

CHAPTER I

Introduction
Tragedy and the Maze of Moments

The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his colleagues in Nigeria by Sani Abacha's government in November 1995 had a most visceral impact on me. I was badly shaken. I had just started teaching the tragedy paper at Cambridge University when the news brought me forcefully to the blank futility of trying to align what I was doing in the classroom with what was taking place in a part of the world I was deeply invested in. And, moreover, to a writer who had stood up to "speak truth to power" on behalf of his community. What was more tragic than that? For those who do not know about him, a few words of introduction: Ken Saro-Wiwa was a writer and environmental activist who, for almost two decades before his untimely death at the hands of his own government, had been making forceful arguments about the devastation that oil companies such as Shell had inflicted upon the Ogoni community. The Ogonis are a micro-minority in Eastern Nigeria much less known than the Igbo, who themselves shot to international fame both through the writings of Chinua Achebe and also because of the ultimately unsuccessful secessionist bid they launched against Nigeria in the Biafra War of 1967–1971. There were many casualties of that war on both sides, but Saro-Wiwa argued that the pollution of his people's lands would have a more profound impact than anything that had ever happened in Nigeria's entire history. And he was right. There are oil-polluted lands in Eastern Nigeria that cannot be cultivated for food for the next thousand years. It represents an environmental devastation of near-apocalyptic proportions.

I remember at the time pacing up and down my office deeply upset and by turns shaking my fists in the air and holding my head in my hands. Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy*, which argued the imperative for us to not separate the domains of the literary from the historical in our scholarly definitions of tragedy, gave me only momentary satisfaction. Around the same time as the news of the hangings, the singer Enya released

2 Introduction: Tragedy and the Maze of Moments

her hit single “Anywhere Is.” The song had what sounded to me like a marching tempo that was somehow directly contradicted by its lyrics:

I walk the maze of moments
 but everywhere I turn to
 begins a new beginning
 but never finds a finish
 I walk to the horizon
 and there I find another
 it all seems so surprising
 and then I find that I know

You go there you’re gone forever
 I go there I’ll lose my way
 if we stay here we’re not together
 Anywhere is

Is the repetition of new beginnings that never find a finish a product merely of confusion or of fundamental chaos? And what is to be made of the impression that if one person goes they go forever (death?), but if the other goes they lose their way (alienation?). Why can they both not stay in the here and now forever? And where or what is “Anywhere”? Does it fold into itself an ontology of time composed of iterations of circularity, or is “Anywhere” the product of longing and bewilderment that can never be resolved? Is this a love song, or, as I chose to interpret it at the time, a song about unrelieved tragic nostalgia? For some reason that was never quite clear to me, Saro-Wiwa’s hanging and Enya’s song became inextricably fused in my mind such that their contradictory combination became the soundtrack of my emotional responses to the difficult task of working out a feasible resolution to the confusing question of tragedy.

Enya’s song, like the other texts I will discuss here, seems significant for me in its ethico-aesthetic dimension that also reflects upon the event of Saro-Wiwa’s hanging.¹ And it is this subliminal impulse to respond to the ethico-aesthetic entailments of both literature and real life that led me first to write *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* and

¹ In the heat of the moment I wrote an essay trying precisely to do this, that is, to deploy the concept of literary tragedy in order to read the life of the activist-writer. The results seem to me now to have been uneven, partly because if the objective had been to marshal public sentiment against the Nigerian government, then this was not the best way to go about it, and partly because the entire episode and the history behind it transcended the capacity of any autonomous literary concept for explaining it fully. See my “Anatomizing a Postcolonial Tragedy: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogonis,” *Performance Research*, 1.2 (1996): 83–92.

Introduction: Tragedy and the Maze of Moments

3

now *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature*.² *Aesthetic Nervousness* was in many ways the direct progenitor of the present book, except that there I referenced disabled characters and literary tropes of disability as surrogates for different forms of bodily impairments and examined how these unsettled existing protocols of representation. I argued there that the literature of disability helped to induct us into more complex ethical responses to the status of people with disabilities in real-life situations. I feel that *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* will allow me to do much more than I managed to accomplish in *Aesthetic Nervousness*. This is because I now delink the broad concept of suffering from any specific character type or existential condition and instead read suffering across different contexts, in works from a variety of cultural backgrounds in the postcolonial world. I also draw substantially on the large and varied history of tragic expression from the Greeks and Shakespeare and on to present times.

