



CHRIST THE TRAGEDY OF GOD

**A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION
OF TRAGEDY**

Kevin Taylor



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Tragedy is a genre for exploring loss and suffering, and this book traces the vital areas where tragedy has shaped and been a resource for Christian theology. There is a history to the relationship of theology and tragedy; tragic literature has explored areas of theological interest and is present in the Bible and ongoing theological concerns. Christian theology has a long history of using what is at hand, and the genre of tragedy is no different.

What are the merits and challenges of placing the central narrative of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ in tragic terms? This study examines important and shared concerns of theology and tragedy: sacrifice and war, rationality and order, historical contingency, blindness, guilt, and self-awareness. Theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Martin Luther King Jr., Simone Weil, and Boethius have explored tragedy as a theological resource. The historical relationship of theology and tragedy reveals that neither is monolithic, and both remain diverse and unstable areas of human thought.

This fascinating book will be of keen interest to theologians, as well as scholars in the fields of literary studies and tragic theory.

Kevin Taylor is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Practical Theology at Pfeiffer University, USA. His publications include coediting *Christian Theology and Tragedy* (Ashgate, 2011) and *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Question of Tragedy in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (T&T Clark, 2013).



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First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Taylor, T. Kevin, author.

Title: Christ the tragedy of God : a theological exploration of tragedy / Kevin Taylor.

Description: New York : Routledge, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018026489 (print) | LCCN 2018031199 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Tragic, The—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Tragedy—History and criticism. | Jesus Christ.

Classification: LCC BR115.T73 (ebook) | LCC BR115.T73 T39 2018 (print) | DDC 233—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018026489>

ISBN: 978-1-138-09214-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-10769-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

With the idea that tragedy is, most of all, about our hopes and dreams for the future, this book is dedicated to my sons Cameron, Bobby, and Elliot, “rightly loving the ones you love” (*Antigone* 99).



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Preface

This book highlights a conversation between theology and tragedy, not in a comprehensive or systematic way (such an overview would be impossible, after all) but as an exploration of some important and shared concerns. What are the merits and challenges of placing the central narrative of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ in tragic terms? This is a conversation that is ongoing and ever incomplete, given that there is an immense range of literature and Christian theology, and that both fields resist conceptualization in profound ways. Tragedies explore diverse and impossible questions, and Christian theology is not that different; to speak coherently of an infinite and triune God is a similarly challenging and endless project. Karen Kilby notes that when Aquinas speaks of the Trinity, he “is content to present us, at times with proposals neither he nor we can grasp ... if we strain and squint hard enough we can *just about* see what he means.”¹ This is not to say that *nothing* can be said. Much has been said about theology and tragedy, both separately and together, but it must be said with an awareness of their inherent instabilities.

This book argues that tragedy explores areas of theological interest and that it has influenced Christian theology in vital ways. Christian theology has a long history of using what is at hand, from Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies to modern conceptions of human rights. Not all churches or theologians have agreed with the extent or even helpfulness of any particular engagements, but such influences have been constant throughout all Christian thought. Jethro was Gentile in race and religion, but he was also Moses’ father-in-law who advised him at a critical time (Exodus 18:24); Moses himself was raised an Egyptian. The New Testament shaped and adapted the Greek language for its own purposes, but the words had pagan origins and meanings that influenced Christian thought and practice, as did the Vulgate’s Latin. The word often translated as “sin” in the New Testament (*hamartia*) was used centuries earlier by the Greek tragedians and Aristotle to mean a mistaken action. The ability of Christianity to engage such influences and ideas is vital and profound, especially if the topics are of shared interest and usefulness. For Augustine, if pagan ideas and concepts

were useful, then they were there for the taking, just as the Israelites took from the Egyptians before their exodus.

Understanding Christ's life and death, as well as the Christian life, as a literary and theological tragedy is not foreign to the Bible or the Christian tradition, but actually has a long and interesting history. These chapters explore that history, as well as important questions about rationality, sacrifice, contingency, guilt, and perception. In the hopes of exploring these questions with clarity, I have taken a key thematic figure as a basis for Chapters 3–7. Seeing certain persons as embodying particular themes is common in tragic theory, and in following this pattern I don't intend to imply identifications that are uncomplicated, reductive, or final; they are not meant as archetypes. The diversities in tragedy and theology are immense, and any generalizations made here are intended solely for clarity and brevity of point, given that "of making many books there is no end" (Eccl 12:12).

The completion of this project would have been impossible without the generous support of Pfeiffer University in providing a sabbatical. I am very grateful for this privilege, as well as the workspace provided at First Baptist Church of Albemarle, NC. I am also indebted to Alyssa Queen and my father Tom Taylor for generously proofing these chapters with keen eyes.

Note

- 1 Karen Kilby, "Aquinas, the Trinity and the Limits of Understanding," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7.4(2005), 414.

1 The question of tragedy

Beyond tragedy

In 1938, Reinhold Niebuhr decided to change the title of his book *God and History* to *Beyond Tragedy*. Niebuhr had come to rethink human action, sin, and hope in light of recent historical events, and tragic literature and theories were shaping his thought. The hopes of the Social Gospel and Christian ecumenism had foundered with World War I, and totalitarianism was on the rise. How could social progress and humanistic hope end in such reversals? Niebuhr found tragedy, and tragic irony, to be useful for making sense of his context and theological beliefs, especially as he explored the difficulties of human aspiration and moral action given the intractability of human sin and pride. For him, God, history, and tragedy were connected, and tragedy could be a resource and conversation partner for Christian theology.

Niebuhr was not the first theologian to take an interest in tragedy. Hegel began the real enterprise of tragic theory, inspiring countless philosophers and theologians to explore tragedy as a genre, influence, and mode of thought, sometimes for illustrative purposes, other times as a unique source of human knowledge and literary expression. But other theologians resisted the theological use of tragedy, including Reinhold's own brother Richard, who refused to use tragedy as a category for history or God. For Richard, God is "always in history," and therefore history can never be tragic.¹ Reinhold took a different tack. If God was beyond history, it could be tragic but redeemable.

Beyond Tragedy, as well as Reinhold's later *The Irony of American History*, uses tragedy and literary genres for theological exploration and expression. He is less sanguine than Richard about sin, history, and hope, given the intractability of sin and the necessity for human moral action. History remains deeply problematic and disjunctive, full of what Hardy titled *Life's Little Ironies*, as well as the larger and more looming ones. There is an irony to the fact that evil can be caused by good people and their good intentions. For Niebuhr, Christianity is an ironic faith where justified sinners must act in history for good despite unintended consequences and

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human pride. Tragedy is theologically useful for its imagery and descriptive power, for speaking of human suffering and pride, and for its warning of how human ego is present in even the best moral intentions.

Tragedy and pity

Suffering, loss, *pathos*, spectators, recognition, betrayal, despair – there is much in Christ’s passion that is in a tragic mode, as Niebuhr came to realize. Tragic categories and examples are helpful in his theology, but the nature of their relationship remains unclear. One of the reasons for the difficulty is the problem of defining tragedy – what is it, exactly? “The word tragic is commonly used very loosely,”² he notes, even as he attempts, and fails, to define it. Perhaps tragedy is beyond pity. Christ’s strength is really pity for others and the ensuing suffering, but it is ultimately pitiable “because it is too pure to be triumphant.”³ In contrast, tragedy is something rebellious and ennobling and therefore not pitiable. With integrity, such a hero stands against great forces and falls, leaving the audience in fear and awe, like Prometheus stealing fire from Zeus with proud, triumphant strength, or Camus’ Sisyphus scornfully rolling his rock up the hill. Henchard’s proclamation in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is, “But I am greater than my fate!” If tragedy is about rebellion, then Jesus is not really a tragic hero, Niebuhr reasons. So what is the nature of Jesus’ relationship to tragedy?

Pity, Niebuhr notes in his titular chapter “Beyond Tragedy,” is a strange emotion. It would be simpler (and more scholastically convenient) if it separated cleanly from tragedy, but who can say where pity ends and tragedy begins? Niebuhr draws back here, realizing the problem. He wants to say that tragedy is something beyond pity because pity is too coarse for the grandness of tragedy, but he can’t because the two are inextricably connected. Niebuhr has a winsome habit of suggesting categories only to then erase them. In a wonderful turn of phrase, he undoes his prior attempts to distinguish them, writing that “the genuinely tragic is curiously compounded with the pitiful.” It’s marvelous in its cadence, honesty, and willing reversal on a prior point. Niebuhr also argues that Christ refused to pity, but that argument is odd given the pity of Christ for Jerusalem throughout the gospel of Luke (13:34–35; 19:41–44; 21:20–24). Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, his death and the coming Roman destruction of the city, looms over the gospels. There is both pity and tragedy in Jesus’ narrative.

Pity, after all, has long been identified as part of the experience of tragedy, for the audience of a tragic performance, the chorus onstage for a Greek tragedy, for characters in the narrative, and in real life. We pity those unfairly brought low. This movement from greatness to abnegation is a key element in many tragedies and tragic moments in history, such as Lear and even the Prodigal Son. Boethius’ consolation was the painful recognition of the wheel of fortune that moves poor souls from greatness to lowliness.

Pity has elements of love and reverence, and it naturally tends toward the weak and suffering. As Bonhoeffer movingly puts it,

In a world where success is the measure and justification of all things the figure of Him who was sentenced and crucified remains a stranger and is at best the object of pity.... The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard.⁴

It's no simple matter to distinguish tragedy from pity. Many have tried, as did Niebuhr, who defined pity as something more common and lowly than tragedy's grand heroes who vindicate themselves despite their defeats. For this reason, Niebuhr argues that Hardy and Ibsen failed to write true tragedy because their protagonists are too common, too close to real life. But he then admits an admiration for Ibsen's well-told tales that "mirror a real aspect of human existence." So Hardy and Ibsen *did* write some form of tragedy that is realistic and representative of common, everyday experience. But if Hardy, Ibsen, and the gospels are more *pathos* than tragedy, then why discuss tragedy at all? Niebuhr settles with the approach that Christianity is "beyond tragedy," but words such as *beyond* are frustratingly vague, suggesting only an imprecise relationship, a sort of "over there." He assumes that Christianity, the cross, and Christian living connect to tragic experience and history, but how, and to what extent? Perhaps Christian faith is something beyond tragedy, somehow redemptive of tragedy while not erasing its reality, but Niebuhr keeps restating the issue because he's not satisfied with his analysis. In *Beyond Tragedy*, he is left trying to define Christianity as somehow related to the tragic, but not really. "Jesus is, superficially considered, a tragic figure; yet not really so." Which is it?

Niebuhr's essay "Christianity and Tragedy" in *Beyond Tragedy* is interesting in its technique. It probes as it redacts with an amiable, confident uncertainty. It attempts to distinguish Christianity and tragedy in some way, but ends up admitting that "there are greater similarities" than differences between Christianity and tragedy.⁵ He has an intuitive honesty regarding their similarities, in that tragedy is theologically useful despite the immense variety in tragic literature, even though the pegs won't quite square with the holes. Part of Niebuhr's difficulty is he's not sure what tragedy is, and he's far from alone. Ever since Aristotle, scholars have argued about what constitutes tragedy, how it works, and what its boundaries are, but no definition has won the day. This is not uncommon; we've long struggled to define even the most basic categories like philosophy and art. Scholars naturally want to define a thing in order to explore it, even as the genres or fields of knowledge resist categorization. But tragedy is peculiarly allergic to categorizing because of its resistance to rational precision, its invitation to consider thorny questions without answering them.

Pity is what Jesus feels for Jerusalem as he weeps over its coming destruction: "Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves" (Luke 23:28).

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For Niebuhr, this is Christ's pity for sinners. But on a deeper level, Christ weeps because Jerusalem's destruction is connected to its rejection of him; it is his presence that precipitates it all. What does it mean for the Messiah to be rejected by his own people? Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that Christ's weeping over Jerusalem is a more personal struggle. He is considering his rejection by his own people and that his presence creates a division between people, especially between Jews and Christians; "in the most human way; there is the full, pure hope that the people of God will accept God's word," but "at some point at the peak of the struggle between the Word and the people, the human awareness breaks through that Israel will not be converted." For Christ, this is his hour in which he weeps, as he "experiences in a human way" the terrible irony that "he is not converting, but hardening, the hearts of men ... in which he experiences the uselessness of the most extreme human effort."⁶ The proclamation of God's kingdom results in a costly and disastrous human "no." Christ has brought not peace, but a sword of division (Matt 10:34). Jesus was the Jewish Messiah who extended God's covenant with the Gentiles, but the result was the church's painful and tragic history of anti-Semitism.

Beyond tragedy

Niebuhr's later work examines irony as a way to make sense of theology and tragedy. *The Irony of American History* argues that Christianity is a form of ironic knowing and living and thus is beyond tragedy. History is tragic, as are other ways of living and thinking, but Christianity transcends them through being "in the battle and above it," as Niebuhr puts it elsewhere.⁷ But the same sorts of questions arise here as they did regarding pity, because it is not clear how we separate tragedy from irony. For example, tragedies often feature some sort of *peripeteia*, a reversal that is in its very nature ironic. It's not clear how we distinguish the irony in *Oedipus the King* from its tragedy. Similarly, it's hard to read the *ecce homo* in John's gospel (19:5) as anything but ironic and tragic, as the humiliated Jesus is contrasted with Pilate; during his Crucifixion, the chief priests complain: "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews" (19:21). It's a straw man to make irony a safe haven from tragedy.

Tragedy and theology have an odd relationship, which is why Niebuhr struggles to relate them. He is not alone; tragedy has a way of doing this. Theophilus of Antioch, for example, stated that Homer and Hesiod were "inspired by demons," but then proceeds to say that their doctrines correspond to the Old Testament prophets (*Apology to Autolychnus* 2.8). For Niebuhr, "Christianity is a religion which transcends tragedy,"⁸ but he is unclear about what this means or how it happens. Karl Jaspers has a similar struggle, that there cannot be a Christian tragedy, that "Christ is the deepest symbol of failure in this world, yet he is in no sense tragic."⁹

These difficulties are a bit of a warning to all who explore tragedy, because it remains unstable ground. Niebuhr attempts another formulation, that “the Cross is not tragic but the resolution of tragedy,”¹⁰ but how can tragedy be resolved if not from within tragedy itself? Christianity has studiously cared for the doctrine of the incarnation that healing must come from within human reality and history. Transcendence requires participation on some level in order to redeem it, after all. Is tragedy something that can be healed from without, *de jure*, or is it healed *de facto* (or even better, *per facto*), through and within? Gregory of Nazianzus argued, “For that which he has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved” (Epistle 101). Like Niebuhr, Hans Urs von Balthasar sees tragedy as a way of describing the human condition and history, but for him, it must be healed from within. The incarnation is God entering the world stage, and the tragedy of existence, in order to overcome it.

And he enters upon this inheritance, not merely through a victorious act of surpassing them, something that would (so to speak) overcome the tragedy of men through a more untragic tragedy of the Son of God, but first of all by entering within the form of suffering of all of humanity and sharing in this suffering, as it has been revealed to us in the ultimate contradictoriness both of Greek existence and of Jewish existence.¹¹

For God to overcome the tragedy of the world from outside would be untragic, just as, for the early church, God could overcome sin and death only through an incarnational encounter. Otherwise we may be left in a deeper despair, as Niebuhr himself realized: “Without the Cross men are beguiled by what is tragic ... in human existence into despair.”¹² But the same is true of tragedy. Despite tragedy’s own despairs, there is a kind of hope beyond it.

