CHAPTER I

Introduction
Modernist Tragedy

Attic Novelists

Why did modern European novelists value ancient tragedy? I find that they turned to the Greeks to rebel against ossified, lethal thought in their own time. Tragedy was, for them, a diagnostic tool. With it, they traced present-day sufferings to their political and existential sources. In their view, tragedy fostered exposé. For a cadre of modern writers, tragedy lent itself to depicting and responding to recurrent crises and their aftermaths. Tragedy allowed writers to think about senseless chance and violence in the natural world; it allowed them to think about political violence, intergenerational trauma, and cyclical calamity. Tragedy was a refutation of Western chauvinism, with its Panglossian defenses of the capitalist and colonialist status quo; Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss maintained that all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Tragic fictions thought otherwise. Tragic novels acknowledged grief, rage, and irredeemable loss. They represented wanting justice, absent consent, and limited agency. These writers formulated an ethics of tragedy as well, which involved collective resistance to atrocity, in straitened circumstances. Their tragedies presented characters beset by amoral or immoral forces, and such works modeled the defiance of structures of harm—neither their denial nor their reproduction.

Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, Albert Camus, and Samuel Beckett contested a cultural tendency to defend undue and unequal suffering. They recognized a different impetus in Greek tragedy: to expose and excoriate suffering and to interrogate its provenance. For this reason, Greek tragedy appealed to them. Refusing to justify suffering, their own fiction was tragic. In their modern milieus, in the context of secularizing science, they recast the whims of the gods as the accidents of natural history. Their shared belief in a Darwinian account of creation, heedless of creatures’ pains, underwrote their representations of uncaring natural phenomena, of the ill luck of birth.
and circumstance, and of historical actors who emulated and compounded the callousness of natural processes.

The aim of this book is not to suggest that a murky tragic sense in art and life was one symptom of an amorphous modern angst. Instead, I would like to illustrate a specific model of living that this set of authors who affiliated themselves with the genre advanced in their novels. Along the way, I would like to distinguish these novelistic conceptions of tragedy – implicit in these authors’ fiction and explicit in their writings on ancient Greek thought and drama – from other influential theories of the art form (Aristotle’s and Nietzsche’s, for instance). Such contrasting of novelists with giants of philosophy shows just how new and iconoclastic these authors’ return to a very old genre was. Their rethinking of tragedy was a serious acknowledgment of – and response to – a life suffused with contingency: the contingency of individual histories, of history, and of humanity’s existing at all.

I find a pronounced disjunction between literary tragedies and philosophical theories of tragedy. Philosophies of tragedy aim to redeem suffering; this is their raison d’être. Literary tragedies just as forcibly and constitutively do not. Modernist critic F. L. Lucas makes this point persuasively in Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle’s “Poetics,” which Virginia and Leonard Woolf published in 1927:

It is easy enough to talk glibly of reconciliation and harmony over the dead bodies on the tragic stage. It may be true that the cry of the blood of Agamemnon is satisfied at last with revenge, that Oedipus comes to rest in a glorious grave in quiet Colonus, that Heracles ascends to sit on the right hand of Zeus; but can we suppose that to Cassandra, to Jocasta, to Dejanira all seemed to end so pleasantly in a pink sunset of satisfaction? Does the world of tragedy or the tragedy of the world really bear any relation to this Universe squirted with philosophic rose-water? It is an astonishing conception. Many another Dr. Pangloss has endeavored to make mankind swallow the world like a pill by coating it with sugar.¹

Lucas is referring to Hegel in this last line. Simon Critchley echoes Lucas’s sentiment: “In the Philosophy of Right, Hegel writes, ‘No people ever suffered wrong. What it suffered, it merited.’ This is wrong.”²

For the writers in this study, tragedy is not suffering’s apologist. In their hands, tragedy evinces a different ethics. This ethical program entails, first, representation of undeserved pain. Pursuant to this representation is a spirit of protest, which generates short-lived glimpses of more salutary living. This is the tragic ethics that Woolf encapsulates in saying: “The moment was all; the moment was enough.”³ These transformative
moments are not cure-alls, but they suffice to hold despair at bay. What I find so wrenching in modern tragic fiction is how evanescent, how tenuous these moments are. But they are also so essential. Visionary and liberatory, they bespeak rival modes of experience and rival social relations. Tragedy, in this modernist vein, confronts imperiled communities with “all” they can do, rather than All, but ventures that “all” might be “enough.”