Notwithstanding all I have said of my inspirations so far, to attempt a fresh statement on tragedy at the present time still seems like a somewhat forlorn enterprise. There is already a vast and formidable range of scholarly work on the subject and many events that take place in today's world are taken to fall readily under the commonplace epithet of tragedy. The perceived relationship between tragedy and the historical phases of its emergence has been ever thorny, as is the question of whether it is the product of particular historical epochs or exclusively of individual acts of writing. On the one hand, the celebrated hallmarks of Greek and Renaissance tragedy seem remote and alien: the anguish of kings and high personages; the vicissitudes of the founding of nations; the ineluctable unfolding of fate and necessity; and the intensification of time as it veers toward catastrophe. On the other, tragedy's transposition from the theatre and into the novel, film, opera, painting, and other media has placed it in the vicinity of the everyday, to the point that, for some, its force as a literary expression has been utterly attenuated. This is the much-discussed view of George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy*, which I pick up later in this Introduction. And if the elements of plot, pathos, conflict, suffering, self-discovery, and death have always guaranteed a celebration of tragedy's universality, then it is also true that tragedy has been subject to surprisingly variant interpretations. All of these have been sources of intense debate. And so, this book is proffered not simply to rectify a glaring absence in the

² Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

4 Introduction: Tragedy and the Maze of Moments

field, which, of course, it also attempts to do, but as a means by which to rethink postcolonialism *through* the prism of literary tragedy and vice versa.

I would like to clear a misunderstanding that regularly comes up with usage of the term postcolonialism among nonspecialists. While the prefix “post-” in the term hints at its temporal inflection, that is, that it pertains to matters that occurred “after” colonialism; by the 1990s, the term was used without a hyphen to denote the field as an area of recognizable interests, debates, and controversies.³ Understood not as limited to the implicit temporal marking of the “post-”, but as the sign of a critical orientation toward colonialism and its legacies, postcolonial studies in general have been concerned with the representation of experiences of various kinds including those of slavery, migration, oppression, and resistance; as well as the intersections between race, gender, and sexual identities, and the responses to the continuing neocolonial discourses of Euro-America. Thus, unlike what pertains in commonplace understandings of the term, it is important to bear in mind that postcolonialism does not refer simply to colonial violence and the resistance toward it, especially as it might be illustrated from ex-colonial societies in different parts of the world, but to much more wide-ranging and multi-layered social, cultural, and political phenomena. It is also important to note that the term is used to shed light on a spectrum of colonial space-making practices and the sociopolitical relations that derive from them in different contexts. These include: a) the establishment of bureaucratic and administrative arrangements for the governing of distant territories (the British in India, the French in Mauritius, the Spanish and Portuguese in South America, etc.); b) plantation economies and post-plantation societies (Jamaica, Malaysia, Haiti, Barbados, the United States, etc.); c) white settler colonialism (Australia, South Africa, Canada, and for some commentators, also the United States); d) migration, refugees, diasporas, and the large populations of ex-colonials in Euro-America and elsewhere (Rohingyars in Myanmar, Somalis of Nairobi and Minnesota, Africans in China, Algerians in France, etc.). A growing concern among postcolonial scholars has also been the fate of racial minorities in the West, including Native Americans and African Americans in the USA and the Aboriginal and Métis populations of Canada and Australia, among others. The varying interests that fall under the rubric of postcolonialism allow for a wide range

³ I provide a full account of the genealogies and multiple inflections of the term “postcolonialism” in “Introduction: Postcolonial Literature in a Changing Frame,” the opening chapter of *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–29.

