of compassion. Tragedy,

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according to him, plays a crucial role in revealing 'our frailty and vulnerability, in which any authentic politics must be anchored'.[10] The recognition that we all share the capacity to suffer, that suffering offers a 'communality of meaning', constitutes the first step in formulating resistance to oppression and forcing political change. Tragedy can awaken this recognition. But of course this ethical claim for tragedy is complicated by the fact that we are distanced from events or from what is represented on stage, as much as we are connected. Witnessing tragedy engages the onlooker's emotional participation but also his independent curiosity. 'I find the joy of life in its cruel and powerful struggles', wrote the Swedish playwright Strindberg, with scientific detachment, 'and my enjoyment comes from getting to know something'.[11]

These questions about the appropriate response to suffering and the ethics of tragedy are perhaps more relevant than ever now, when we are bombarded with pictures of horror from areas around the world devastated by war and when the virtual image is hard to distinguish from the real. In the television age, as Guy Debord wrote, we live in a 'society of spectacle'.[12] We have closer access to atrocity than ever before, in that images of war and famine can be beamed across the world almost immediately, and yet we are removed from the horror of these experiences because they are mediated by cameras. We can flick channels or turn them off. So insidious has become the influence of the moving image upon our imaginations that many people reportedly compared the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11th with a horror movie. The planes swooped in towards the twin towers and the buildings collapsed again and again as the film clip was repeated endlessly on television. The additional fact that it was not possible to see the horror inside the planes or the buildings also gave the event a strange quality as spectacle. It was 'catastrophe observed from a safe distance. Watching death on a large scale, but seeing no one die', as Ian McEwan's character Henry Perowne reflects in the novel *Saturday*.

Given the surplus of images today and the ubiquity of televised or photographed horror, is it any longer possible to be shocked? Does tragedy have a place? And is the sense of shock an ethical necessity anyway? According to Susan Sontag, our diminishing capacity to be shocked is not based upon a surfeit of images nor the fact that our sensibilities are jaded, but rather it is produced by our sense of powerlessness. 'People don't become inured to what they are shown . . . because of the *quantity* of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling.'[13] We have been shown images of war or famine so many times before and nothing we do seems to change that situation. Playwrights and photographers have perennially responded to what is popularly known as 'compassion fatigue' by outdoing each other in the graphic violence of their representations; Sontag regards shock as only useful if it can galvanise us into

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action. Writing primarily about war photography but clearly with implications for the witnessing of tragedy more generally, she echoes Eagleton's conclusions about the communality of suffering. 'It seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others.'[14] But that 'enlarged sense' must be driven by understanding, rather than simply by emotion or compassion. Sontag describes the goal of 'standing back from the aggressiveness of the world' and thus being freed 'for observation and elective attention'. But how do we gain that 'elective attention'? Indeed the question of how to make something significant or uniquely impressive upon our sensibilities is both a demand and a source of uncertainty for writers and journalists alike today.

The origins of tragic drama lie in Greece. So what can we learn from ancient Greek tragedy? What relevance does it have to the questions about emotion, ethics and shock which I have been discussing so far? How does the experience of watching mythological characters in a comfortable theatre amount to anything other than a diversion from twenty-first-century war and social injustice? On the one hand, Greek tragedy is specifically about its own time and place and arguably celebrates the values of Athenian culture. Indeed some critics focus upon the historical context of tragedy and maintain that Greek tragedy can only be approached as a fifth-century BC cultural phenomenon. They stress the mythological, religious and political concerns of the plays, which ultimately owe their origins to Homer and to religious and civic practice. Richard Seaford, for example, maintains that tragedy 'deploys the restoration of ritual normality to express the historical contradiction between household and polis' and thus the tragic plays are of interest as anthropological curiosities, for what they reveal about the development of the Athenian fifth-century 'polis'.[15] But on the other hand, critics like Jean-Pierre Vernant, who famously observed that Greek tragedy 'does not reflect reality but calls it into question', are interested in how the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides depart from their immediate context.[16] In questioning its own culture, Greek tragedy paradoxically raises some of the pressing concerns which continue to concern the later tradition of tragedy: community, spectatorship, metaphysical belief, causation.

Greek tragedy is clearly central to the tragic tradition, and the fact that it has been staged and restaged over the centuries reflects its continuing capacity to speak to us. The American tour of *The Trojan Women*, using the pacifist Gilbert Murray's translation, during World War I; Deborah Warner's production of *Electra* in Derry in 1992, just after the outbreak of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland; two productions of *Hecuba* in the winter of 2004–5 in London, while the 'insurgents' continued to blow up Iraqi police recruits in great numbers (plus

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a few American soldiers): these theatre productions are just a few examples of Greek tragedy offering 'modern agnostics exactly the disturbing combination of open-ended metaphysics, aesthetic beauty and hard-core suffering' which chimes with their contemporary experience.[17]

But 'tragedy' is not exclusive to the Greeks, and, despite Steiner's warning, it is not dead. Rather than seeing 'tragedy' as basically 'retrospective', I prefer to see it as a natural human response to particular historical circumstances or conditions.[18] In this respect, Vernant's comment about the historical moment which gave rise to Greek tragedy is equally applicable to other historical periods and cultures: 'The tragic turning point occurs when a gap develops at the heart of the social experience. It is wide enough for the oppositions between legal and political thought on the one hand and the mythical and heroic traditions on the other to stand out quite clearly. Yet it is narrow enough for the conflict in values still to be a painful one.'[19] Tragic drama seems to be produced often in periods when beliefs are changing, when there is a shift in values, when politics seem unstable. These revolutions create the conditions in which what Felicity Rosslyn calls 'a social reorganisation' is 'profound enough to shake the individual into heightened self-consciousness and draw all his old relations into question'.[20]