Tragedy’s landscape

There is a history of theological engagement with tragedy and tragic theory, even without an accepted, precise definition. The word “tragedy” can be an authorial flourish, evoking a numinous sense of pain in the midst of unfortunate events and sympathetic circumstances. This is not surprising, given that it is a term that peculiarly resists definition; it is something recognized by a family resemblance more than some magical formula. History shows the failure of any accepted definition of tragedy, and its allusive power has meant its fairly free use in many contexts. In the end, “tragedy is a terrain, rather than a single object.”¹³

This has not stopped many rich attempts to settle the matter. The impetus for definition goes back to Socrates, who often led with “let us define things first,” although even Socrates was sometimes left scratching his head

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at defining even the simplest of concepts. Precise definitions elude most scholarly categories and analyses. It is no surprise, then, that attempts to define tragedy run into the same problems. Helen Gardner notes that, despite the vast differences between *Hamlet* and the *Oresteia*, no one doubts or qualifies them as authentic tragedy.¹⁴ In reality, the problem with tragedy is that it is, in its very nature, inherently resistant to conceptualization. Tragedy explores boundaries, dissonances, questions, and therefore is peculiarly indefinable. As Terry Eagleton observes, they have all failed. “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.”¹⁵

Tragedy is a surreptitious genre, unstable and resistant to categorization. It is a literary genre, a human experience, an event, a kind of irresolvable conflict, a situation, a literary theory, and a mode of philosophical thought, which explains why the word can cause so much confusion. It is a transliteration from the Greek *tragoedia*, which may mean something like “goat-song,” but as with many ancient words, we’re not really sure on the translation or meaning; from at least the ninth century, there were several etymological theories,¹⁶ and not much has changed since then. Whether the goat-song refers to a prize or an event is simply not known.

Tragedy has withstood changes in language, culture, empire, and performance. For the ancient Athenians, tragic drama was a performance that was civic, religious, and competitive. To act out disturbing stories, as part of a competition that ultimately unified and expressed the reality of Athens against the backdrop of democracy, is fairly unique. Other cultures may have practiced dramatic performances, dances, and sacred stories as both cultic and political events, but not in formalized ways as the Greeks did, connecting the city-state, democracy, and the theater. Satyr plays were performed by the ancient Greeks alongside the tragedies at the *Dionysia*, the spring religious festival dedicated to Dionysus. Centuries later, the Roman thinker Seneca was writing tragedies with no intention of their competitive performance. With the rise of the novel in the seventeenth century, the dramatic grand heroes of the classical era shifted to the domestic problems of bourgeois moderns in prose.

Tragic theory

The genre of tragedy, how it works and how to define it, is the arena of tragic theory, and it has been an issue ever since Aristotle. Ideas about tragedy have shifted greatly throughout the millennia. In the ancient world, tragedy was thought to be universal, universalizing, and typical, while history was particular and concrete,¹⁷ but the opposite definition has been argued in recent centuries. For the classical world, tragedy was often seen as melodramatic fiction (the evocative Greek word for fiction was *plasma*, something elastic and untrue) with its use of the supernatural, gods, oracles, and plot

devices like the *deus ex machina*. In contrast, contemporary approaches to tragedy see it prizing particularity against the generalizing tendencies of styles such as epics. Aristotle's famous words about tragedy are brief and somewhat cryptic, more notes about *Oedipus the King* than considered analysis. For him, good tragedy should focus on actions and events related to a fatal flaw of the protagonist, occur over 24 hours, include a dramatic reversal of events or circumstances (*peripeteia*) and a shift from ignorance to knowledge (*anagnorisis*), resulting in a purifying (cathartic) pity and fear in the audience. *Oedipus the King*, therefore, occurs over one day as he comes to know his identity and culpability, moving from Theban hero and king to a blind, exiled beggar. Aristotle's laconic definition is useful but only in a limited way; it fails to appreciate the variety of tragic drama even in his own day, much less modern tragedy. The sequel *Oedipus at Colonus* is considered a tragedy, yet it lacks both *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*; *Medea* lacks *anagnorisis*, and *Philoctetes* lacks a catastrophic reversal. Aristotle thinks that the fall of the virtuous is not tragic, but this rules out Antigone, Electra, and Cordelia, and what of the unlucky, such as Philoctetes? Tragedy remains a fluid and unsystematic genre.

Nietzsche's famous *The Birth of Tragedy* defined Greek tragedy as a battle between the structuring work of Apollo and the creative force of Dionysus, who is both generative and destructive (one must destroy in order to recreate, after all, as the Hindu god Ganesh with his strong elephant head reminds us). Authentic tragedy trespasses with joyful destruction, celebrating the breaking of Apollonian distinctions. Nietzsche's analysis of tragedy has proven richly resilient, but like Aristotle's definition, it doesn't succeed with every tragedy. Nietzsche was interpreting certain Greek tragedies and Wagner as his ideal, much as Aristotle did with *Oedipus the King*. Tragic theories are a bit like the quest for the historical Jesus: they end up saying more about the interpreter than the texts themselves.

For part of the twentieth century, scholars favored the idea of a tragic flaw that is brought to light in the course of a tragedy. This had its origins in the literary criticism of A.C. Bradley. Bradley's work on Hegel led him to see true tragedy as involving some kind of inner tragic flaw for the tragic hero, such as Hamlet's indecisiveness, Othello's suspiciousness, or Oedipus' prideful blindness. For many decades, this was canonical, and literary studies analyzed most tragedies according to the protagonist's tragic flaw; Oedipus was decent enough, but too proud, and Hamlet dithered too much.

Other scholars debated tragedy as solely literary genre and aesthetic construction. Real tragic experience is demeaning and boorishly everyday, while tragic literature is refined and artistic. This approach tries to draw a neat line, much as Niebuhr did between tragedy and pity, but such distinctions remain unconvincing, as Niebuhr himself realizes (at times, seemingly mid-sentence). To separate tragic literature and theory from common, human experiences is to reject works like *Death of Salesman*, *Clarissa*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as not being authentic tragedy. Eagleton and

Raymond Williams have forced many to rethink such aesthetic judgments. How can the misery of poverty in *Mother Courage and Her Children* or *Beloved*, for example, be somehow not worthy enough to be tragedy, but torment an arrogant king a bit in *King Lear* and it is given canonical status? It's hard not to smell privilege. Often the theory proves the canonicity of particular works, and vice versa; to value collision is to look to *Antigone*, tragic flaws to Shakespeare, mistaken actions to *Oedipus the King*.

Some scholars are unsure what to do with prose and the novel, arguing that only drama can be authentically tragic. This position also runs into discrepancies. Homer is considered by Plato and the Attic tragedians as the father of tragedy, but he didn't write drama at all, and he may have been the first novelist (scholars aren't sure about that genre either). There is a general judgment that George Eliot is too optimistic to write tragedy, but then sometimes *Middlemarch* is included. Because Hardy's early novels featured references to Greek and Shakespearean works and settings, they are sometimes admitted to the canon. To mold the tragic heritage to the novel *might* be okay. Jennifer Wallace comments, "Thomas Hardy's novels might reasonably be termed tragic, in that he attempted to impose a classical tragic structure upon the non-classical landscape of Wessex."¹⁸ Rowan Williams falls prey to this,¹⁹ as does Niebuhr. Hardy is often the one most discounted. There's something in Hardy that makes scholars uncomfortable, because his work seems tragic but they can't quite square it with a theory. Hardy is all over the place, seen as classical in some works and modern in others, from *The Return of the Native* to *Jude the Obscure*. He started with poetry, moved to novels, and then moved back to poetry. He was accused of atheism but never identified as such, was horrified of cruelty in its Christian and Nietzschean forms, and we simply don't know what to do with him. Half a century ago, Ian Gregor asked what kind of fiction Thomas Hardy wrote,²⁰ and we're still unsure today. The same can be posed about his tragedy, but no one has a clear answer because there isn't one. There isn't a clear answer about Shakespeare, either, or about Euripides. It's not a question of the author's vision, but of tragedy itself, which is inherently unstable and resistant to categorization. Eagleton and Nathan Scott hold that there is something vital in Hardy that should be wrestled with, even if they aren't really sure what it is.

Sometimes it's simply the idea of the novel that irks critics, that it's too individualistic an experience to read a book in comparison to the communal performance of the theater – never mind that far more plays have been read than performed, and some tragic plays were never intended for performance. Others find the subject matter less worthy. The bourgeois protagonists of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or *Death of a Salesman* are smaller than queens and kingdoms, and their problems seem far more fixable and less menacing, economic oppression being a smaller order than inscrutable Greek gods. But these newer tragic works simply reflect the enormous changes in world history in past centuries as nations have

embraced constitutions and republicanism over the divine right of kings. Wars and economics may seem more tractable than divine madness and trickster gods, but recent centuries have shown that they are not. To think that social evils are unworthy of tragedy is to be rather naive about them, to echo the enormous optimism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the world is inexorably improving. Meanwhile, children starve and tyrants play.

We are left with “a theory in ruins,” as Eagleton titles the first chapter of his *Sweet Violence*. Horace Kallen is quite right that “there is no absolute problem of evil any more than there is an absolute Man.”²¹ Tragedy, like evil and suffering, is inherently messy, ever resistant to systematic explanations. There may be a sense of noble despair before ironic catastrophe, or the boldness of the strangely empowered hero who defies, or accepts, fate. It may reflect pride, rebellion, transgression, revenge, victimhood, a noble error, an Achilles’ heel, the struggle between the private and public, a determined freedom, an interior struggle, an unavoidable destiny, mysterious forces, or an unfortunate and irreversible series of events. It often has an ironic fall from grace, especially when within one’s greatness there is also a fatal flaw. It always includes some sort of loss, which is one of the few givens in tragic literature, along with some presence of irony, but that loss can be manifested in many ways. Tragedy can be located in the events, the characters, or the effects upon its audience. It can be the possibility of mistaken human actions that lead to catastrophe. Tragedy can be a struggle with external forces, such as the mysteries of the gods, Fate, the Furies, and the oracles, or how rival goods can become collisional in the social forces and conditions of one’s time. Tragedy can also be an inner struggle, the question of the psyche in the depths of human desire, imagining, perception, and struggles for authenticity. It can also be poor timing or bad luck.

Although there is no unifying definition or scheme to tragic literature, this does not mean there aren’t family resemblances. Terry Eagleton develops three groupings: tragic action, collision, and circumstance. Some tragedies primarily engage a tragic action, such as Oedipus’ determination to solve the riddle of Thebes’ plague, or the family murders of the *Oresteia*. Other tragedies describe irreconcilable opposition, as between two different goods. When the demands of the state conflict with the family fidelity, as with *Antigone*, then there is a tragic struggle. The significance is that, unlike Aristotle’s focus on a tragic action, here there is a kind of deep-seated opposition, and tragedy is the result of powerful, colliding forces. The tragic opposition can be within the protagonist’s psyche, who may be pulled in multiple directions at the same time. Eagleton’s insight, built upon that of his mentor Raymond Williams, is to point to tragic circumstances. It is not a tragic action or collision, but a situation that causes the tragedy, as for Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure*; his lack of education, poor choice in lovers, family history, and alcoholism prevent him from achieving his vocational hopes. Philoctetes is abandoned by his friends after a

poisonous snakebite, as unlucky a circumstance as any. Luck (*tuchē*) points to factors beyond human control, the contingency and resistance that form the backdrop to human existence.

The collisional aspect of tragedy can be developed in other ways. These irreconcilable oppositions are deep and constitutive of human life and existence. For Balthasar, the fact that human life and goodness are both ephemeral creates an existential tragedy. The things we desire and the things that comfort us are finite and transitory, and the good lives that we build eventually end in death (or the paralyzing fear of death). There is an incongruity between our intentions and their results, our desires and their fulfillment, between what is and what should be, between our love that “lives on propinquity, but dies of contact,” wrote Thomas Hardy.²² In some ways, this kind of tragedy is rooted in economics, as there is a limited number of goods available in our world, and scarcity is the norm. C.S. Lewis agreed, holding that love is potentially tragic: “The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation.”²³ What happens when we desire an eternal good not of this world, Augustine asked, and many theologians and philosophers have developed this theme. For Pascal, it results in a wretchedness; we strive for something unavailable to us, and the Christian hope is for bliss in heaven. Bertrand Russell and Albert Camus also see a hopeful wretchedness in the human ability to create our own meaning and hope. But others, such as Schopenhauer, see a despairing wretchedness with no final hope. There is an existential tragedy to simply being human.

The terrain of tragedy has highs and lows, and scholars do speak of things being more or less tragic. The *Oresteia* ended with punishment averted, and the vengeful spirits of the Furies are transformed into the Kindly Ones. *King Lear* is notably painful, especially its jarring ending with Cordelia’s unnecessary death, which was too much for eighteenth-century England, so they redacted that bit. Some tragedies, as George Steiner has argued, end in absolute tragedy, while others are more mixed. Niebuhr conceived of a “purest tragedy,” and Balthasar, William Lynch, and Ben Quash also discerned levels of tragedy.²⁴ On one level, moral actions may be clear but costly. Deeper and more systemic is when actions boomerang into unexpected catastrophes; they may hide the good or end in failure.²⁵ Tragic waste is the remainder to our moral vision and actions, reminding us how anyone can be made a fool. It was too easy a jibe for Chesterton to call Hardy the village idiot. Weil noted that “a village idiot in the literal sense of the world if he really loves the truth, is infinitely superior to Aristotle in his thought,”²⁶ and Balthasar commented that saints may be ambiguous or thought of as fools.²⁷ They may be hidden or forgotten; Hardy put it simply: “There are many unkept Good Fridays.”

Yet tragedy’s inherent instability, its interrogative mode and resistance to conceptualization, means that it is not wholly saturnine or defeatist. Tragic suffering can lead to personal and societal transformation. In the *Oresteia*, the Furies become the Kindly Ones, and wise justice prevails in Athena’s

judgment. There is a social challenge and critique: if grinding poverty makes some people's existence tragic, then oughtn't we to do something about it? Beggars and sycophants appear often, calling for our pity. Oedipus and Lear move us, as does the image of the crucifixion. In the end, we are left with this powerful and strange matrix of questioning, narrative, and suffering, and that is all that can be said. Tragedy "prompts the spectator to submit the human condition, limited and necessarily finite as it is, to a general interrogation,"²⁸ even as it itself remains indefinable in many ways. The mistake of many tragic theorists is to assume that in considering the worst, as tragedy does, is to somehow assume that is all there is. But tragedy has the odd ability to point beyond itself, to move beyond itself despite the worst. Only by naming suffering, by what Hardy calls a "full look at the worst" in "In Tenebris II," can we move past it. In *King Lear*, Edgar holds "And worse I may be yet. The worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" Are these words of promise, or a threat, Eagleton asks?²⁹

When it comes to tragedy, nothing really works, and everyone is a hypocrite.

Notes

- 1 Scott R. Erwin, *The Theological Vision of Reinhold Niebuhr's The Irony of American History: "In the Battle and Above It"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30.
- 2 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1938), 156.
- 3 Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 155.
- 4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 77–78.
- 5 Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 165.
- 6 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 269–70. Although Von Balthasar doesn't use the word *tragedy* in this paragraph, his analysis is consistent with how he often describes tragedy.
- 7 Erwin, *Theological Vision*, 2.
- 8 Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 155.
- 9 Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy Is Not Enough* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953), 40.
- 10 Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 155.
- 11 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology* vol. 3: *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 400.
- 12 Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 20.
- 13 Jennifer Geddes, "Religion and the Tragic," *Literature and Theology* 19.2 (2005), 97.
- 14 Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 93.
- 15 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 4.
- 16 In the ninth century, Sedulius Scotus notes that "goat-song" may be related to the booty of war, an award for a composition, or the dregs of desserts. See Carol Symes, "The Tragedy of the Middle Ages," in *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the Fourth Century BCE to the Middle Ages*, ed. Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Revermann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 346.