Introduction: Tragedy and the Maze of Moments

5

of applications, thus designating a constant interplay and slippage between the sense of historical transition; a specific sociocultural location pertaining to colonialism and empire in past and/or present contexts; and an epochal configuration.⁴ However the term is construed, a central underlying assumption is that a focus on the discourse and ideology of colonialism is as important as one on the material effects of subjugation and interracial relations under varying contexts and conditions. While occasional reflections on postcolonial tragedy have not been uncommon, a sustained analysis of the relationship between tragedy and specifically postcolonial representations is really only to be found in Timothy J. Reiss's *Against Autonomy: Global Dialectics of Cultural Exchange* and David Scott's much more elaborate *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*.⁵ However, both Reiss and Scott are interested mainly in outlining a philosophy of postcolonial history, so their remarks on tragedy, though highly insightful, do not focus predominantly on literary examples. Scott will be especially important to my discussion of colonial modernity as reflected in Chinua Achebe's rural novels and I shall be returning to him many times in the course of these pages. It is the generative quality of postcolonialism not as a temporal marker but as a mode of reading political, social, and cultural relations in different contexts and parts of the world that allows me to bring together in *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* writers with as varied provenance and thematic emphases as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Tayeb Salih, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, J. M. Coetzee, and Samuel Beckett, among various others. While I shall attempt in each chapter to explain how each writer illustrates features of postcolonialism, the underlining assumption in all of them is that these writers collectively give us an incremental and fertile view of what might pass for postcolonial tragedy. Many other writers could have been included in these pages (I think immediately of Jean Rhys, Gabriel

⁴ There are many useful books and essays on postcolonialism. For a good range that pays attention to the various historical and more discursive usages of the term, see Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Postcolonial," *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992): 99–113; Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Postcolonialism'" in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 253–256; Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2005); Robert J. C. Young, *Empire, Colony, Postcolony* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015). The different forms of colonial space-making and thus the different kinds of postcolonial theories that might be applied to them are elaborated more fully in Ato Quayson, "Introduction: Postcolonial Literature in a Changing Historical Frame."

⁵ Timothy J. Reiss, *Against Autonomy: Global Dialectics of Cultural Exchange* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) and David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

6 Introduction: Tragedy and the Maze of Moments

García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Junot Díaz, Naguib Mahfouz, Gayl Jones, Richard Wright, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Michael Ondaatje as other worthy possibilities for inclusion in the discussion), but the point of this book is to show that our understanding of what falls under the definition of literary tragedy can and must be enriched from the many rich postcolonial examples now available to us.

From Aristotle Through the Akan to Fanon: A Psychoexistential Poetics

The argument of this book is essentially built on an Aristotelian foundation, which I shall elaborate incrementally throughout. But it is important to delineate this Aristotelian foundation from the very outset and to clarify in what ways it opens up avenues for a working definition of postcolonial tragedy. Aristotle suggests in the *Poetics* that a) plot is the soul of tragedy; b) plot depends on a structured sequence of incidents that flow inexorably from one to the next; c) complex plots are preferable to simple plots and that a complex plot aligns discovery/knowledge (*anagnorisis*) to reversal (*peripeteia*); d) the reversal of the hero's fortunes is triggered by an error of judgement (*hamartia*) that is symptomatic of an impasse of understanding; and e) for the audience, the tragic action has an educational and therapeutic function, generating pity and fear the better to channel them (*catharsis*).⁶ Each of Aristotle's concepts from the *Poetics* has been the subject of vigorous debates in the history of tragedy but of special interest to me are the concepts of *hamartia* and *anagnorisis*, which I elaborate upon and turn to slightly different uses in various chapters in this book. I also draw from Aristotle's comments on plot to elaborate the concept of causal plausibility (more on this presently), which I argue indicates the specific ways in which tragic plot structure is connected to the elicitation of our sympathy for the suffering of the protagonist. I shall raise a number of problems regarding causal plausibility in relation to the work of Samuel Beckett in Chapter 9.

If in the *Poetics* Aristotle focuses specifically on tragic plot in outlining for us its main elements and emotional effects, it is in *The Nicomachean Ethics* that he elaborates upon the nature of the good life, which in his view derives both from settled orientation and the exercise of ethical choice. The question as to whether the supreme good emanates from "the *possession* or in the *exercise* of virtue" is settled for him with reference to the latter, for as

⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. T. S. Dorsch (London: Penguin Classics, 1965).