These authors refuse to assign compensatory value to suffering, which is the modus operandi of much interpretation of tragedy. It is also the modus operandi of much imperialist political theory, Christian religious thought, and natural history both before and after Darwin. Darwin’s explanation of evolution, as I argue in Chapter 2, introduces a tragic conception of natural history into modern thought. In the mid-nineteenth century, Darwin recognized chance, not design, as the engine of all life. Darwin heretically argued that random variation among creatures – the unpredictable, good or ill luck – underwrote the existence of species. A core tenet of tragedy, long resisted, became a core tenet of the modern life sciences: chance, the contingent, the unforeseeable, what the Greeks called tuchē. Greek tragedies depicted externally wrought, fortuitous necessity, divorced from mercy, from justice, from theodicy. Darwinian natural selection likewise preserved and destroyed creatures – retaining traits that happened to be adaptive and jettisoning those that did not – with no conscious volition and no further end in mind, only because of chance differences among creatures. In both Greek tragic drama and Darwinian evolutionary biology, no moral Mind allocated fate to individual beings. As a result, tragedy and evolutionary theory faced analogous interpretive distortion; a preponderance of theorists sought to banish the unplanned, the aleatory, from fiction’s and science’s narratives of individual and species-wide destiny. By contrast, the strain of literary modernism that I treat conceives of nature in a manner distinct from redemptive or teleological discourse. The writers in this study admitted chance into their fictional worlds. Their revival of what they understood to be a Greek tragic worldview constituted a literary backlash against comforting, anthropocentric accounts of human origins and human futures. These authors saw the fickleness of the Greek gods in Darwin’s godless nature. In the Greek plays, too, the inhumanity of men matched the indifference of divinity; similarly, in tragic novels, indefensible cultural logics ape the pitiless material world. Tragic antagonists, ancient and modern, prove double: for these writers, the larger universe’s insensibility too often finds its analogue in lethal social and political norms.
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Like Darwin, these novelists convey the paucity of meaning, the dearth of sufficient reason, that attaches to suffering. In their tragic framings of life, these writers animate characters who find themselves compelled to accept a restricted compass for action, and who commit to act nonetheless. These novelists also gravitate toward lyrical, time-dilating moments in their fiction, which serve as ballasts in the tragic tide, temporary stays to tragic inevitability. In Hardy’s case, these brief interludes exist primarily in imagination. Hardy’s final two tragedies, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, privilege characters’ and narrators’ momentary conjurations of a present that stands apart from and in insoluble conflict with brutal culture. What was a rhetorical fixture of Greek tragedy—disputing the irrevocable plot at hand—is a prominent facet of Hardy’s tragedies as well. It is characters’ should-have-been lives, fleetingly evoked, that Hardy’s tragedies exhort readers to make reality. Hardy’s hypothetical moments of reprieve then emerge as full-fledged, realized moments of safety and satiety in Woolf. Woolf takes Hardy’s message of unforgiving temporality to heart, but where his moments were yearning and abortive, hers become tragedy’s pièce de résistance. Woolf juxtaposes these moments against the timelessness of abstract concepts and the deep time of evolution. Given these metrics, human joys and cataclysms measure as naught. Still, Woolf devotes the lion’s share of her fiction to these rare intervals of security and solidarity, precisely because they do such outsized work to sustain characters in the face of inhuman timescales. Across both Woolf’s and Camus’s oeuvres, these signatures of modernism—“moments of being,” Woolf calls them—function as bulwarks against ruthless natural forces and the viciousness of modern history. Mirroring Woolf, Camus abandons traditional plot structure in favor of ephemeral, rapturous moments, set in the shadow of natural and historical menace. Beckett’s characters also contend with ambient conditions both inscrutable and agonizing; they respond with denial (doubt, disbelief) as a mode of pain management. But Beckett’s late novella *Company* brings resuscitating moments into an otherwise devastated fictional world. Although these moments are still epistemologically and emotionally suspect—not apogees of happiness—they attest to surroundings that might allow for pleasure, amelioration, or company.