12 *The question of tragedy*

- 17 Jeff Jay, *The Tragic in Mark: A Literary-Historical Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 43.
- 18 Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 168.
- 19 Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 149.
- 20 Ian Gregor, "What Kind of Fiction Did Hardy Write?," *Essays in Criticism* 16(1966): 290–308.
- 21 Horace Meyer Kallen, *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1959), 42.
- 22 Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 230.
- 23 C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Glasgow: Collins, 1991), 111. Michael Ward, "The Tragedy is in the Pity: C.S. Lewis and the Song of the Goat," in *Christian Theology and Tragedy*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 154.
- 24 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama vol 1: Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 425–26. William F. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: The dimensions of the literary imagination* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2004), 109–10. Ben Quash, "Four Biblical Characters: In Search of a Tragedy," in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 24–33.
- 25 Christopher Steck, "Tragedy and the Ethics of Hans Urs Von Balthasar," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21(2001), 245.
- 26 Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1981), 329.
- 27 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord vol 5: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 138.
- 28 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 247.
- 29 Terry Eagleton, "Tragedy and Liberalism," *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018), 252–53.

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2 The Bible and tragedy

Tragedy beyond ancient Greece

Some scholars have argued that the Attic tragedians were unique, and all tragedy after them is a mere imitation and copying. The purest tragic literature ended with Euripides – or possibly Sophocles, because some have argued that Euripides isn't true tragedy. Tragedy is not limited to the ancient Greeks, though. It is a literary mode that explores catastrophe, loss, and irony and is a recognizable mode of world literature and human thought. Japanese Noh theater, modern drama, and novels are genres that are distant from ancient Greek tragic norms and culture, yet they are commonly recognized as being tragic. This is not to say that all tragedies are equal, or that there aren't periods and works of particular tragic flourishing. Helen Gardner probes why there are particular periods of tragic flourishing in ancient Athens, Elizabethan England, and seventeenth-century France, but she admits that "it might be better not to ask, since satisfactory answers are unlikely to be found."¹ The particular power of tragedy in these time periods and works does not exclude tragedy in other times and places, such as Biblical and medieval tragedies. This applies to the question of modern tragic literature, as when Gardner speaks of successful modern tragic novels that suggest "modern tragedy" may be an "unreal category."² Scholars often assume the presence of particular and recognizable genres in various cultures and places, even if their definitions and influences are elusive. For example, comedy, poetry, and wisdom literature are found in various cultures as well as the Bible, and understanding them is useful. The genre of tragedy, however, has faced resistance.

Modern interpreters often assume that tragedy is, by definition, atheistic and nihilistic. Given this premise, along with the assumption that the Bible is optimistic, their relationship must be one of hostility. Tragedy would admit no optimism, and the Bible would resist any notions of tragic loss. Yet such characterizations are clearly untrue; tragedy offers no such simple stability nor breezy demarcation, and canonical status is never that easy. There are many tragedies with some kind of "happy ending," while plenty of Biblical narratives end in unresolved darkness. Many Greek tragedies

used the technique of the *deus ex machina*, where a god was mechanically brought out at the end of the play to resolve the plot and to signal the play's end; these plays do not end in gloomy pessimism, but in restoration. Many of Shakespeare's plays are considered "problem plays" and unclassifiable by scholars, and Euripides is also accused of having plays with problematic endings and genres.³ Scholars are also mistaken to characterize the Bible and Christian faith as glibly optimistic, given the narratives of Joseph, Saul, David, Job, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul as well as the events of church history. Regarding the Song of Songs, the Venerable Bede noted, "the dramatic, or active, is the genre ... as is the case in tragedies and plays ... and in our scriptures, the Song of Songs is written in this genre."⁴

To frame Greek tragedy as some sort of static, definable norm puts scholars in a difficult corner. The looming question is, what about Shakespeare? He does not directly imitate or allude to Greek tragedy, nor does he use a chorus or *deus ex machina*. It is conceivable that he invented tragedy afresh in his time period, or he may have been aware of the medieval definitions, concepts, and understandings of Greek tragedy. Shakespeare's style, source material, and monotheism show that tragedy works outside of ancient pagan Athens; he is not translating or putting Greek tragic drama in a new setting, but creating something new but still recognizably tragic. It is a rare scholar who will argue that Shakespeare is not true tragedy (although some have tried). Others, such as A.C. Bradley, have taken the opposite approach, holding that Shakespeare is the only true tragedy, and the Greeks but a pale intimation of it. Monolithic and historicist approaches to tragedy often consider Aristotle's brief notes about tragedy as some kind of canonical definition. Such simplicities are problematically reductive, and they leave scholars painted into odd corners. It's always a mistake to ossify tragedy, to reify it into some golden norm, especially given that such a norm has never existed. For Carol Symes, even Aristotle does not approach it as some static written thing, and Attic Greek tragic drama varied greatly until, with Athens' decline, the Attic tragedians came to be held up as somehow canonical.⁵

Tragedy and the Old Testament

Various scholars have found tragedy within the Biblical canon. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* argues for Biblical narratives as an ancient and singular mix of tragedy and everyday realism, as seen in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Peter's denial, and the Incarnation.⁶ For Northrop Frye, there are tragic arcs in the Biblical narratives of Fall, Exile, and Crucifixion.⁷ If tragedy is a way to think about thinking, as Rowan Williams argues,⁸ then an effective storyteller can create these techniques independently of Greek influence. Tragedy, properly considered, is not unique to ancient Greece. Theologians have, for some time, found tragic themes in the Bible, as when Kierkegaard discerned a tragic dialectic in the Old Testament

in Abraham and Isaac, Moses, Jonah, some of the prophets, and Adam and Eve.⁹

Some of the Bible's tragic narratives may be a result of direct Greco-Roman influence. Jeff Jay points to a tragic mode at work in the Second Temple period, when the historical influence of Greek culture is highly likely.¹⁰ He argues that Jewish and Christian writers were using tragic techniques such as recognition, reversal, and the *deus ex machina* with great effect, as seen in 2 Maccabees, Judith, the gospel of Mark, and Philo. The presence of a Jewish and Christian tragic mode shows that Jewish and Christian thinking are far from opposed to tragic expression and influence, and older narratives such as Joseph and Saul could predate Greek tragedy. Like Noh theater, Biblical tragedies simply reflect a human creativity that discovered what the Greeks discovered, that stories about catastrophe and loss, told with irony and including reversal and recognition, are a powerful way of reflecting on human existence and loss.

Early tragedies: Joseph, Judah, and Samson

The story of Joseph dominates the book of Genesis. His divine gift of dream interpretation, along with his naive arrogance, leads his brothers to attempt his murder, have him taken into slavery, and then fake his death before their father. His suffering in Egypt, eventual rise to power, and later reencounter with his brothers and father during a famine creates an emotional, moving, and powerful tragic narrative. The story contains reversals and scenes of recognition, which are marks of Jay's tragic mode. The questions of human freedom and providence, along with the painfully won ending, make use of tragic techniques: the problematic family dynamics, a prophecy or oracle that questions fate and freedom, a certain arrogance in the protagonist, reversals of fortune, recognition, and eventual triumph. Joseph's prophetic dream, where he will rise to dominate his brothers, looms over the narrative much like *Oedipus the King*; Jews and Greeks would have known the end results to these narratives (prophecies always win, after all), but would have enjoyed the dramatic tension as it plays out for the characters and events. The restorative ending for Joseph sounds like *The Oresteia*. These techniques and effects at work in Genesis, especially their "complication, reversal, and dénouement," would predate Greek tragedy and reflect a well-constructed narrative.¹¹ There is also, as Ben Quash traces,¹² a moral tragedy for Judah. Judah participated in Joseph's enslavement and later guaranteed Benjamin's safety to his father. When in Egypt Benjamin faces imprisonment, Judah is left in a desperate state of penitence, pleading to take Benjamin's place out of love for his father and guilt over the past. It is Judah, and not Joseph or Benjamin (as we might expect), who is the ancestor of Israel and of Jesus.

Samson evidences a tragic fall. As a powerful judge among the Israelites, he does something foolish and experiences catastrophe. His cartoonish life

is like Heracles, but it turns grim when he is betrayed by his lover Delilah, then blinded and imprisoned by his enemies. His mistake is larger than life, similar to Ajax, Othello, Deianeira and Heracles (*Women of Trachis*), Pentheus (*The Bacchae*), and Philoctetes, who all suffer exaggerated falls from grace. Samson's revenge shifts the plot to a poetic justice, but the losses remain. Milton traced the tragic possibilities of Samson in his play *Samson Agonistes* (1671), which was a basis for Handel's 1735 opera. Milton's introduction to *Samson Agonistes* comments that he wanted to connect the Biblical story of Samson, along with Job and the Psalms, to Greek tragedy and Aristotle.

Monarchy, history, and vulnerability: Saul and David

David is extolled as one of Israel's great kings, the one after God's own heart who authored some of the Psalms and was an ancestor of Jesus. He was a golden child who won every battle, whose decisions were blessed and fruitful in his wisdom, mercy, and wiliness. Yet David was not Israel's first king; in his shadow stood Saul. He too was a golden child, chosen by God, anointed as king, and a decisive fighter and military leader. He was also successful in his battles against the Philistines, but he was ultimately and painfully replaced by David as Israel's leader, savior, and king.

Saul's fall was mysterious and one of the Bible's most powerful tragedies. He was Israel's first king, chosen and anointed by God through Samuel, but he finds himself rejected by God and replaced by David for uncertain and morally dubious reasons. His periods of possession were like the Greek spirit of tragic madness, or *até*. When Samuel was late and his troops were deserting him, Saul offered a sacrifice to God. Just then Samuel arrived, and with ironic timing the sacrifice was deemed unlawful. Samuel was brutal in his condemnation, stating that God would have established his kingdom forever, despite that Saul was "told neither of the promise nor of the condition."¹³ The ironies continue, as David comes to success in Saul's own court as an advisor to Saul. Their families intermingle, as David marries Saul's daughter Michah and is a close friend to Jonathan, Saul's son. Saul becomes suspicious that David is indeed the neighbor who is better than him and to whom God has given the kingdom (1 Sam 15:28).

As Saul's troubles increase into something like madness, it is God who is at work, opposing Saul even as he blesses David. The rest of the narrative is an unfolding of this divine will (15:29), which is inexorable and dooming for Saul in the mode of Greek tragic destiny (*moira*) and oracle. The focus is not on how will Saul overcome his fate, but, like Oedipus, on the manner that it all works out. Like Hamlet, David must fake madness to survive, ultimately becoming the humiliated king of *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*, Balthasar observes.¹⁴ Despite his loyalty to David, Jonathan goes and dies with his father in battle, which conveniently clears

away the house of Saul. There is a dramatic effect when Saul's son is left to briefly challenge David's claim to the throne (2 Sam 2:8–4:12), but that too is resolved when the head of Ishbaal is presented to David. The prophecies, and their relationship to divine and human freedom, are left in a mysterious, ironic, and paradoxical state. The text itself highlights this problem as it struggles with how even God's mind can change regarding prophetic actions; God regrets making Saul king in 1 Sam 15:10, but some verses later God is "not a mortal, that he should change his mind" (15:29). Tragedies like this often explore such ironies and inconsistencies between freedom and determinism.

The question of Saul tarnishes David's rise and eventual decline. If the books of Samuel and Kings were written and edited during David's reign, then part of this tragedy is dynastic, that the house of David has maligned and erased the house of Saul. As Shakespeare knew, the history of dynastic succession was rife with tragedy. Most everyone in Saul's dynasty dies as David establishes his power. David may be one of Israel's greatest and most powerful kings, but he himself will fall from grace when he abducts and sleeps with Bathsheba. The ironies here are rich, as David's malicious conniving is contrasted with Uriah's righteousness, whom he has killed in battle. Nathan will accuse the king with a story; the same technique happens in *Hamlet*, where there is also a performance within a performance, and in *Bacchae* with the disguised Dionysus. David repents and suffers, and tradition holds to his authorship of some of the penitential psalms; David's "royal sufferings provide a model for those of Jesus," especially given the many references to Psalm 21 in the gospels.¹⁵ He will see problems in his own dynasty when his sons betray him in attempts to gain the throne, fulfilling God's curse through Nathan: "Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble [or evil] against you from within your own house" (2 Sam 12:11). His son Amnon rapes his daughter Tamar, and his son Absalom leads a revolution against David to take the kingdom. David's son Solomon proves to be a faithless king, despite his wisdom, and through these many reversals David ends up in an aged decline. He may have been a glorious king of a small empire, but he is left shivering and emasculated in the end (1 Kings 1:1–3). His kingdom will only survive Solomon, after which it will be divided and conquered. For Balthasar, it is the "classical tragedy of David, which in sheer quality competes with Sophocles and Shakespeare."¹⁶ His greatness, along with his faults and decline, is recorded in the Bible, along with the lingering questions about the tragic history of Saul. After Solomon, the Israelites experience division, conquest, and wars between their two kingdoms. The vast majority of kings are judged as evil, and the larger history is tragic in its repetitions of immorality, injustice, and idolatry. Notable is the appearance of the singular Queen Athaliah in 2 Kings 11, who executes all her rival claimants to protect her reign, but is later undone by a hidden successor. Her story is told in art by Doré, a tragic play by Racine, and an oratorio by Handel.

Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes, and Job

The Old Testament traces a tragic suffering and reversal for the kingdom of Israel. The Solomonic empire, Josiah's later reforms, and the return from exile augured golden ages, but they ended in dissolution. The hope for Josiah ends in his unexpected death. Later Judah is conquered, and Jerusalem and the temple destroyed. With Cyrus and the return to Palestine, there are hopes for the Second Temple and Zerubbabel, but they also end in disappointment. Both Zerubbabel and Josiah die unexpectedly through historical circumstance and misfortune, abruptly ending their more auspicious beginnings and prophesied futures. There is, as Horace Kallen summarizes it, an "irony of a chosen people that suffers, of individual tragedies like Jeremiah's and Zerubbabel's."¹⁷

This time of reversal and loss falls on Jeremiah. Jeremiah and David both dominate the Old Testament, and both their lives reflect tragic losses. Jeremiah is called to proclaim the Day of Yahweh as not a day of triumph, but of loss, and his message was rejected by his own family, his people, and the Jewish leadership. Like Cassandra and Tiresias, his words and prophecies are ignored. Jeremiah feels not only this personal rejection but also the coming suffering of his people. Like Jesus, he weeps over the destruction of Jerusalem, even desiring to flee (9:1–2). Jeremiah openly struggles with his calling and message throughout the book; he complains, doubts, and asks to be vindicated. His rejection by his own people for proclaiming God's true message is a foreshadowing of John the Baptist and of Jesus. Tillich notes that "no man with a prophetic spirit likes to foresee and foresay the doom of his own period."¹⁸ There is great irony that Jeremiah is arrested and imprisoned, but then summoned by King Zedekiah, who fears Jeremiah might be right after all (Jeremiah 37). Like Jesus before Pilate, there is a questioning of who is truly in charge, which is repeated in Chapter 38. Zedekiah is a fearful, haunted, and pathetic king, and his end is tragic and violent as his sons are executed before him. He is blinded and then taken prisoner by the Babylonians, and the bloodiness of it is reminiscent of *Medea*, *Oedipus the King*, *The Bacchae*, *Ajax*, and *King Lear*. Like Oedipus, the king who refused to see is made fully blind. Jeremiah's end is unknown; in painful Biblical fashion, he simply disappears from the narrative.