he notes, at the Olympic Games, “it is not the best-looking or the strongest men present that are crowned with wreaths, but the competitors (because it is from them that the winners come), so it is those who act that rightly win the honours and rewards in life.”⁷ This emphasis on virtue as deriving from action is consistent with his installation of the principle of action at the core of his definition of tragedy in the *Poetics*: “The representation of the action is the plot of the tragedy; for the ordered arrangement of the incidents is what I mean by plot Of these elements [spectacle, character, plot, etc.] the most important is the plot, the ordering of the incidents; for tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness – and happiness and unhappiness are bound up with action.”⁸ “Nevertheless,” as he continues to argue in the *Ethics*, “it seems clear that happiness needs the addition of external goods, as we have said; for it is difficult if not impossible to do fine deeds without any resources.”⁹ The resources Aristotle has in view here are of a material character, but will also later be shown by him to encompass the much broader ambit of worldly goods. Martha Nussbaum has glossed the category of worldly goods as implying the “interactions of *philia*, either familial or friendly” and good health, as well as the benefits of citizenship and communal belonging.¹⁰ We might add to these the freedom of expressing one’s identity with respect to racial, gender, and sexual orientations, as well as the capacity to revise these without fear of social condemnation. To go back to Aristotle: since “one swallow does not make a summer; [and] neither does one day,” a man needs a whole and complete life to call himself “blessed and happy,” and to exercise ethically meaningful choices.¹¹ At the same time, he recognizes that “in the course of life we encounter many reverses and all kinds of vicissitudes, and in old age even the most prosperous of men may be involved in great misfortunes, as we are told about Priam in the Trojan poems.”¹² A good person cannot long remain good – that is, exercise ethically meaningful choices – if they have encountered great reversals of fortune: “For no activity is perfect if it is impeded, and happiness is a perfect thing. That is why the happy man needs (besides his other qualifications) physical advantages as well as external goods and the gifts of fortune, so that he may not be hampered

⁷ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin, 2004), 1098b34–1099a6, also 1106b36, emphasis in the original.

⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 39. ⁹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1099a32–34.

¹⁰ Martha Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton University Press, 1992), 266.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1098a19–22. ¹² Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1100a5–9.

8 Introduction: Tragedy and the Maze of Moments

by lack of these things.”¹³ The happy man, then, is one “who is active in accordance with complete virtue, and who is adequately furnished with external [worldly] goods, and that not for some unspecified period but throughout a complete life”.¹⁴ For Aristotle, ethical choice is an expression of *eudaimonia*, translated from the Greek variously as indwelling virtue, happiness, and also flourishing.¹⁵ From his account in the *Ethics*, *eudaimonia* has a dynamic dimension related to the exercise of virtue-as-action and a contingent element pertaining to dependence on external or worldly goods. Aristotle’s question regarding what constitutes the good life is also answered at different points in the *Ethics* with respect to practical reason as well as to the dictates of contemplation.¹⁶ All these furnish the grounds for identification with the plight of a man of moral equilibrium and settled character orientation who falls into ruin, a man he describes in the *Poetics* as neither good nor bad, but who through an error of judgment and the interaction with unpredictable circumstances, suffers an ethically significant reversal of fortune. Negative or intractable conditions may be triggered either through character misjudgment or from chance and contingent circumstances, but the point to be lamented is that however these conditions occur, they may come to restrict the character’s capacity to exercise ethically significant choices. In Nussbaum’s various readings of Aristotle, the frustration of access to worldly goods serves to atrophy the character’s self-perception, making it difficult or even impossible for her to draw upon the internal and external resources that would enable her to exercise ethically significant choices.¹⁷ Her capacity for making ethically significant choices is impeded by the loss of external goods such that the atrophying of her capacities are the direct measure of such impediments. This is what for me unites Achebe’s Okonkwo, Morrison’s Sethe, Soyinka’s Elesin Oba, Arundhati Roy’s Ammu, and Coetzee’s Magistrate, as we shall see later in the book.

¹³ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1153b16–20. ¹⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1101a14–17.

¹⁵ For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* and thus virtue is directly tied to action; *Ethics*, 1095a18–20, 1098a15–22, 1176a33–47.

¹⁶ These are especially to be found in *Ethics*, X.7–8.

¹⁷ My description of Aristotle’s ethical propositions is heavily inspired by Martha Nussbaum’s writings on the subject. See also, her “The ‘Morality of Pity’: Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*,” Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 148–169; and *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also, Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially ch. 18; Sarah Broadie, “What Should We Mean by ‘The Highest Good’,” in *Aristotle and Beyond: Essays in Metaphysics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 153–165; and Howard J. Curzer, “The Supremely Happy Life in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Apeiron*, 24 (1991): 47–69.