In various ways, then, these authors pit vulnerable people and their fragile moments of respite against encircling, inhuman forces that warp and extinguish personhood. Such fiction admits ineradicable constraints on people’s freedom and flourishing, yet envisions small-scale dissent, momentary resistance to annihilation. Equally in their oeuvres, however, these writers picture characters who are drawn to not being—to ceasing to
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be, ceasing to ruminate and to feel – and such character studies in negation, I argue, operate as cautionary tales. Modern fiction becomes a site of counterpoised ethical experiments: in tragic ethics, on the one hand, and in nihilism, on the other. Juxtaposing fleeting “yeses” against suicidal “nos,” these writers work to counteract ethical paralysis, what critics of tragedy from Plato onward feared to be the genre’s issue. The abdication of moral and political action was also what literary critic György Lukács held to be the message of the modernist novel in particular. But the literature in this study maintains that although the natural processes that produced our human senses, language, and cognition appear, in Camus’s parlance, absurd – devoid of intention and unconcerned with humankind – our creation of meaning is precisely what such absurdity galvanizes. Modernist tragedy envisions a model of sociality based not on transcendent design but on its absence: shared defiance of the amoral and inhumane.

These authors’ readings of Greek tragedy and their own tragic fictions mark, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a concerted departure from much of the genre’s reception history. From the Middle Ages forward, a dominant objective in philosophy and literary theory was to decipher metaphysical order in Greek tragic drama and to testify to such unity in modern instantiations of the genre. Hardy’s tragedies, by contrast, denounce this recasting of mortal luck and the cruelties of men as the victim’s wrongdoing in a providential universe. Woolf calls Hardy “the greatest tragic writer among English novelists” and lauds his daring to represent “that human beings are the sport of forces outside themselves,” forces that participate in no salutary plan. Woolf finds Hardy groundbreaking in his novelistic communiqué that “no symbol of caprice and unreason [is] too extreme to represent the astonishing circumstances of our existence.” Woolf comments extensively on the insurrectionary truth-telling of Hardy’s tragic predecessors as well: “it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick . . . of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age.” Camus, too, who is strikingly Woolfian in his ethics and aesthetics, turns to tragedy to emphasize the lamentable passage from natural peril to manmade atrocity. He contends that European “history has put on the mask of destiny”; this history behaves as the divine or natural fatality that it claimed to supersede. What Horkheimer and Adorno called enlightenment’s delusion – its pretension to banish fear with reason – modernist tragedy also exposes. Beckett, too, identifies no consoling antidote to mortal fear in natural or social history. Instead, he scathingly defines tragedy as “the original and eternal sin” of having been born. Deriving such wording from Anaximander and Schopenhauer,
Beckett has in mind a chronic and congenital suffering, punishment for the transgression one has committed at birth—even as there is no reason for individual existence to be so cardinal a wrong. He has in mind a crime that cannot be expiated, in a world that cannot be set right. Beckett anticipates Anne Carson’s account of tragedy; in her introduction to her translation of four plays by Euripides, she writes: “Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.” Beckett, too, associates tragedy with a grief that cannot be remedied. Even if we were to succeed in expelling noxious cultural narratives from our midst, such that “[n]othing will remain of all the lies they have glutted [us] with,” Beckett suggests that we would still be subject to wrenching embodiment: “Tears gush from [the eye] practically without ceasing, why is not known, nothing is known, whether it’s with rage, or whether it’s with grief, the fact is there.” Beckett’s indignant narrator in The Unnamable labels this reasonless, ineliminable torture “getting humanized.”

This strain of European “modernism” is distinct from European “modernity” insofar as it disputes European modernity’s imperialist premises: its insistence on progressivist history, on unassailable subjects who are self-determining. Tragedy is one of the strongest expressions of modernism’s critique of modernity. The novelty of this modernist rapport with an ancient art form lies in its refusal to grant that European science and history render people ever more invulnerable to loss, in a world that makes underlying sense. It is true that in complex and varying ways, other spokesmen of the period—Eliot, Pound, Joyce, or Auden—engage in anti-metaphysical thinking, recur to ancient genres, and seek to depict fresh and unprecedented approaches to living. But their endeavors to shore up even partial and provisional order in the face of historical and epistemological uncertainty strike a more major key, possess a more sanguine and hopeful orientation, than does tragedy. More committed to epic, as C. D. Blanton argues, these other modernists still pursue “the claim to totality from which the form [epic] originates.” Blanton understands such totality, in Hegelian and Marxist terms, to be that of history, and shows us modernists who recognize that they cannot directly represent this totality in their work, but who endeavor to approach it obliquely, via a metonymic method that supplies shards of the whole as proof of its reality. Such authors, in this reading, manage to evoke precisely the fullness that their poetry cannot house within its bounds: “Conceived in this way, the epic remains necessary whether it is possible or not, the simple name of a need to conceive the present as historical, to think totality.”
I would say that what modernist tragedy indexes is the want of sense that inheres in the environments people inhabit. As postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist critics have shown, exposure to harm is not equally shared. Racial capitalism protects its beneficiaries and redistributes harm to internal and external Others. It displaces fault onto them. Crucially, racial capitalism exacerbates danger and consigns its victims to extreme risk. Both Hardy’s and Beckett’s characters resist induction into this order of violence. They balk at recruitment into the normative role of “man.” Woolf shares this concern, that even dissidents will be compelled to think as their oppressors do. Camus is also focused on complicity in state violence. “All I maintain,” says his character in The Plague, “is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it’s up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences.”