Many of the Old Testament prophets experienced rejection. For Tillich, the message of Isaiah and other prophets is the same as Greek tragedy, that arrogant overreachings result in tragic self-destruction.¹⁹ God's people can be blind to the presence and proclamation of God, blind to God's demands and judgment in history and coming events, or willingly disobedient to the covenantal demands. This is rooted early on in Moses, who is considered to be the pattern of the true prophet who knew and spoke for God. The later tradition saw Moses as the author of the melancholic Psalm 90, where the human span of life is only toil and trouble. As Moses is receiving the law, the people are simultaneously making a golden calf, ironically breaking the

commandments even as they are being given. This pattern continues for many of the prophets, such as Elijah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Like Antigone, a proclamation that challenges political and social realities can mean tragic struggle and rejection or that prophets are misperceived and persecuted. The question will arise of how to distinguish a true and false prophet, and Jeremiah's cries against his prophetic calling will be called jeremiads. It is painful to oppose historical circumstances; "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14) may be a verse of hope and promise, but it can just as easily go all wrong, as it did for Jeremiah. Time can be like in *Hamlet*: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" Jeremiah cursed the day he was born (20:14–18), as did Job. God may have "plans for welfare and not for evil," but the way to that hopeful future may be unpleasant; Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah don't get to see that future. Faithfulness to God does not mean appropriate reward.

Prophets offer a painful truth that can be willfully ignored, like Electra and Tiresias, or persecuted and rejected, like Elijah, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist. The later Jewish and Christian tradition will see this as parabolically "killing the prophets" (Neh 9:26, 1 Thess 2:15, Romans 11:3, Luke 13:34 and Matt 23:37),²⁰ including John the Baptist, Stephen, and James the son of Zebedee. To obey God's commission, as with the prophets, Moses, Psalms, Lamentations, and Job, is to suffer rejection. The climax of Stephen's speech is both biting and baiting:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.

(Acts 7:51–52)

Resistance to God in the form of persecuting the prophets is a part of the Deuteronomic view of history.²¹ The irony is played out as the enraged crowd stones him to death. This is ultimately a problem for God – what will God do about the problem of human rejection? Jeremiah sees rightly, but his message and existence are rejected as wrong, even as it all mysteriously fulfills God's plan. He is a laughingstock (20:7) and a prize of war, and tradition attributed Lamentations to him. To be part of God's message is to identify with God and to experience rejection as God does.

Israel's wisdom literature is at times confident. In Proverbs, God's gift of wisdom can be humanly comprehended and followed. But Ecclesiastes and Job sow a great doubt about such ability. Instead, Ecclesiastes holds that knowledge only increases sorrow (1:18). If there is a pattern to life, it cannot be humanly comprehended, and it all feels meaningless. God may be sovereign, but it's all inscrutable, meaningless, and prone to catastrophe (9:12). Time passes, leaving all things futile. It's not all gloom, however,

considering there's a bit of self-doubt about the teachings themselves (12:12–14), and a call to enjoy life and find peace in the moment (9:7–10, 11:9–12:8); the belief is that all is “in the hand of God” (9:1).

The Greek figure Silenus had a dark message that it is better to be dead, or to never have been born. The same wish is in Ecclesiastes (4:1–3, 6:3–5) and Job (3:9–10), who also questions how God's sovereignty is present in meaningless suffering. Richard Sewall begins his book *The Vision of Tragedy* not with Greek drama, as we might expect, but with Job, and the idea that the Hebrews had a tragic sensibility. For Sewall, Job is more potent than Prometheus or Oedipus because he is the universal image of “the mystery of undeserved suffering,”²² and Job has been called the Shakespeare of the Old Testament. Depending on when the book is dated, it could have been influenced by Greek tragedy and culture; Horace Kallen's *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy* demonstrates how Job can be reconstructed as a Greek tragedy, with its speeches and the chorus of friends. For Christians, Job is often a prefigurement of Christ because he suffers despite his righteousness. Whether Job's prose prologue and conclusion are original or not, the final form of Job reflects many tragic works that have restorative endings through the appearance of the divine (the *deus ex machina*).

Tragedy and the New Testament

The gospels

Grace comes in a new way in the New Testament, but it is, in the words of *Agamemnon*, “somehow violent” (182). The cross is central to Christianity, as Christ's passion and death dominate the Christian gospels, theology, and worship. Christians are left looking “with pleasure on what is painful to you,” as the disguised god Dionysus says in Euripides' *Bacchae* (815).²³ How does such a terrible image as the Crucifixion become central to a religion, signifying despair and hope, defeat and victory, sin and grace? Christ's freedom is living into a prophecy of betrayal by his followers and being forsaken by God. The narratives are full of ironies regarding his identity, mission, rejection, and followers; he is the awaited but unrecognized king who dies in exile. Roger Cox puts it bluntly, that the similarities between the gospels and tragedy are obvious, and the gospels are “fundamentally tragic stories.”²⁴ The gospels make use not only of tragic plots and reversals but also of tragic techniques, Jeff Jay argues. Mark's uses of reversal, revenge, recognition, lamentation, emotions, and the supernatural reflect a tragic mode.²⁵ Jesus' claim to kingship means, according to the *talio* justice of an “eye for an eye,” that he *must* be mocked as a fraudulent king. Christ's life embodies a “revolutionary reversal,” for Terry Eagleton, which he especially sees in Luke's Magnificat; the “deepest suffering and the highest exaltation” are found in both Judaism and Western tragedy.²⁶

In Jesus' life and ministry, there is an ironic reversal. Instead of an increase of faith and acceptance, he is met with growing unbelief, to his amazement (Mark 6:6). His amazing power in the gospel of Mark is to heal, feed, resurrect, and calm a storm, but that power is absent as he unheroically dies on a cross at the end. He is the Son of God in 1:1 who is abandoned in 15:34. His own disciples, for whom we feel sympathy and frustration, are blind to the reality of him and his kingdom, and their blindness is like that of Creon, Oedipus, and Pentheus. Their response to Jesus' prediction of his own terrible death is to argue over who will be more important in the new age, because they misunderstand Jesus' mission, kingdom, and teachings. They expect a new kingdom that will emerge without suffering, an *eschaton* without *tragedia*, a Jesus who does not go to Jerusalem. Their false ideas that "fulfillment will come easily and without suffering" mean that Jesus is left predicting their premature expectations of messiahs and end times (Luke 17:25).²⁷

For Donald MacKinnon, the scene of *ecce homo* in the gospel of John is powerfully tragic, as the humiliated Jesus is contrasted with Pilate. "So with an overwhelming exploitation of the resources of irony ... John presents Jesus' supreme ordeal as the judgment of the world."²⁸ Mocked and unseated kings are common in tragedy, and John puts the trope to full, painful ironies. The rejected divine king is humiliated by a human governor, and the signage is contested because it is ironically accurate ("Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man *claimed* to be king of the Jews," 19:21). The political machinations of Caiaphas the priest and Pilate the governor are revealed, as are the crowd's terrifying "amenability" and the flight of the disciples. The crowd will cry that they have no king but Caesar, a moment of ironic apostasy for a people whose only king is God (1 Sam 8:7, 12:12). In this catastrophe, divine love is veiled in sin, mysteriously present in and through violence and suffering. Without solving the problem of evil (whatever that would mean), the gospels use narrative to explore unanswerable questions about suffering, rejection, and atonement.

For MacKinnon, tragedy reflects the reality that human moral actions can result in unintended consequences and larger ramifications, the *peripeteia* and irony that can result if intentions and actions are inherently good. For MacKinnon, even God's sovereignty is not of "limitless resourcefulness,"²⁹ and this is true of Jesus in the gospels. His decision to go to neighboring towns (Mark 1:38) means others will be left uncured or without his message, and his limitation to Israel means Gentiles will not experience his miraculous presence. His wisdom and deeds mean he is rejected in his hometown, and the Gerasenes will ask him to leave after he cures the demoniac. He comes not to condemn the world but to save it, and yet in him the world is judged because he brings a sword of division. Hebrews 12:19 laments that "those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them." For Christ to raise Lazarus may prefigure his own resurrection, but it is also

part of the Sanhedrin's decision to order his execution.³⁰ Tillich notes how "every decision is tragic, because it is the decision against something which cannot be suppressed with impunity."³¹

These unfortunate outcomes, what MacKinnon calls the *surd*, are the remainders leftover from our untidy moral equations. They were present in Jesus' life, actions, and teachings, especially as Jesus' larger tragic narrative impacted others. John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming Messiah, but in the tragic mode of painful reversal; his great success as God's messenger and prophet, who drew large crowds, shifted to his imprisonment and then execution.³² His death is public, at a dinner party, which itself may have included tragic performances as part of the entertainment. There is irony and betrayal in Herod's fear because he does not want to execute John. But Salome's dance and his foolish promise force his hand, even as it fulfills prophecy and foreshadowing Jesus' own death. The end for John the Baptist and Jesus is similar as their successful ministries end in arrest, betrayals, and execution. In the early church and medieval period, John's story is repeatedly called tragic by theologians and church leaders.³³

Betrayal is the painful human response in the gospels, and is especially present in Peter and Judas. In Jesus' life and death, Peter is given careful tragic attention through his experience of reversal and recognition. He will go from being at Christ's right hand to denying Jesus, from walking on water to fearful hiding. There is an oracle in Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial. Peter vehemently denies this could ever happen in good tragic fashion, but oracles always come true, and he is left to his realization as he weeps bitterly. Earlier he had almost understood Jesus as the Christ; in the *anagnorisis* of his betrayal, he realizes, as Oedipus did, that the gods are always right. Peter is given tragic attention, but it is Judas' role that is most problematic. Was Judas chosen because he would betray Jesus, or was it his own free action? When Rodrigues faces his own moment of betrayal in Endo's novel *Silence*, his insight is that "Judas was in anguish as you are now." As with many tragic works, we are left with the larger question of how Judas stands in the "tension between providence and tragedy."³⁴

In one of MacKinnon's most celebrated passages, he traces how even Jesus' parables are not free of tragic possibilities. The father of the Prodigal Son is a kind of Lear, trapped in questions of love and duty from which there is no escape. MacKinnon asks, if the father had given a party for the elder brother, would that brother have been less dull, less puritanical? The struggle of the elder brother is related to the choices of the father and the prodigal son. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan possessed the knowledge and items to offer first aid, as well as the freedom from the Jewish law that the priest and Levite were beholden to. Kindness is not a simple matter. It could have ended differently if the Samaritan had made a medical error, or the innkeeper had not honored their agreement.³⁵

MacKinnon quotes the Duke of Wellington that a victory “is the greatest tragedy in the world, only excepting a defeat.”³⁶ For MacKinnon, we are deceived if we think there is a breezy compassion, a victory without loss, within the current moral order and human history. A costless pity and compassion is a deception. Circumstances and situations matter, and the line between comic resolution and tragic disaster can be thin at best. A situation may bring out good actions that are also flawed, and even devotion can lead to guilt.

Robert Tannehill develops how Jesus’ weeping over Jerusalem is tragic. It is only in Luke that Jesus weeps for Jerusalem and its impending destruction, which is due to its blindness.³⁷ Jesus was born a king who was to reign over and redeem Jerusalem (Luke 1:33, 2:38), but instead his failure is that he is unrecognized as the Messiah (Luke 19:41–44, Acts 3:17, 13:27). For Tannehill, the clear “tragic turn” at the weeping for Jerusalem is an intentional reversal of the earlier Benedictus, as the longed for fulfillment falls apart. Christ’s words over Jerusalem echo the pattern of the Benedictus: visitation, way of peace, enemies, and knowledge. God’s good promises and gifts can be rejected, and the failure of recognition can be catastrophic. The coming judgment echoes Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa 29:3, Jer 6:6), when the city and temple were previously under God’s judgment and military conquest. Jeremiah, like Jesus, wept over his people (9:1, 14:17). For Luke-Acts, Israel’s history is tragic.³⁸

Jesus’ mental and physical suffering on the cross is echoed, “redoubled,” as he sees the suffering of his mother, Jerusalem, and his disciples; the *Christos Paschon* calls it “an other crosse.” For Mary, a sword will pierce her heart. Balthasar describes how, for Jesus, his “human awareness breaks through that Israel will not be converted ... he is not converting, but hardening, the hearts of men. That is the hour in which he weeps for the city of God, the terrible hour in which he experiences the uselessness of the most extreme human effort.”³⁹

His presence means divided families (Luke 12:51), and his success is ultimately not with the chosen people of Israel but with the Gentiles. For MacKinnon, the Cross is the failure of Jesus’ eschatological hopes; Jerusalem faces destruction, and Christ’s death will divide Christianity from Judaism.⁴⁰ Christ is victorious over sin and death, but even his resurrection has tragic ramifications. The mission to Israel ends in defeat, but its success with the Gentiles means that Christianity will be a Gentile religion separated from Judaism; Acts, Romans, and subsequent church history will struggle to make sense of this ironic reversal. Victories can be tragic despite their triumph, and the image of the cross will birth a Christian empire that conquers, fights in Crusades, and persecutes the Jews. “We would rather clothe ourselves in a security in which there are no real defeats,” is how Christopher Devanney crisply puts MacKinnon’s analysis of ethical living, for Jesus and for us.⁴¹

Acts and Paul

MacKinnon had deep reservations about the Acts of the Apostles (he went so far as to suggest it was not written by Luke, but someone else). In Acts, he saw a Christian triumphalism and the seeds of a state church, along with the basis for an eventual anti-Semitism, because Christianity seems destined to peacefully spread throughout the Roman Empire as the disciples engaged in acts of thaumaturgy. There is a sense of providential progress, that Christianity is consonant with Rome and the *Pax Romana*, which leads to the Venerable Bede's sense of conquering for empire and church, and the cross and the crown that will conquer the New World.⁴²

MacKinnon's concerns are legitimate, but Acts is more subtle and complex than he allows. As Robert Tannehill realizes, "The grand vision of salvation for Jews and Gentiles through Jesus in Luke 2:30–32 and 3:6 appears to lead to tragic disappointment."⁴³ Acts ends despondently, with Jerusalem and Israel not redeemed, nor are God's people saved from their enemies, as the Spirit had foretold to Zechariah and Anna in the early chapters of Luke.⁴⁴ Instead, the Way's initial successes in conversions decline to a trickle by the end of Acts, and it ends in a muted hopefulness as many tragedies do. In the beginning, it seemed assured that all flesh would see God's salvation (Luke 3:6), but it concludes with closed eyes and the inability to see (Acts 28:27). Balthasar observes how the ending of Acts turns on a tragic circumstantiality; the apostle James "imperiously insisted" that Paul should submit to the Temple law, which led to Paul's arrest and eventual execution.⁴⁵ As with Jesus' ministry, it was meant to be a triumph. The hope of redemption tenuously remains in the book's strangely open ending. Like the endings of 2 Kings and *Prometheus Bound*, Acts concludes with a muted defeat. Glimmers of hope reside, as Paul is able to preach while imprisoned, just as the exiled Jehoiachin is alive, and Prometheus will eventually be freed and forgiven by Zeus. Many themes from *Bacchae* are present in Acts: a new god and religion that causes resistance, female worshippers, trials and imprisonment, deliverance and miracles, lightning and earthquakes, charges of drunkenness against the disciples at Pentecost, and a common vocabulary ("kick against the goads," Acts 26:14, *Bacchae* 795), leading some to wonder at Greek cultural or direct tragic influence on the text.⁴⁶

MacKinnon neglects the tragic ironies in Acts, but his fears about its nascent triumphalism are accurate. The church will take the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) as a legitimation of conquest, and the tragic history of Israel will be a basis for terrible Jewish persecutions, although Luke-Acts never makes such claims or instructions and ends far from triumph. Acts suggests that tragedy will continue for Christian existence and the church, as is evident in church history. Acts ends with the theme of human resistance and blindness to God's grace in Christ, and this is a deepening tragedy for God. God's people can and do reject God,

and this heightened rejection will frame Balthasar's final volume of his systematic theology. Balthasar's final volume of the *Theo-Drama* concerns the Bible's unanswered problem of persistent human resistance to grace, especially to the Son:

... The dramatic thrust of which the New Testament we spoke in preceding volumes becomes more and more tragic and inevitable. Tragic not only for man, who can throw away life's meaning and his own salvation, but also for God himself, who is compelled to judge where he wished to heal; in the extreme case he is compelled to judge precisely because he only wished to bring love to man.⁴⁷

What happens when even a spirit of the heart (Jeremiah 31) is rejected? For Balthasar, it means a true tragedy and Hell, that "before Christ (and here the term 'before' must be understood not in a chronological sense but in an ontological), there can be neither Hell nor Purgatory."⁴⁸ "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks" (Hebrews 12:25).