When Aristotle notes in the *Poetics* that the plot of a tragedy must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, he is not simply calling for the mechanical temporal sequencing of the tragic action, but rather for the establishment of the terms of what Nussbaum glosses as causal plausibility. As she notes, whether with respect to literary tragedy or real life, for the victim of suffering to elicit sympathetic identification from the witness to their suffering, it has to be shown, first, that they were not culpable for the catastrophe that befalls them, second, that even if they were somewhat culpable, the scale of the catastrophe vastly outstrips their culpability, and third, that the catastrophe has undermined the sufferer's capacity to make ethically informed judgments. It is these three elements that collectively define causal plausibility for the audience and in the eye of the one that bears witness, thus triggering sympathy for the sufferer and perhaps an active response to their suffering.¹⁸ And yet in the literary representation of suffering, causal plausibility entails a number of other elements, not all of which necessarily comply with Aristotle's notion of the ideal plot. At issue are the elements of circumstance and contingency, and sometimes even of the contrast between the human domain and that of the natural world, as we shall see amply illustrated in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in Chapter 8. In contrast, unlike the work of the other postcolonial authors noted in the previous paragraph, in much of Samuel Beckett's work the randomization of causes and effects and the severing of consensual meanings from the domain of language all mean that his plots do not allow us to align causal plausibility to the characters' suffering in any straightforward way. The terms of our sympathy for Beckett's characters and our own potential for identification with them are seriously challenged, thus requiring us to rethink the Aristotelian relation between plot, pity, and fear. All definitions of suffering have to find a way of correlating two central vectors: Self as a category has to be defined as fully as possible and then correlated to the category of World. But often Self and World are not easily separable even for definitional purposes, since the boundaries of the one overlap with the other and the two are completely co-constitutive. While the Self may disintegrate in direct response to reversals of fortune, it may also, properly speaking, suffer a sense of biographical discontinuity simply at losing the capacity to produce a coherent account of the world to itself and to others. And how does one choose between courses of action when they are framed by belief systems that do not enjoy the individual's unconditional assent – as in the case of the Magistrate's reaction to the violence of Empire that we

¹⁸ See especially Nussbaum's "The 'Morality of Pity': Sophocles's *Philoctetes*."

10 Introduction: Tragedy and the Maze of Moments

shall see in our discussion of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* in Chapter 7? Or are the products of oppression – as in the case of Sethe and her response to slavery, as we shall see in picking up Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in Chapter 6? What amounts to a loss of hermeneutical coherence is what unites Achebe's Ezeulu, Soyinka's Professor, Coetzee's Magistrate, Morrison's Sethe, and links the unnamed narrator of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* to Shakespeare's Othello, Beckett's Estragon and Vladimir, and Fanon's persona in *Black Skin, White Masks*, even if from completely different universes of experience and genres of representation.

In the Akan culture from which I hail, there are certain infractions that are placed under the rubric of *musuo*, or “harms to the soul,” that seem to me analogous to the category of impediments to ethical choice in Aristotle's formulation of impediments to *eudaimonia*. Kwame Gyekye has defined *musuo* in terms of “extraordinary moral evils” akin to social taboos and he lists under them “suicide, incest, having sexual intercourse in the bush, rape, murder, stealing things dedicated to the deities or ancestral spirits, etc.”¹⁹ All the transgressions Gyekye names fall squarely under the rubric of cultural taboos among the Akan, and his interests are in their socially oriented character rather than in the harmful effects they may have on the individual. Deep harms that impact directly on individuals must also fall under *musuo*, however, since it is an umbrella category in his description. When a trusted person sleeps with a friend's wife, the Akan say *wa di no awu*, which may be translated as “he has served/given him death,” (i.e., “he has killed him”). Such grave acts of betrayal are also referred to as *wakum ne sunsum* (“he has killed his soul”). The killing of someone's *sunsum*, or what I am describing here as a harm to the soul, is thought by the Akan to deeply impact upon the victim's emotions and may cause the affected individual to suffer a loss of faith in society that may consequently also affect their capacity for making ethically informed choices. Such *musuo* are even thought to trigger suicidal thoughts, so extreme is the effect of such harms to the *sunsum*. Another instance of *musuo* is when a greedy *abusuapanin* (the head of a family) sells some valuable heirlooms (*agyapadee*) or consecrated jewelry (especially gold ornaments), that have been passed down from generation to generation. In this case, it is said that *wakum won sunsum* (he has killed their/the family's soul). Such offences lie under the class of major financial malfeasance that impacts upon the core of the family unit and destroys it from the inside.²⁰

¹⁹ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 131–133.

²⁰ Many thanks to Kwesi Ampene at the University of Michigan for confirming these nuances for me. Personal communication, March 6, 2018.