Camus imagines opposition to pestilential ideology and he imagines characters who perpetrate colonialist terror and try to defend enslavement. These authors, that is, depict an array of characters: from culpable insiders to demonized and defiant outsiders. When their writings, then, evoke a common humanity and shared precarity, this is not to deny or to elide political injustice. Instead, from their tragic perspective, the horror of mortal suffering per se only emphasizes the fact that eugenic, genocidal Western politics—the gratuitous horrors of white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, and fascism—are indefensible.

Such tragedy does not subscribe to a dialectical logic either: the divisions that these authors represent between persons and injurious forms of power are not precursors to reconciliation. Paul Saint-Amour, leery of too stringent a definition of modernism, offers the following rule of thumb: “the term ‘modernism’ functions as nonexclusive shorthand for works that display, even speculatively or intermittently, an anticontemporary or counterconventional temper.” What is anticontemporary and counterconventional in modernist tragedy is characters’ piecing together that there is no lasting safety to be derived from their surroundings. The plots in which they are inscribed are crushing—and these plots are binding, some for now, some forever. As Jay Clayton has argued, this merciless logic of plot characterized fin-de-siècle naturalism and twentieth-century dystopian fiction as well. But naturalist and dystopian narrative arcs primarily referenced social ills, whereas these authors drawn to Greek tragedy explicitly paired violent social practices with representations of a natural world bereft of directive, meaningful structure. Foreign to the tragic novel, then, is experience of the Kantian sublime, in which vulnerable subjects come to realize that they do hold pride of place in an intelligible cosmos.
and that reason protects them from harm even as their bodily senses are overwhelmed by the might or enormity of inhuman forces. While modernist literary critics like Lukács and Joseph Wood Krutch stipulated precisely this – that tragedy qua genre goes hand in hand with a transcendence of pain and of incoherence – the tragic novelists in this study detect, as Woolf puts it, "no such kindly meaning" in "the huge blackness of what is outside us, of what we are not."  

I defend in such modernism a "mortalist humanism" that holds collective susceptibility to loss to be the basis for tragedy and for ethics – an idea that Miriam Leonard and Bonnie Honig criticize in Judith Butler’s work.  

I do not think, to answer Honig and Leonard, that this ethical turn to "mortalism" evacuates tragedies of their specific historical content or ushers in apolitical inaction. Honig argues, too, that there must be more to tragedy than solidarity in grief, and points to a feast that mourning Priam and Achilles share in the Iliad and to an invitation to dance even in Antigone. And here I fully agree. I have found solidarity in enjoyment to be the defining ethical yield of modernism’s tragedies. Those imagined or impermanent possibilities of happiness, manifestations of some alternate world, are enshrined in these tragedies’ pages. Where literary critic Cristopher Watkin sees impoverished ethics and "ascetic atheism" in this period, I see the tragic sociality that keeps characters afloat in the face of disaster and structural violence.  

Watkin contends that a modern eschewal of religion leaves only "meagre crumbs of ... happiness." But what Watkin labels “scraps of immanence” in the wake of faith, I find rehabilitated and prized in modernist fiction. Watkin illuminates philosophical endeavors today, in Nancy, Badiou, and Meillassoux, to counter a perceived starvation diet after metaphysics, but I find that modernism’s pared-down moments of precarious meaning already nourish a new and tragic ethics that sustains its characters. Modernism’s tragic authors show us that to lament mortal finitude is not to pine for religion. These authors do not yearn for what they do not believe in, spiritual or political eschatology. These writers’ tragic stances, on the contrary, commit them to beauty and justice, but without hope of deliverance.  