The cross removes the wall of division between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:14), but the resulting *peripeteia* is an even higher wall, a cross that is judgment and division.⁴⁹ Odd reversals happen between the Church and Israel, that the Messiah for the ones chosen will be rejected by them, and Christianity will become a dominantly Gentile religion. Paul will grapple with this irony in Romans 10–13, that those who were chosen are rejected, so that those rejected (the Gentiles) can be chosen. Like Oedipus, the Jews will be blamed and persecuted. The book of Acts reveals the split between Jewish and Gentile that will widen into persecution, pogroms, and Holocaust. Balthasar puts it graphically, that "the church is tragic to the extent that ... [it runs] into a cross that is dislocated and perverse as a result of her own guilt, a cross with hooks (swastika) on which she is entangled and remains hanging."⁵⁰

Paul's letters to Corinth also reveal tragic themes and influences. God's power, triumph, and nature do not remove the reality of tragedy. "The wisdom of this world is folly with God" (1 Cor 3:19) is paradoxical and an ironic reversal. To describe it, Paul employs the common tragic metaphors of sight and blindness. The veil that hides the truth is a stumbling block, like Jesus' parables that only encourage a greater blindness (Mark 4:11–13). Jesus reversed the expectations in his day about the Messiah, discipleship, and kingship and set forth a foolish pattern of service and humility. For Courtney Friesen, Paul's use of tragic performance and reversal (especially 1 Cor 4:9) in the cosmic theater (*theatron*) is highly significant. The apostles play their seemingly foolish parts even as they are truly wise, while the supposedly wise and honored Corinthians are themselves merely playing parts because they are actually fools.⁵¹ The wheel of tragedy, where what goes up must come down, is a powerful tragic idea, and it captures the medieval mind after Boethius. The odd relationship and reversals of wisdom

and folly play out in many forms. It is a factor in Socrates' life and death; he was the wisest man on earth yet professed his deep ignorance. Roger Cox sees the wisdom and foolishness in 1 Corinthians as an important theme in *King Lear* as it explores questions of love and loyalty.⁵² Many tragedies trace how the worldly wise lean on their own understanding with arrogance and the flattery of others, but in the end they are undone because God's judgment looms over all. These reversals of wisdom and foolishness will culminate in the final reversal of the apocalypse, where God's last *deus ex machina* will reveal the price of pride and the beauty of humility. Until then, Christians continue to live ironic and tragic lives as they practice a wisdom that is foolish to the world. In David Ford's celebrated essay on MacKinnon and 2 Corinthians, the resurrection is a victory that also intensifies the reality of the cross, atonement, and contingency. Instead of ending the contingency of human living, the resurrection "it intensifies it terrifyingly" because "tragic disobedience is a possibility."⁵³ The future is in God's hands, but that does not guarantee the absence of loss and catastrophe for anyone, as history continues to show.

After the Bible

Starting with Edward Gibbons, it has become common for Western culture and scholars to condemn the Christian Church for destroying Greek tragedy. It's a tempting narrative, after all: the dour, heaven-focused Christians suppressed the Greek genius, with its tragic vision expressed through lively performance. With this, the battle lines between theology and tragedy were drawn. Yet it is simply untrue that the Church destroyed some golden age of tragic performance. The Christians didn't kill tragedy – its golden era was long gone by the time they appeared.⁵⁴

Biblical and Greek tragedy have an ongoing life in the early Christian era and the church fathers. The Christian Emperor Constantius II (Constantine's son and successor) actually protected the Greco-Roman theater, while the later pagan Emperor Julian sought to ban it.⁵⁵ The word "tragedy" continued to be used in the Middle Ages, with various meanings and colorings. Some tragic texts were preserved, given the realities of "new writing technologies, reading habits, and practices of documentation" that were happening in antiquity.⁵⁶ Theaters continued to be built during the Christian era, but theatrical performance was in decline before this period. The pagan Celsus spoke of Matthew's gospel and the "ending of your tragedy" in the darkness and Jesus' cry of abandonment, comparing them to Euripides' *Bacchae*.⁵⁷ Although the church fathers were uncertain about dramatic performance, they did make use of tragic protagonists and comparisons. Clement of Alexandria's *Miscellanies* parallels Christ's death to Antigone who defies Creon in the name of Zeus, and the Christian's desire for heaven is illustrated by Odysseus' yearning for Ithaca. There are 80 citations from Euripides throughout his writings,⁵⁸ since the tragic poets "clearly taught

the unity, supremacy, and goodness of God.” Origen and Justin Martyr both compare Jesus to Dionysus. Even the church father Tertullian, well known for his condemnations of pagan culture, ends an argument with the dramatic imagery he normally condemns. Describing the coming of the Lord, he notes that a joyful audience of angels and saints will watch the spectacle of the pain of others, as tragedy becomes reality.⁵⁹ Tragedy is a useful genre for understanding scripture; Ambrose of Milan compares the ascriptions in Psalms to tragedy, and the Venerable Bede compares the Song of Songs to tragedy.⁶⁰

Biblical narratives were conceived as tragic in antiquity and the Middle Ages. The roughly fifth-century Greek epic poet Nonnus had interests in tragedy and the Bible, and he explored the myth of Dionysus in the *Dionysiaca* and the Gospel of John in *Metabole*. Ezekiel the Tragic Poet, possibly of the second century B.C., was called a “poet of Jewish tragedies” by Eusebius (*Praep. Evang.* 9.28), and his *Exagoge* recast the exodus of Israel as a Greek tragedy, with a Euripidean-styled prologue. Early Christian art at the Callistus catacombs in Rome used Dionysian imagery.⁶¹ Apollinaris, Bishop of Laodicea (d. 390), set the Old Testament as a Homeric, tragic epic. Oscar Wilde wrote *Salome* as a tragic play in the Victorian era, but he was 1,400 years too late; the fifth-century archbishop Peter Chrysologus, who saw tragedy as a Jewish genre, beat him to it when he categorized John the Baptist and Salome as Jewish tragedies.⁶² Throughout the Christian period, John the Baptist was seen as a tragic figure. In the Middle Ages, there is an ongoing interest in the idea and knowledge of the tragic form, even though the genre and particular works had disappeared. In the ninth century, Abbot Paschasius Radbertus argued that “this tragedy about John [the Baptist]” revealed King Herod’s incestuous and adulterous family like Greek tragedy did with Oedipus and Agamemnon’s families. Boethius noted that Christ’s Incarnation was “a tremendous tragedy,” assumedly with a more kenotic than disastrous meaning.⁶³ The thirteenth-century *Christos Paschon* is a singular medieval achievement; it sets Christ’s final hours as a tragic drama through the use of Euripidean quotations and a chorus of Hebrew women.

The Renaissance and Baroque period saw a great interest in exploring tragedy and Christian faith in dramatic performance and music. There was a flourishing of Biblical tragic dramas, inspired in part by interest in the *Christos Paschon*. Quintianus Stoa’s 1508 tragic drama *Theoandrothanatos* translated Christ’s passion into Senecan tragedy. Other notable works were Nicholas Grimald’s *Christus Redivivus* (1543) and *Archipropheta* (1548), Nicholas Bartholemaeus’ *Christus Xylonicus* (1529), and Joost van den Vondel’s *Lucifer* (1654). Racine overtly composed the Biblical stories of *Esther* and *Athalie* as tragedies. Calderón’s *Life Is a Dream* explored prophecy, free will, and fate, and his *autos sacramentales* explored the mysteries of Christian faith and the Eucharist in *Belshazzar’s Feast* and *The Divine Orpheus*. The latter is particularly interesting with its use of Orpheus and

Eurydice as a narrative allegory for creation, fall, and Christ's redemption. Milton traced the tragic possibilities of Samson in his *Samson Agonistes* (1671). Racine used the Old Testament queen Athaliah (2 Kings 8, 11) as the basis for his tragic drama *Athalie*, which Balthasar praised for its weaving of Greek and Hebrew tragedy.⁶⁴

The Florentine Camerata's interest in Greek tragedy led to the development of dramatic music and opera through the creation of recitative, which was a technique to convey tragic narratives. Greek narratives were popular for opera, but oratorios that featured Biblical stories developed as well. Giacomo Carissimi developed the oratorio with *Jephthe*, *Jonas* (Jonah), *Vanitas Vanitatum* (Vanity of Vanities), and the motet *Lamentationes Jeremiae Prophetae*. Handel used the oratorio to explore Biblical narratives as tragedy with his *Jephtha*, *Samson*, *Saul*, *The Brookes Passion* (*The Story of Jesus, Suffering and Dying for the Sins of the World*). *The Brookes Passion* inspired Bach's *St. John's Passion* and *St. Mark Passion*, and Bach also explored tragedy in *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* (*God's time is the very best time*) BWV 106, also known as the *Actus tragicus*, which blended Old Testament, New Testament, poetry, and hymns by Luther. The Protestant Reformer Melancthon quoted and referenced Greek tragedies with approval, because for him they illustrated the catastrophic results of human sin.

The interest in tragedy accelerated in the modern period. The great tragic theorist was Hegel, and he connected tragedy, theology, ethics, and philosophy in ways that still resonate today. P.T. Forsythe thought Ibsen was wonderfully insightful into human nature and the power of sin, and Simone Weil found a common religious genius in Greek tragedy, Job, and the gospels. She attempted to write her own tragic drama, *Venise sauvée, tragédie en trois actes*. Balthasar marveled how "Jesus Christ is the heir of all the tragedy of the world."⁶⁵ David Tracy put it as a simple challenge:

Does the great hope so alive in the biblical prophetic God-centered religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—remove the tragic undercurrent? Reread Milton and Racine and their 'Christian tragedies.' Reread Pascal. Are the great comic visions of our culture alternatives to a tragic vision?⁶⁶

Tragedy continues in history and human action when institutions and rituals cause catastrophe, suffering, and ironic reversals. The list is depressingly long. History is full of ironic catastrophes and reversals that are the hallmark of tragedy. The Anabaptist revolution at Münster, like the French Revolution, began with freedom but shifted to authoritarianism. History is tragic in Shakespeare's publications; the First Folio 1623 edition of Shakespeare listed *Richard II* and *Richard III* as history plays, but the earlier Quarto editions labeled them tragedies. For Balthasar, Joan of Arc, the Inquisition, the Reformation, and anti-Semitism are tragedies of history.⁶⁷ The Christian persecution of the Jews is particularly catastrophic given the

origins of Christianity. For the New Testament, Jesus' message meant an inclusion of the Gentiles in God's prior covenant with the Jews, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek [or Gentile]" (Romans 1:16). Yet Western Christians transformed Jesus' message of humble servanthood into one of preeminence, persecuting Jews and other "heathens," and later practicing human enslavement on an previously unimagined scale. When Africans were brought to a Christian slave fortress in Ghana, above the holding cells was the chapel where they were forcibly baptized. Baptism here was not to freedom in Christ (Galatians 5:1) but to enslavement. It is a terrifying reversal. History being tragic is nothing new, though. The tragedy for Agamemnon began with his ancestors, who started a cycle of familial violence (and even cannibalism) that enmeshed many generations of their family. Ulrich Simon argues that the tragic nature of history is most powerfully revealed in the Bible and Christian tragedy, for whom "no Temple is secure in this world,"⁶⁸ not even its own. The curse of Cain is over all of human history.

The cross and The Green Mile

The tragedy of the cross can also be explored in the modern period through its primary literary form, the novel. Stephen King's *The Green Mile* demonstrates how the tragic novel can place Christ's crucifixion in the contemporary setting of death row, capital punishment, and racial prejudice. The narrator, Paul Edgecombe, is an elderly man facing death in an assisted living facility. He recounts a story from the 1932, when he was a former head guard at Georgia's death row. The green mile was the hallway of green linoleum in the shape of the letter "T"; it is through this cross that those on death row must pass. To the left of the juncture was the outside exercise yard, and to the right were the supervisor's office and a small door that led to a storage room and the execution room. The spatial division is between life and death ("a left turn meant life"),⁶⁹ the thief on the left and the thief on the right, and the guard desk stands at the crossroads. When a mouse looks up at the desk, the protagonist Paul Edgecombe has one of several visions:

For a moment I imagined myself to be that mouse, not a guard at all but just another convicted criminal there on the Green Mile, convicted and condemned but still managing to look bravely up at a desk that must have seemed miles high to it (as the judgment seat of God will no doubt someday seem to us) ...⁷⁰

The electric chair, like the cross, is a political and public execution, and the guards set out folding chairs for the spectacle. The figure of John Coffey is an otherworldly Jesus, a mysterious and confused healer who is forgetful and afraid of the dark. His healing power is also psychic, leaving him weeping most of the time for the terrible pain of the world, his tears were "some unhealable but strangely painless wound," persistent even through his

execution. The crowds are quick to assume that an African-American, like a Nazarene, must be guilty; his identity is unstable, as his speech sounds “as if he was *from* the South, but not *of* it.”⁷¹ Like Jesus and Socrates, Coffey is innocent but found guilty.

Coffey seems to have confessed to the crime, saying “I tried to take it back, but it was too late,” and it functions as an oracle to the story that Edgecombe will, like Oedipus, investigate. It is Coffey’s goodness that is seen as offensive and evil, because both he and Jesus heal in ways that offend and confuse. The guard Percy Wetmore, like the nursing home worker Brad Dolan, is an Iago character who is mean simply to be mean with an incomprehensible cruelty. As Edgecombe explores Coffey’s crime and past, he comes to understand that “atonement was powerful; it was the lock on the door you closed against the past.” He has a vision of Jesus’ crucifixion, where he and the other guards are centurions. But it is Coffey being crucified instead of Jesus, flanked by Wetmore and the prisoner Delacroix: “I looked down at my hand and saw I was holding a bloody hammer.”⁷² As Coffey is seated in the electric chair, the spectators hurl insults at him, reminiscent of the cries of “crucify him!” Coffey is prepared for death but also terrified, and he dies without a usual hood because of his fear of the dark. The mousetraps set out for the mice are, like the cross for the Emperor Constantine, branded VICTOR. Edgecombe quits his job and later sees a vision of Coffey with his “endless flow of his tears”; he is left with the knowledge that “sometimes there is absolutely no difference at all between salvation and damnation.” Like the unanswered questions about suffering in the gospels, Ecclesiastes, and Job, *The Green Mile*, ends with a call to compassion: “God *lets* it happen, and when we say, ‘I don’t understand,’ God replies, ‘I don’t care.’”⁷³

Tragedy is not foreign to the Bible and the Christian tradition but thoroughly within it. It has a rich presence in the Old and New Testaments and in church history and is, therefore, an important resource for theological reflection.