Tragedy has been a topic to which philosophers have returned again and again over the centuries. Certainly Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud and Camus, among others, have found themselves drawn to the problems of injustice, madness, trauma and despair which tragic drama dwells upon because they believe that these issues raise even more general questions about the limits of human thinking. Their writing is important because the theoretical discussion about tragedy, in which these philosophers engage, replicates the activity of tragic drama itself. Their attempt to explain tragedies mirrors the effort of playwrights to pattern suffering into narrative on stage. It is also instructive to read these philosophers' works and then to begin to see the broad conceptual questions potentially lying behind individual tragedies. But ultimately the emotional punch which tragedy packs derives from our inability to understand the worst events we experience and from our unwilling recognition of the cruel justice or injustice of the world. Particular examples of loss or destruction or maliciousness resist any well-meaning attempt at consolation or rationalisation; of course, this is why philosophers have been drawn to these examples, precisely to ponder what intellectual enquiry is unable to intellectualise.[21]

So this is a book about the specific moments in tragic dramas when audiences are confronted with these critical questions and emotions. It is a book, too, about tragedies before it is about tragedy. Peter Szondi in his *Essay on the Tragic* observed that 'the concept of the tragic disastrously rises out of the

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concrete situation of philosophical problems into the heights of abstraction' and that it needs to 'sink down into the most concrete element of tragedies if it is to be saved'.[22] In other words, the staging of tragic drama should be essential to thinking about the metaphysics of tragedy. The issues which witnessing a performance raises – issues of the audience's embodiment and shared experience of pain and pity, of its ambiguous sense of detachment, of the actors' presence in time – prevent the study of tragedy from becoming over-abstract and removed from emotional difficulty. With this in mind, I deal in this book first with the 'concrete' tragedies before considering tragic theory, for this chronology replicates the watching experience, in which we are first moved by particular tragic dramas and only later begin to reflect upon our response. At the end of the two main sections on 'tragic drama' and on 'tragic theory', I have focused upon some case studies. These draw out thematically those specific moments in performance in which theories might come into conflict with practice and when the question of perspective might alter one's interpretation of the issue.

To write a textbook on tragedy is a contradictory process, since textbooks are, by nature, pedagogical and unambiguous while I believe that tragedy – both as theatrical form and aesthetic concept – is quite the opposite. There is, admittedly, a tradition of associating tragedy with didacticism. The observation which the chorus in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* utters, that we 'learn through suffering', has been taken out of context as a wise commentary on the function of tragedy. Meanwhile the comic, satirical portrayal of tragic playwrights in Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, which finishes with the hope that the ghost of Aeschylus can save Athens, is sometimes misleadingly interpreted as an argument for the general therapeutic purpose of ancient tragedy.[23] I want to make it clear that tragedy, as a form, has traditionally searched for meaning or explanation, but whether it has found them is – and has been over the centuries – a matter for debate.

In tracing what is, in effect, a history of Western drama, this book considers why theatre matters, how it can help to make sense of terrible events, how it shapes sorrowful experience. But it is right that comparisons should be made between theatre and other efforts to make sense of suffering: other artistic representations, such as sculpture and painting; eyewitness accounts and photographic images of war and atrocity; memorials and ritual; theological and psychoanalytic debate. While the primary focus of this book is upon tragic drama, therefore, it also ranges out in the final section to begin to engage with other tragic art forms, with theological and psychoanalytic discussions and with the element of tragedy in daily life.

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*Chapter 2*

# Tragic drama

## 2.1 The Greeks

### *Competition*

Tragic drama was accorded a special function in fifth-century Athenian civic life. It was performed at the City Dionysia festival each March, over a series of about three or four days, and attended by all the citizens of Athens.[1] The burden for producing the plays fell upon the *choregos*, a wealthy private citizen, appointed by the city annually, whose public duty it was to fund and train a chorus of young, male citizens for the performance. Before the performances, the city engaged in a series of processions, sacrifices and public ceremonies, all designed, as Simon Goldhill has argued, to 'use the state festival to glorify the state'.[2] Integral to the celebration of the city (the 'polis' in Greek) was the performance of tragedy itself. This took the form of a competition between three playwrights, who each wrote three tragedies and a satyr play, to be staged in a single day. At the beginning of the festival, the ten judges were chosen by lot, from a list of names drawn from the ten tribes of the citizen body. While the judges' verdict was final, it might be influenced by the noisy approval or disapproval of the general audience. Appealing to the crowd was consequently hugely important and, before each day's performances, the playwright would mount a platform with his chorus to display himself to the people. Socrates, for example, recalls in the *Symposium* seeing the playwright Agathon stepping onto 'the platform with your troupe – how you sent a straight glance at that vast assembly to show that you meant to do yourself credit with your production'.[3]

It is important to understand the original context of Greek tragedy in social political life and in dramatic competition, because democracy and individual prowess are central concerns of the tragedies themselves. Competition lay at the heart of Athenian culture. It featured in the democratic assembly, since citizens needed to win over their audience to their point of view through scintillating rhetoric. Competition of course also played a crucial part in the athletic games



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