**Tragedy versus Philosophy**  
A certain strain of philosophy has long been antipathetic to the tragic conception of nature and history that these authors embrace; such philosophy has been hostile to depictions of irremediably fragile persons besieged by amoral and immoral forces. Plato roundly disparaged tragedy in the
Republic precisely because, in his apt assessment of it, it bore witness to human grief at gutting and unwarranted misfortune. To use Aristotle’s terms, tragedy as Plato saw it lacked efficient and final causes for human suffering; it evoked a cosmos in which there was no clear origin of our keenest pains, and no higher purpose for them. The gods subjected mortals to tuche, not eikos; the latter refers to rational odds we can calculate, the likely or probable. For the Greeks, tuche and eikos were ontologically distinct categories. We might think of tuche as stochastic: impossible to predict in advance. Not surprisingly, then, Aristotle’s defense of tragedy consisted in ascribing an intelligible source to tragic fates. Aristotle bound tragedy to eikos. In Aristotle’s Poetics, tragedy was ideally to stem from knowable causes, from characters’ own inadvertent mistakes; these were not culpable but pitiable. The causal logic of tragic plot, then, was to have little connection with divine whim, curse, or prophecy that sullied mortal happiness. A man was his own causal nexus of suffering; neither gods nor others persecuted him. Further responding to Plato’s contention that tragedy upended a stoic regimen of the soul, Aristotle also assigned the genre a productive social telos: that of catharsis. However we understand this much-debated term, catharsis is of benefit to audiences. Affirmative tragedy may seem like a contradiction in terms, but it is true that for a majority of thinkers, tragedy must dramatize suffering that is morally justified, socially useful, or aesthetically gratifying. Aristotle, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Lukács subscribed to versions of this view. But as I show in Chapters 2 and 3, Hardy squarely departs from Aristotle, and Woolf from Nietzsche; in Chapter 4, I explain Camus’s rejection of the counter-tragic philosophy of Sartre. And the philosophers whom Beckett preferred – early Greek thinkers apart from Plato and Aristotle, as well as Geulincx, Schopenhauer, Mauthner, and Wittgenstein, among others – also broke ranks with Plato and his descendants and with existentialist humanism, and pictured life at odds with intelligible, consolatory, or anthropocentric design.

Here is one illustrative example, however, of the prevailing philosophical impulse to neutralize suffering, especially in connection with tragedy. In three separate ways, Nietzsche over the course of his career sought to interpret tragedy as a recipe for redemption from pain. First, he contended that it proffered narratives of individual heroism so beautiful they rendered life’s torments bearable for us. Second, he suggested that tragedy hinted at the possibility of mystical self-dissolution and recovery of unindividuated
being, the ultimate salvation from mortal grief. Third, he determined that tragedy pointed the way to an endorsement of our mortal sufferings themselves. Nietzsche offered the first two readings in The Birth of Tragedy (1872, revised 1886). Here he suggested that tragedy’s salves are supplied by the two generative drives in Greek drama: the Apolline and the Dionysiac. Both serve to soothe individuals (tragedy’s characters and audiences), who are aghast at tuchē: “the terrors and horrors of existence,” “the Titanic forces of nature,” the “unpitying” “cosmic stupidity.” Well-wrought Apolline illusion affords the individual hero succor: “the Apolline quality of the mask [is] the necessary result of gazing into the inner, terrible depths of nature – radiant patches, as it were, to heal a gaze seared by gruesome night.” Tragedy’s terrifying truth – figured as a glimpse of nature in all its chaotic and inhuman chanciness – is “overcome by the Greeks, or at least veiled and withdrawn from view” by these Apolline ministrations, in order “to seduce us into continuing to live.” Every sighting of nature must be alleviated by Apolline fiction: “Here, at this moment of supreme danger for the will, art approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live.” Art produces a trompe l’oeil vindication or relaxation of our suffering.

The truth of nature that so daunts the individual is, for Nietzsche, the Dionysiac – the destructive, fecund, uncaring wellspring of life. And Nietzsche’s key argument in The Birth of Tragedy is that although such nature nauseates individual men and women, their suffering does not stem from nature itself but from the singular evil of individuation. Our primary misfortune is being individuated in the first place. If we could rejoin the Dionysiac stream of life, we would be released from mortal terrors. Precisely the loss of personal identity that sickens individual consciousness is the mystical homecoming we need. This for Nietzsche is the message of the pre-Classical, springtime rituals of the fertility spirit Dionysus, who was dismembered only to be reimmersed in the whole. With this rite, the entirety of the community, in Nietzsche’s view, rejoined nature as well:

Not only is the bond between human beings renewed by the magic of the Dionysiac, but nature, alienated, inimical, or subjugated, celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind. Freely the earth offers up her gifts, and the beasts of prey from mountain and desert approach in peace…. Now the slave is freeman, now all the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or “impudent fashion” have established between human beings, break asunder. Now, hearing this gospel of

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