Notes

- 1 Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 99–100.
- 2 Gardner, *Religion*, 93.
- 3 Francis M Dunn, *Tragedy’s End: Closure and Innovation in Euripidean Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- 4 *De arte metrica* (c.25, PL 90:174). Carol Symes, “The Tragedy of the Middle Ages,” in *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the Fourth Century BCE to the Middle Ages*, ed. Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Revermann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 345.
- 5 Symes, “The Tragedy of the Middle Ages,” 337–39.
- 6 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, 50th anniversary ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 18, 46, 69.

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- 7 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 207–13.
- 8 Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 144.
- 9 Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 14.
- 10 Jeff Jay, *The Tragic in Mark: A Literary-Historical Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 110.
- 11 Jay, *Tragic in Mark*, 207n5.
- 12 Ben Quash, “Four Biblical Characters: In Search of a Tragedy,” in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 26.
- 13 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 100–1.
- 14 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord vol 6: Theology: The Old Covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 112–13.
- 15 Jay, *Tragic in Mark*, 255.
- 16 Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 6, 106–7.
- 17 Horace Meyer Kallen, *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1959), 78.
- 18 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 8.
- 19 Tillich, *Shaking*, 20.
- 20 None of the major or minor prophets are recorded as having been killed. Frank D. Gilliard, “Paul and the Killing of the Prophets in 1 Thess. 2:15,” *Novum Testamentum* 36.3 (1994): 259–70.
- 21 Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation, vol 2: The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 87. He cites Odil Hannes Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geshick* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967).
- 22 Sewall, *Vision*, 9.
- 23 Courtney Friesen, “Paulus Tragicus: Staging Apostolic Adversity in First Corinthians,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134.4 (2015), 813. The translation is Friesen’s.
- 24 Roger L. Cox, *Between Earth and Heaven: Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and the Meaning of Christian Tragedy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 2. Also see Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 34–35. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 44.
- 25 Jay, *Tragic in Mark*. Also see Gilbert Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977).
- 26 Terry Eagleton, introduction to *The Gospels* by Giles Fraser (London: Verso, 2007), xix–xx.
- 27 Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 260.
- 28 Donald MacKinnon, “Subjective and Objective Conceptions of Atonement,” in *Prospect for Theology: Essays in Honour of H.H. Farmer*, ed. F. G. Healey (Digswell Place: James Nisbet & Co., 1966), 29.
- 29 Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 119.
- 30 Cox, *Earth*, 148.
- 31 Tillich, *Shaking*, 179.
- 32 Jay, *Tragic in Mark*, 206–7.

- 33 Symes, "The Tragedy of the Middle Ages," 350–51.
- 34 Anthony Cane, *The Place of Judas Iscariot in Christology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 4.
- 35 MacKinnon, *Problem*, 137–39.
- 36 Donald MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1979), 192.
- 37 Tannehill, *Luke*, 284.
- 38 Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* vol. 2, 89.
- 39 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 269–70.
- 40 MacKinnon, *Problem*, 128.
- 41 Christopher Devanny, "Truth, Tragedy and Compassion: Some Reflections on the Theology of Donald Mackinnon," *New Blackfriars* 78.911 (1997), 36.
- 42 MacKinnon, *Problem*, 128–33.
- 43 Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* vol. 2, 2.
- 44 Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* vol. 2, 357.
- 45 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology* vol. 3: *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 409.
- 46 Courtney Friesen, "Reading Dionysus: Euripides' Bacchae Among Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2013), 226–71.
- 47 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* vol 5: *The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 193.
- 48 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 177.
- 49 Balthasar, *Explorations* vol. 3, 406.
- 50 Balthasar, *Explorations* vol. 3, 409.
- 51 Friesen, "Paulus Tragicus," 831.
- 52 Cox, *Earth*, 71–95.
- 53 David F. Ford, "Tragedy and Atonement," in *Christ Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 123–24.
- 54 Symes, "The Tragedy of the Middle Ages," 342.
- 55 Symes, "The Tragedy of the Middle Ages," 341.
- 56 Symes, "The Tragedy of the Middle Ages," 337.
- 57 Margaret M. Mitchell, "Origen, Celsus and Lucian on the 'Denouement of the Drama' of the Gospels," in *Reading Religions in the Ancient World: Essays Presented to Robert McQueen Grant on his 90th Birthday*, ed. David E. Aune and Robin Darling Young (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 221.
- 58 John Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 18.
- 59 Friesen, "Paulus Tragicus," 832.
- 60 Symes, "The Tragedy of the Middle Ages," 344–45.
- 61 Friesen, "Reading Dionysus: Euripides' Bacchae among Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World," 208n3.
- 62 Symes, "The Tragedy of the Middle Ages," 350.
- 63 Eagleton, *Violence*, 12.
- 64 Balthasar, *Explorations* vol. 3, 398.
- 65 Balthasar, *Explorations* vol. 3, 400.
- 66 David Tracy, "On Tragic Wisdom," in *Wrestling with God and Evil: Philosophical Reflections*, ed. H.M. Vroom (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 16.
- 67 Balthasar, *Explorations* vol. 3, 407–10.
- 68 Ulrich Simon, *Pity and Terror: Christianity and Tragedy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 76.

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- 69 Stephen King, *The Green Mile: The Complete Serial Novel* (New York City: Pocket Books, 2017), 25.
70 King, *The Green Mile*, 71–72.
71 King, *The Green Mile*, 240, 32.
72 King, *The Green Mile*, 385, 318.
73 King, *The Green Mile*, 396–98.

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3 Apollo and rational coherence

Philosophical coherences

After supporting the Nazis and Mussolini for decades, the American poet Ezra Pound was finally captured by the Allies. During his imprisonment as a traitor, he suffered a mental breakdown. While a patient for 12 years in a Washington, DC psychiatric hospital, he wrote a version of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*; one of his lines is "what SPLENDOUR, IT ALL COHERES." There is something profoundly moving and deeply indicative about tragedy when one considers the inspired poet gone mad who still held to a splendid coherence, as Adrian Poole has argued.¹ Tragedy has a way of doing that; in the midst of madness (for the Greeks, *áte*), politics, wars, and prisoners, it suggests a kind of order.

Tragedy suggests coherences and patterns that invite our rational consideration. How might we understand tragedy's patterns, vision, significance? The god Apollo has, after Nietzsche, been interpreted as the force of order and reason. The god of reason, numbers, music, boundaries, systems and order, and light and sunlight was the god of the Muses, after all, and he personally appears in many Greek tragedies. Nietzsche's Apollo suggests a rational exploration of tragedy, and there is a long history of doing precisely this.

Plato was the first to make a conscious identification of tragedy, to try to get it to "cohere." Plato identifies tragedy to corral it because its poets and seers are suspect. The poetry of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides was too close to religious inspiration or ecstatic possession, forms of knowledge that, while having the possibility of accuracy, were haphazard and unrepeatable. Truth must be accessible another way that was not dependent on charismatic gifts, the inspiration of the Muses, or divine inspiration. The invisible, spiritual reality not made of hands was available to anyone capable of rational thought, and not the unpredictability of the oracle at Delphi or gifted poets. Tragedy is a challenge to Platonic philosophy that sees the world as philosophically and morally good; to see the world as immoral, catastrophic, perilous, or unlucky is to deny the reality of the forms, which is the basis for this world. How could tragic poetry and drama, which explored undeserved suffering, madness,

necessity, and moral waste in paradoxical ways, ever suggesting coherence and incoherence, be reconciled with a moral universe?

Tragic drama encourages us to shift the blame, since the gods may partly be the cause of our suffering. But for Plato, the gods and the forms cannot be the source of evil. How can the gods compete in their moral demands? asks Socrates in the *Euthyphro*. This would be irrational and would deny the ultimate unity of the truth. It would make the pious and impious the same. Suffering is ultimately meaningless and empty, just an unfortunate result of living in a contingent world. The problem with tragedy is that it all too often portrays people as victims to larger forces, be they moody Greek gods or dark providential forces. Rather, Plato holds that a moral person is wholly responsible for his choices, life, results, "for all that happens in his life."² To allow people to blame God, a *daimon*, the devil, Fate, contingency, or luck would lead precisely away from the sort of moral responsibility that true philosophy demands. Tragedy is pretense and escapism from the real world, and here Plato values the real world more highly than the arts. *Mimesis* fails when it imitates an immoral order.

Plato identified tragedy so that he could exorcise it; others sought a tragic pattern to tame and use it. Aristotle focused on the pleasures of viewing a tragic performance: that its conflict, action, and resolution create a psychic purgation and release. Hegel offered the first thorough analysis of tragedy serving our human progression toward a serene, rational coherence. He famously saw *Antigone* as intractable oppositions of partial goods colliding and eventually yielding to the higher resolution. Tragedy is a part of his larger architecture, just a step along the way. If Hegel veered toward resolution, Nietzsche shifted toward dissolution in his favoring of Dionysus, the god of joyful destruction. There are many proposals, but none has won the day, and the various ways that philosophers have sought to make sense of tragedy indicate the inherent problem of tragedy's destabilizing, nonconceptual nature.

Tragic theorists have also attempted to find the pattern to tragic literature, the one tragic theory to rule them all, but the attempts have failed. If Greek tragedy is the true tragic model, as some argue, then Shakespeare and modern tragedies are inauthentic. Critics have argued that only drama counts for true tragedy and then must rule out genres and works that others consider truly tragic. An attempt to schematize will have to admit its own failure, as when Irving Ribner's *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* opens on page one by admitting the many attempts to trace Shakespeare's development, that his art is infinite, and any analysis is partial and reflects the critic's own interests.³ If there is a maturing moral order in Shakespeare, as he postulates, it must recognize that it is but one of many such orders.

Some argue for a tragic vision that is a wisdom; such an ongoing morbidity to life is often labeled tragicism. But such a wisdom ignores Orestes, who whistles as he walks by since he survived his tragedy fairly intact. It is to ignore the honor and significance in Antigone's death. Schopenhauer

and others have impressed many with a vision of tragedy where life is futile, painful, and meaningless. A tragic philosophy of life sees suffering as perhaps avoidable, but more often inevitable, and never eradicable; “things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd,” as Steiner sketches his definition of tragedy.⁴ The universe is malevolent and dangerous, and only some kind of apathy can inure us from the world’s wounds. In truth, Schopenhauer encourages a tragic heroic face on it all, but the more popular version of this is more of a glum resignation that *Prometheus Bound* shows the malevolence of the gods, and King Lear suffers terribly for the foolish pride of an aged man. If tragic wisdom is that evil and suffering are regnant and unassailable, then who wants it? Tragicism is alluring, as it gives tragedy a kind of smug confidence. It is a simplistic answer to the problems of life, which is why Terry Eagleton calls such ideas “post-tragic.”

The arguments of tragicism fail, though, with the many tragedies that don’t meet this standard. If some critics argue for an absolute tragedy, others veer the other way and argue that a meaningful death is the truest tragedy. To portray the sacrificial death of the protagonist as empty and meaningless would be to degrade the good and the true; their sacrifice must have meant something. Death as meaningful, or death as meaningless – either approach can be a kind of consolation, in a Marxist sense. To be told that one’s death is meaningful as a sacrifice can be as deceptive as the idea that one’s death is meaningless; the suicide bomber and the suicide are both given an order to their deaths.

Tragedy and secularism

Tragedy has been interpreted as a protest against religious belief, that it is a secret agent for atheism. This would provide a neat system, that tragedy is some sort of modern sneer at religious belief. Tragedy has certainly railed against the gods, the wanton flies and the cruelty of it all; its Promethean rebellion is against a divine ordering. Religious beliefs and practices can entrap and enslave, preventing human flourishing. This was Marx’s great critique (religion is the opiate of the masses), along with Nietzsche (there has only been one and Christian) and Whitehead (Christian theology is a great disaster).⁵ Tragedy has a long history of religious protest. Antigone protests Creon’s gods, preferring the gods of the dead. The decline of Sue Bridehead in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* shows a religious law that keeps them unhappily impoverished and ostracized, and then Sue internalizes that law as she declines into a self-loathing mental illness. The temptation is to make tragedy itself into a kind of anti-religious creed, which is rather odd, given how inherently destabilizing it is. As much as tragedy has held to some sort of atheistic order, it has also held to a theistic order. Many Greek tragedies feature an *apotheosis* or a restoration. These are not immoral, atheistic plays and worldviews, but rather “God-soaked,” as Balthasar commented on the Greek plays he so admired and valorized.⁶

Few tragedies end in complete despondency, and most have some element of hope in their endings. Theology has a history of protest too: Antigone's rebellion was religiously motivated, Luther opposed the sale of indulgences, liberation theology considers political systems and the place for the poor, and black theology points to ethnic marginalization. Nietzsche opposed Christianity in part because it empowered the weak and poor. Perhaps the sorrow is not ours in the end, but God's, as Barth sees it: "What is our suffering when we recollect that God has Himself felt it so deeply as to give His only begotten Son in order to remove it? Our suffering for sin has not touched us, and cannot touch us, as it touches Him." Tragedy is "forbidden to us as something presumptuous ..."⁷

It's always easy to blame the gods, somehow. Sophocles ends *Women of Trachis* with

Mighty deaths beyond belief,
Many an unknown form of grief,
Ye have seen to-day; and nought
But the power of Zeus hath wrought.⁸

If the gods were the cause of suffering and evil, then eliminate the superstitions and humanity can be liberated – or so the French Revolution and Reign of Terror thought. To lose the gods is to lose the coherence of the final end but to gain freedom and responsibility. Edmund's famous complaint in *King Lear* is, "This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune – often the surfeits of our own behavior – we make guilty of our own disasters, the sun, the moon, and the stars" (1.2.116–19). We blame the cosmos for our own problems, choices, mistakes, when we may indeed be guilty of our own disasters. Tragedy can encourage such escapism. To pity those who suffer catastrophe, as tragedy often does, only encourages the shifting of blame to external events and contingencies. For Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "People will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot."⁹ It's always easier to blame the gods or fate for one's sins or the need to sacrifice. If the universe has a sacrificial order to it, then we get to shift the blame, and tragedy becomes a way of blaming sacrificial chthonic gods.

At times, tragedy veers toward a seemingly glorious freedom of human progress and responsibility. The chorus in *Antigone* rhapsodizes civilization and progress in its Ode to Man. Nets and yokes move humanity beyond the hunt, and the horizon is a progressive secularism that makes no mention of the gods. There is a similar sense in the Old Testament in the books thought to be written during the Davidic and Solomonic periods, along with the books of Esther, Ruth, and Song of Solomon. In Ecclesiastes, for example, God's role is increasingly indirect. Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* also parallels this as he leads Thebes away from superstition and oracles, ignoring the prophet Tiresias in his drive for stability and success. But darkness

lurks in a brave new world of erased horizons and breezy modernity. Like Frankenstein's monster, the wonders (*deina*) that we create with the power of craft and Vulcan's *technos* exert a control over their creators. There is a cruelty to civilization; its dangers may be civilized, but cities remain capable of great injustice, as *Antigone* shows. Political authority and justice is as precarious as ever. Athens' destruction in 480 BC looms in the background of the Greek tragedies, and Tiresias predicts coming wars, in part because the Greek city-states were most always at war. The order of civilization remains disordered. The Ode to Man ends with the entrance of Antigone, who will throw doubt on the wise laws of the city, and Oedipus finds that human power and freedom are overshadowed by oracular determination.

Madness and doubt

Suffering is something that cannot be rationally circumscribed and remains beyond the limits of rational thought. While some things can be said, there are also things that cannot be said, that are not conceptual and cannot be assimilated into a larger coherence. Tragedies explore this with topics like madness and revenge, where rationality simply falls apart. Tragedy is rife with illusions and disillusion, divine and self-caused, what the Greeks called *áte*. The rational mind can shift to irrationality as madness can come in a flash, wrought by deceptive gods or the fury of revenge in a revenge tragedy. Agave's divine madness leads her to dismember her son; Ajax sees his band of brothers as sheep and slaughters them. King Saul descends into madness while his replacement David plays a secret chord, and God sends a "lying spirit" to entice and destroy King Ahab and his prophets. Medea's fury leads to a mad revenge that kills her children. Love can become a violent jealousy: Shakespeare's *Lear*, *Othello*, and *Leontes* in *A Winter's Tale* are all swept up in an irrational, destructive jealousy, and the mad passion in Racine's *Phèdre* destroys many of the main characters. Nor are these just stories: in the last days of World War II, Magda Goebbels kept her six children with her and the Führer in the bunker, refusing to smuggle them out of Berlin, and murders them and herself as the Soviets take Berlin. Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche claimed to have found tragedy's coherence, yet significant exceptions and doubts always remain.

Philosophers and literary critics have explored tragedy, seeking to define, reject, or embrace it. Yet tragedies tend to doubt even themselves, interrogating and suggesting without solving. The tragic characters themselves wonder about the meaning of their tragic narratives, as when Eustacia cries in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, "O the cruelty of putting me into this imperfect, ill-conceived world!"¹⁰ (The doubt also includes the question's audience – is the question put to God, or to Hardy?)

The stars and their patterns suggest a cosmic coherence. *Iphigenia at Aulis* begins with a mysterious star, and "our terrine Moon / Is now eclipsed" in *Antony and Cleopatra* (3.13.152). Cassius famously says that "The fault,

dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings” (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.140–41). Humans can measure the patterns of the stars through astrology and astronomy, and with witchcraft there is an influencing of the inscrutable patterns. Stars follow an order that we neither control nor fully understand, and storms remain as the old fears reside, the superstitions and uncertainties. The gods are behind it all, after all, making it necessary but also uncertain. The gods may not show up in *Oedipus the King*, yet the oracle about Oedipus proves absolutely true. The gods always win, but we’re not always sure how. There is a form and order, but it is beyond our comprehension, which is why the reasons and causes of so many tragedies are nonconceptual: irascible and unpredictable Greek gods, human or divine madness, an irrational revenge, or an inscrutable Providence. We blame the gods because tragedy suggests what is beyond human conception and control.

Human action remains mired in the lurking forces beneath human reason and beyond our full control, and tragedy suggests “a knowledge that is suffered but not cognizable.”¹¹ Oedipus’ eyes are opened to the truth, but it results in a physical blindness, moral liminality, and exile. Similarly, the Cross defeats our attempts to fully describe or conceptualize it, remaining a jarring narrative, so that in Mark all the disciples can do is flee (16:8). Plato struggles with the possibility that it doesn’t all cohere. Ironically, he “uses more theatrical metaphors than any other classical Greek author.”¹² Why does his philosophy continually return to the methods of dialogue, story, parable, and myth? Plato’s use of narrative in the midst of his philosophical endeavors points to an odd limit to human reason, that the truth of the cave can only be told in narrative as a parable. If knowledge can be liberating, it can also be damning, and Plato’s cave demonstrates both truths – the enlightened and freed prisoner is back in the cave with a miserable fate. Nor is Plato above using pity in his myths, despite his concern that pity encourages the lower parts of the soul. The reality is that, in Plato’s goal of reforming the pre-philosophical world of myth, narrative, and tragedy into a rational philosophical world, his tools of choice are precisely myth, narrative, and tragedy, and he remains “obliged to give a voice to the tragic outlook,” resulting in “an irresolvable paradox.”¹³

Morality and poetic justice

Tragedy has been condemned as escapist and immoral, but it’s also served as a form of moral warning. Plato considered that there might be a kind of enlightened tragedy, showing how one remained philosophically pure while enduring catastrophes. Calamity’s only role is in character formation; in a Stoic sense, it is morally educative, because it reminds us of our distance from earthly things. Suffering shows the test of character, as Paul argues in Romans 5:3, and Socrates showed his confidence in the immortality of the soul as he fearlessly drank the hemlock and comforted his friends in

his own death. Painful events become teachable moments, as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where there is learning through suffering (*páthei máthos*, line 177).

Boethius took comfort in suffering as a refining fire, that his suffering had reminded him of what is true and real and that his treasure is in heaven. If suffering is ordained by God, it must be borne accordingly, as some reason in their rejection of euthanasia. The moral lesson here is personal: we see, imagine, and are prepared to understand our own sufferings. God, after all, chastises those whom he loves, and suffering can have meaning and purpose. Boethius attempted to make sense of his suffering through a kind of mental game, a grasping of why he suffers. His pain was real, but his suffering was due to wrong thinking – if he can get the pattern right, if he can see things rightly, then he will no longer suffer. Pain is inevitable, but suffering is a mental choice. So he consulted with Philosophy personified, reaching out for divine Order when all was disorder; perhaps he could write his way out. Do we suffer because of misguided thoughts and beliefs, and can we conquer it with our minds and words? Like Plato, it had to be a dialogue with another person and not just an essay. It had to be truth incarnated as a person, as in the gospels.

Our grief and suffering are, after all, rooted in our attachment to a temporary reality on the way to a better place. Tragedy has the psychological power to move us, which made it so dangerous to Plato. We may find ourselves deeply shaped by the immorality of tragedy, its images of good people suffering undeservedly that move us to an un-stoic pity. Suffering is a choice and a kind of blindness, for the enlightened person does not grieve. Like the Stoics and Epicureans, there is a concern that in wallowing in suffering we would magnify our hurts and lose ourselves. Although pain is real, suffering is something we can choose to ignore. For Plato, the just person feels pain but cannot really suffer. Misfortune may strike, but the good man bears it with strength and confidence and without grief. Thus in the *Republic*, the young guardians are to be kept innocent and only told good stories about the gods rather than stories of their duplicity or murder; God is without duplicity. Similarly, the Mishna prohibits “external books.” Apollo would have all things ordered well and would see suffering as producing character and even hope in a better world. For Plato, tragic pity is irrational and inescapable, a herald of the limits of reason. Nietzsche concurs in *The Antichrist* that “pity makes suffering contagious” (§7). There is “little place for pity in Plato’s universe,”¹⁴ and even grief is unacceptable. When Socrates prepares for his own execution, Phaedo weeps but admits it is not for Socrates but for himself (*Phaedo* 117c). The only exception Plato allows is that suffering can be a moral teacher, reminding us to renounce this world for a better one, to practice philosophy as the practice of death. Tragedy should be something that can be defined, proscribed, even prescribed.

But tragedy raises the distinct possibility that a defined moralism fails, and Socrates is a supreme example. Stephen Halliwell potently asks,

“Could Socrates’ death be in any sense a tragedy—an appalling rejection of philosophical goodness by the world, an index of some ineradicable flaw in things—as well as an overwhelming personal loss for those who loved Socrates?”¹⁵ Plato wants to connect virtue with happiness where morality is its own reward, but the irony is that the moral life struggles with reality and appearance, being and seeming; one can be evil and seem good and vice versa. Antigone, Socrates, and Jesus show how badly the dissonance between seeming and being can play out; the just who challenge social and political norms may be counted as criminals by the state and the crowds.

The moral warning can also be preventive: if the wage of sin is death, then tragedy can serve as a warning against vice. Consider what results from sin and pride, and then turn to the Christian virtues of knowledge, repentance, humility, faithfulness, and martyrdom. Basil of Caesarea thought Homer could establish a good moral disposition in thoughtful readers in his “Address to Young Men,” and Cyril of Alexandria felt Euripides and other tragedians help us avoid the evil results of sin. If sin is rooted in pride, and pride goes before the fall, then tragedy reminds us not to think too highly of ourselves. Thinking you are some sort of cosmic exception to the wheel of fortune will just grind you down, and it’s the prideful ambition of Doctor Faustus and Milton’s Satan that lead to their downfall. Hardy notes that “the study of tragedy in fiction may possibly here and there be the means of showing how to escape the worst forms of it, at least, in real life”;¹⁶ trouble is best avoided, after all. The Common Man in Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons* knows that “it isn’t difficult to keep alive, friends – just don’t make trouble.” In Hardy’s day, some called for a consistent poetic justice, that all Hardy’s fiction should provide either happy or just endings. Hardy termed it “Grundyism” for a figurative bourgeois person named Mrs. Grundy who would approve of such morality stories.

Tragedy explores not only how suffering can be instructive or avoidable but also how unjust suffering can be resisted. The laws of Thebes and dictates of Creon are clearly wrong in *Antigone*. The social rejection turned political opportunism regarding Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus* is striking; in Creon, Thebes is a liar and bully, while Athens shows a kind mercy. Pity is a key effect in many tragedies, leading us to abhor the outcomes of our many public and personal cruelties that prevent human flourishing. *Jude the Obscure* deeply probes all the ways we are cruel, the hardness of the human heart that turns love, marriage, poverty, education, social class, and religious teaching into human suffering; divorce laws and social understanding may ease suffering couples and persons like Jude, Sue, and Phillotson. Tragedy’s sympathy can call for moral and political change, as in Anouilh’s version of *Antigone* under Nazi controlled France. The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has been criticized for venturing into tragedy, as in his photo of himself laying inert on a beach that imitates a dead child from the Afghanistan refugee crisis.

Tragedy has served as a theodicy that defends God's providence – see how God punishes the wicked! Melanchthon's 1545 *Cohortatio ad legendas tragoedias et comoedias* is the first lengthy defense of tragedy since Aristotle some 1,900 years earlier. Tragedy warns of the outcome of sin, encourages virtue, and points to God's providence over it all. Melanchthon writes how "there is some eternal mind that always inflicts severe punishments upon atrocious crimes, while bestowing mostly a more tranquil path for the moderate and just."¹⁷ God is ultimately in control of the tragic plot, so it's only fitting that Heracles' lust leads to his tormented death in *Women of Trachis*. Moderation, humility, and tranquility are the true happiness. Given a long view, it all works out, since our present sufferings are a shadow of our future glories. The Eumenides will transform into the Kindly Ones, and Zeus will free Prometheus as they shake hands, laughing.

The limits of virtue

Some tragedies suggest that morality itself can lead to catastrophe. Optimism in a moral order, without the reality of collateral damage, can be defeating and naive. As Oedipus reminds us, our attempts to avoid evil may only bring it closer. Virtues such as compassion or a self-giving martyrdom can fail us. The monk and missionary Rodrigues in *Silence* is determined to be a martyr and saint, but finds himself defeated by a seventeenth-century Japan determined to destroy Japanese Christianity. The Japanese had realized that Christianity can flourish during persecution and martyrdom; Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean* features a similar motif when the Christian soldier says, "Let them hit me... I like suffering," as does Sartre's *The Flies*. The Japanese response in *Silence* is to target the priests with the torture of Christian peasants. Rodrigues' massive trip, his attempt to find his old teacher Ferreira, his desire to save Japan with his martyrdom – it's all a terrible waste, and he ends up apostatizing just like Ferreira did, imprisoned by the Japanese and despised by his Catholic superiors. His goal and method are deeply Christian, much like "Origen's ideal of the Christian martyr who meets every one of the torturer's blows with love."¹⁸ Such sacrificial heroism had converted the Roman Empire, but it fails Rodrigues when five peasants are tortured until he finally recants. He had prepared for his own suffering, but not the harm that could come to others. His sense of spiritual superiority judges Ferreira and Kichijiro for their apostasy, making his own denial all the more ironic and tragic. Tragic protagonists are not always resolute moral figures, but can be hurting, misguided, and pitiful, and it may be that catastrophes fail to teach us anything at all, and it just a question of endurance. Even charity can be misplaced and has its limits. MacKinnon criticized Niebuhr for having such an illusive sense of "limitless resourcefulness" for people and even God.¹⁹

In *Jude the Obscure*, Mr. Phillotson finds, like Rodrigues, the limits of charity. He taught Jude his deep ethic of compassion: that he should always

be kind to people and animals. His compassion leads to his great kindness to his unhappy wife Sue; he allows their divorce and her elopement with Jude. But this compassion is his own undoing, as the social stigma he suffers means the loss of his job, income, and reputation, and he suffers greatly. When Sue suffers her mental breakdown and she returns to Phillotson, it engenders his vicious apostasy against compassion, and he takes her back and possesses her with cruelty. Compassion saves Rodrigues' soul in the end, but it destroys Phillotson and Sue. It is an "illusion that kindness is a simple matter," noted MacKinnon;²⁰ such an idea sometimes causes worse catastrophes. A simple moralism, as what Job's friends offer him in his suffering, doesn't always work and may result in divine condemnation. Some tragedies point to the many causes of our suffering and ways to learn from it, but others demonstrate how people suffer undeservedly, without a Platonic moral calculus that the just are happy and the unjust suffer. As Reinhold Niebuhr notes, "there cannot be a simple correlation between virtue and happiness."²¹ Virtue may make one supremely unhappy.

Despite the desires of moralists and Grundyists, poetic justice is fairly rare in tragedy. While most protagonists carry some blame, few deserve the extent of their suffering. Resolutions are never easy. The problem of evil remains unsolvable, something beyond human conception and expression. The problems remain particular and partial; if there is moral justice, there is also moral injustice. Similarly, John Dennis complains that Shakespeare's tragedies lack morality; "there can be none or very weak instruction in them ... [they] call the government of providence into question."²² The Victorians revised *King Lear* so that Cordelia did not die, but was reunited with her father in the end. Who can blame them? It's far easier to not see. But a morality play with poetic justice forces everything to serve a certain morality and expectation, and with this the gratuitousness of goodness and of evil are lost.²³ Richard Swinburne observes that "a world without evils would be a world in which men could show no forgiveness, no compassion, no self-sacrifice."²⁴ Yet the cost remains. For MacKinnon, "it is a lesson to be learnt from tragedy that there is no solution of the problem of evil; it is a lesson which Christian faith abundantly confirms, even while it transforms the teaching by the indication of its central mystery."²⁵

Deus ex machina

When the plot is complicated, the finale offers to tie it all together, solving the plot threads with a final coherence and a satisfying poetic justice. Greek tragedians sometimes employed a *deus ex machina*, a narrative and performative technique where a god was lowered by a machine at the end of the play. This served to resolve the plot, give a sense of an ending, and signal that the play had ended (there was no curtain, after all). But the *deus ex machina* has bedeviled readers and scholars since ancient times. Is it a writing crutch, an easy way out of entangled plots that thrilled the audience?

The ancient world often thought this, accusing tragedies of using emotion, bloodshed, and then a quick divine ending to resolve it all. Thus, Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* ends with no more deaths and the appearance of Athena, and Hardy was forced to add a happier ending to *The Return of the Native*. One way to resolve a tragic dilemma is to have God show up and fix everything, so that poetic justice is restored. Some critics debate whether authentic tragedy should feature a *deus ex machina*. It's an odd argument given that it was common enough in Attic tragedy. Ancient critics saw tragedy as overusing the plot device and veering toward crowd-pleasing spectacle, divine epiphanies, and overwrought speeches. Critical opinion of tragedy later reversed, and it came to be seen as weighty, classical, and canonical, the evidence of a high style. Such a classical style and message of Schopenhauerian gloom led many critics away from the *deus ex machina*. They argued that such a restorative technique voids the true vision of tragedy.

Tragedy's history of interpretation points to the genre's inherent desire for patterns, as well as its persistent instabilities. Tragic theories have traced tragedy's patterns but end up duped because the theories inevitability break down. The works that suggest patterns end up breaking the patterns. Like Oedipus, we want to solve the puzzle of it all, but tragedy then frustrates us, failing to finally cohere and ever resisting a final systematization. A common pattern is to assume that monotheism promises a victorious resolution, therefore it cannot be properly tragic. It's an ironic pattern given the restoration of a *deus ex machina* was itself born with Greek tragedy; the *deus ex machina* validates Christian tragedy as being thoroughly authentic.

Restorative endings have led scholars to reject the possibility of Christian tragedy, or to argue that it has been corrupted. The book of Job ends oddly with prose and a restoration, a *deus ex machina* that has long irritated scholars who held to a Schopenhauerean pattern. If Job is dominated by tragic poetry, then what to make of that unassimilable ending where God shows up to restore Job's losses, condemn his friends, and not answer his questions? Actually, this is exactly what we would expect from tragedy: that it would suggest poetic possibilities only to deconstruct them with prose; the restoration may irresolutely create new questions. Like some Shakespearean problem play, it doesn't cohere with a rational system. As Horace Kallen observes, "the Epiphany [of God to Job, in the whirlwind], as in the Euripidean drama, saves an intolerable situation, so far as in the course of nature it can be saved at all."²⁶ Many dissertations and publications have been launched that argue a later editor added the moralizing prose of the beginning and ending to lessen the raw, tragic vision of Job. The Apollonic center must hold, despite the simple fact that there are many tragedies with divine restorations, and tragedy curiously invented the *deus ex machina* in the first place.

Christ's resurrection is often accused of invalidating the question of tragedy and theology. If it all gets fixed with the Father's *deus ex machina*, then how is it tragedy? Again, this is an ironic criticism since divine restorations

are themselves a technique of some Greek tragedies. Nor is the *deus ex machina* of the resurrection resolved in the gospels. The mocking cries of the crowd for Jesus the miracle worker to “save yourself!” and “let us see whether Elijah will take him down” are cries for an intervention that does not come when needed or expected,²⁷ and Christ’s cry of abandonment is his own defeated expectation of a divine *deus ex machina*.

Docetism was rejected as a heresy because, in the Incarnation, Christ has entered tragic suffering. When the *deus ex machina* of the resurrection does come, it is no clear restoration or happy ending. In Mark, it leaves the disciples afraid, confused, and in disbelief, because the meaning of the resurrection is left unclear. The narrative ends with an angelic announcement of a *deus ex machina*, the cue that the story has ended, but it’s far from resolved. The conclusion in 16:8 is a tragic mode of “divine absence, contingency, uncertainty, shuddering, and frightful emotion”; this too is not the full pattern, for this tragic fear is countermanded and deconstructed with the promise that Christ is in Galilee, but how it all works out is offstage.²⁸ Nor does the “happy ending” erase the tremendous suffering or waste that have occurred, as in the denial of Peter, the sanctioned betrayal by Judas, the coming destruction of Jerusalem that moves Christ to weeping, and the sword that pierces Mary’s heart. The high cost of living and discipleship continues.

The New Testament witnesses to the resurrection, but never in a complete or final way. Acts continues the story, but it ends with many questions and irresolutions as Peter disappears and Paul is imprisoned. Christ is risen but in a form that is coming and going, a presence that is an absence. The resurrection is known in miraculous appearances, but also in the absence of the empty tomb; “blessed are those who have not seen but still believe” (John 20:29). With the ascension, Christ is absent from earth, yet present in the unpredictable Holy Spirit. God is present, yet absent, as in the off-stage Zeus who received Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Christ appears as a stranger on the road to Emmaus only to disappear again before the ever-baffled disciples.

The mystery of human rejection and blindness remains. Christ’s Messianic secret indicts human blindness: how could the awaited Messiah, the Son of God, be unrecognized, misunderstood, and rejected during his lifetime? The truth is revealed in the end, but also at the beginning: he is the Son of God in Mark 16, but also in Mark 1. But that identification is unresolved, a pattern that is suggested but never finalized, and church councils and teachings will be left to debate what it all means. The angel appears in Mark 16 as God’s messenger with a supernatural oracle that is similar to Greek tragedy in its irresolution. The resurrection is no happy ending that erases the larger questions raised by Jesus’ ministry and death, the blindness and fallibility of the disciples and all Christians, the suffering and evil at work in the world and in positions of authority, the ongoing threat of crucifixion and martyrdom, the question of following an ascended Messiah whose kingdom is not of this world, and a living God who has died and is alive

forevermore. The blindness continues as the pattern remains ultimately indefinable: IT ALL COHERES, but not in a way we can understand. The disciples remain confused, even after reports of the resurrection: “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). The resurrection is a *deus ex machina* like the end of Job, disjunctive and unresolved. To read Job or the gospels otherwise is to read them poorly.

Considering the resurrection as a *deus ex machina* develops the vital theological concern for the depth of the human plot in all its circumstantiality, historicity, and powerlessness. The situation may be so dire that there is no human resolution; the Gordian knot requires a divine cutting. It’s a theme in some Greek tragedies that only a god can resolve the plots of *Oresteia*, *Philoctetes*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Prometheus Bound*. The *deus ex machina*, maligned as either a cheap plot trick or an annulling of the tragic vision, resonates with the Christian idea that only God can resolve the inextricable human dilemmas of original sin and human guilt. For Balthasar, the depth of the problem is revealed by God’s intervention, because “a knot that has been tied by a god can be untied only through the god himself.”²⁹ The gospel is tragic as it resolves without finalizing, effecting a poetic justice that condemns as it reveals and effects as it promises. The most tragic plots may require divinity.

For theologians such as St. Augustine, Origen, and Anselm, this leads to Christ’s divine nature: he must have been *homoousios* with the Father in order to save us. Yet Christ is not only divine but also truly human, incarnated as one who has truly entered the human situation in its historical, circumstantial, and tragic reality, and only from there can he effect change. His *deus ex machina* is not from outside the reality of history and human circumstance, some divine edict that offers a simple, easy resolution. Tragedies resist easy resolutions, after all. To offer a solution from outside would be untragic, as Balthasar points out; instead, Christ is a character in the story itself, not “removed from the darkness of sin,” nor does he “bear the burden [of sin] as something external.”³⁰ For Athanasius, “Thus it happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord’s body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished” (*Incarnation* 4.20). Anselm saw that only a God-man could both render satisfaction and remove the debt; only one who is both outside of the human drama of sin and death, and interior to it, can resolve the entanglement of guilt and goodness. For Weil, the urn of Orestes becomes a kind of crucifix in Sophocles’ *Electra*: “a *machina* caused his death, now a *machina* has saved him,” is how she translates line 1229;³¹ the mechanism (*machina*) of death has become a mechanism for salvation, but it required a *deus ex machina* to effect it. The resurrection is a *deus ex machina* in the classical sense, but it is not the final act, the last divine appearance onstage where all things are made new. This true and final pattern, hoped for yet still beyond comprehension, is God’s final apocalypse, the last *deus ex machina*.

Theology and words

Nietzsche's theory about tragedy is that it traces our progression from order and disorder, from Apollo to Dionysus. With Apollo, the human mind seeks to project, control, and individuate, ultimately yielding to his opposite Dionysus, the joyful god of creative destruction, irrationality, intoxication, and unity. Our inevitable drive for control and logic, rooted in human rationality, leads to the countermanding drive for irrational ecstasy and the joyful pleasure in the death of Apollo. It's a powerful idea, but like all such theories, it falls apart. It's not Apollo who is torn apart in *The Bacchae*, after all. Nor are Apollo and Dionysus static archetypes as Nietzsche defines them. Historically, Apollo has also been a destructive god, who could send disease and plague. He may be the god of light and order, but he is also the god of fire and Oedipus' enigmatic enemy in *Oedipus the King*; if Apollo is so controlling and logical in human reasoning, why is he irrationally vindictive and contrary to human justice in the plays?

Neither is Dionysus always a god of destruction and dissolution. A foreign god, his identity and cults are complex and contradictory. He was the patron of drama and ordered the tragic performances, after all, and they followed civic patterns and a programmatic order, and in this sense he was a source of civilization, not of destruction. He was a god of life who invents, along with a god of death who destroys. And yet Dionysus himself is often missing from the tragic dramas themselves, leading to Plutarch's comment that some tragedies have "nothing to do with Dionysus." The patron god of drama, for whom the competitions were named and performed, is absent in ways we simply don't understand. Dionysus, after all, wears a mask – his form is highly mutable in Greco-Roman culture. Nietzsche clearly favors Dionysus; Apollo simply sets things up, for the joy is reserved for the Dionysiac destruction. Greek tragedy accuses the gods as much as it venerates, and there is simply no history of Greek drama to support Nietzsche's analysis of the birth of tragedy. Nietzsche's Apollo, and Nietzsche himself, remind us of how a system invites and demands a structure, a theorizing and a system that orders and saves.

Literary critics, philosophers, theologians – many have sought to rationally circumscribe Apollo, tragedy, and suffering. The demand for structure can lead to amusing moments, as when D.D. Raphael thinks that Christianity has a "consistent theology."³² Schopenhauer and Nietzsche have influenced theologians to see tragedy as a dark and malevolent pattern. David Bentley Hart fears that seeing Christ's death as tragic is to condone an immoral and sacrificial cosmos; tragedy denies the ultimate hope and gift of the resurrection. As with Plato, if tragedy can be identified, it can be rejected, and it's far simpler to see the gospel as a divine, triumphant comedy. Chesterton works hard in *Orthodoxy* to convince us that Christianity is laughter and joy, but he has to admit on the last page that his book is a "chaotic volume." (Evidently so, given his bizarre

argument that Christ's mirth was so great that it was omitted completely from the gospels.)

Theology has long favored the conceptual precision of philosophical expression and analytic, expository writing. This is not surprising, given how optimism and rationalism serve the political and imperial interests of a Christian empire, in contrast to tragedy's supposedly dour fatalism. MacKinnon worried that theology's preference for Greek philosophy over tragedy had led it away from the ambiguities of moral action, context, and evil. Conceptualization and precision are far more preferable and tempting than the uncertainty and resistance of paradox and irony; *mimesis* is philosophically suspect as something less real, as a pretense that moves away from true reality. In contrast, narrative is inherently unstable and destabilizing, since it roots itself in character, setting, and a chronology of events that invite analytical uncertainty. For Allen Tate, T.S. Eliot, and William Lynch, Apollo is symbolic of the problematic human impetus to escape historical reality into an angelism, an "infinite dream." It is an abstraction from the particulars of lived human lives into something reasonable, controllable, and predictable.

Theology moves to order things, to be the connective tissue through the Bible, Christian practice, human understanding, cultural ideas and practices, and human living. Systematic theologies take things even further, creating a larger pattern of connections, concerns, themes, and understanding over many topics and volumes. The words and ideas get stretched as they attempt to communicate the paradoxes of living and God as Wholly Other. Where theology is most successful is when such ordered ideas about God and humanity are done against the larger backdrop of an infinite God who is beyond human comprehension. A clear rationality is always theologically tempting, but the irony of overly rationalistic theological systems is that they betray the scriptures themselves, their canonical diversity, deep use of narrative, and conceptual oddities. Order and clarity can lead us into false simplicity, as with the people in Luke who thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once, and which Jesus must correct by problematizing (Luke 19:11).

For William Carlos Williams, there are "no ideas but in things," but it's better said that there are no ideas but in words. The problem is not just Apollo, it's the words themselves, and this is the constant challenge for theology and all human understanding. How do we work with such fragile and facile things as words to express the deep realities of God and human living, and to avoid getting it wrong? Words place a kind of value on things, attempting to speak and measure sacrifice and suffering but ending with deferral. Plato worried that the power of writing, its external marks, would cause us to forget ourselves and our memories, and theologians have long debated the problem of words; the problem goes back to Exodus 3:14 and the name of God, which is no name but some incomprehensible verb. At worst, all God-language is idolatry. How do we speak of God in

a personal way, given the absence of personal, nongendered pronouns in most languages? The words fail us and are open to manipulation, as when Pope Innocent III defined the papacy as more than human and second only to God. The Wicked Bible of 1631 misprinted Deuteronomy 5:24, so that God's greatness became "his great asse," and Exodus 20:14 demanded that "Thou shalt commit adultery." The words are not just unstable and inadequate but also invite deep levels of deception, so that Hauerwas worries that using the word *saint* for someone like Dorothy Day is a way to "get rid of her easily," that *philanthropy* lets us label when we've done enough and take Pharisaical pride. Swearing an oath implies that at other times, we do lie; in the concept of "an oath" is the idea of deceit. Words create their own reality. If they create, they create the not-there, the falsity and hypocrisy. They can be aspirational, the person we want to be, but not the honesty of the person we are.

Words, Weil says trenchantly, "are uncomfortable companions."³³ It's in the words that the conflicts are developed about events, actions, and within the protagonists. Characters in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, for example, argue over how to interpret the events and what to do about them, from the unruly and unpredictable sailors, the disengaged chorus, to the changing opinions of various protagonists. Agamemnon rewrites his orders and, in many ways, his own self in the play (108)³⁴ because language always invites ambiguity and antithesis. Words are deceptive, illusive, and unstable, but especially so when they strive to speak of the unspeakable. In many ways, as Rowan Williams puts it, "tragedy is about the effect upon us of what we do not know."³⁵

Tragedy reminds us of the silences, exceptions, pauses, and difficulties. Electra has waited offstage for the plot to really begin with Orestes' dramatic return – until then, what can she say or do? Billie Whitelaw, Samuel Beckett's confidant and interpreter, commented that "Silences never worried Beckett," asking her to change three dots into two dots.³⁶ Rowan Williams recounts the famous story of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who waited in long lines to feed her imprisoned son. When she was asked if she could describe her plight, she answered simply with something like a smile, "Yes."³⁷ Hamlet's last words are "The rest is silence," with the Folio text adding, "O, O, O, O. Dyes," similar to Lear's last speech at Cordelia's death, "Never, never, never, never, never."

"Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say," ends *King Lear*, but what shall we say? Words are all we have; what else can be used to name and explore? At best they are metaphorical and analogical for the deep realities of God and human existence, used with fear and trembling. Words contain patterns, structure thought, and create illusions and errors. At times they point to "an absolute perfection which we cannot perceive," such as justice and love, meaning they are dangerous to use.³⁸ How can we use words without associating them with error, fallibility, or human limitations? Words can communicate something of the divine reality, but they can also lead to terrible moments such as the cross becoming a symbol

of empire and colonial powers, or the use of the Bible to justify slavery and racial subjugation. The Council of Chalcedon met after the Council of Nicaea to clarify matters, but the words still failed before the paradoxes. It is a mistake to think that language can encompass all. There are moral irrational numbers, which is why MacKinnon was fond of the word “surd,” from the Latin *surdus*, meaning deaf and silent. Without words is the absurd, as when Antigone says to Ismene, “leave me to my own absurdity,” and Ismene calls her “wild, irrational,” and withdraws (111, 115).³⁹ But even with words, there is still the absurd. Tragedies reveal how words fail us, as when Sophocles’ Deianeira mutely exits the stage. Language resists expectations and even expression; at the death of Timon in *Timon of Athens*, there is no life summary, wisdom teaching, or epitaph.

Through language we seek to express and to understand. But language plays an even greater role, as it constitutes our thoughts. We think with words, as you’re doing right now (“you do not know that you are a text,” the words of Alan Moore’s *Jerusalem* tease us).⁴⁰ Without language, we cannot perceive, but the words are stretched as they wrestle with the deep realities of God, justice, guilt, freedom, and suffering. Analogy is required to make sense of how the infinite can be present to the finite. John Beer notes how a word like “perhaps,” the lightest of words, has an “extraordinary subversive power,” an alchemic transformation from finality to openness.⁴¹ Words break down, but they also signify and constitute. Tragedies feature reticence, Poole notes, but they also “show how words go on, how we can go on in the teeth of disaster.”⁴²

The words that remain can create new genres and modes. “Alarminglly, the narrative progresses past the reassuring borderlines of genre into the unnerving territory of the avant-garde,” writes Alan Moore.⁴³ Boethius struggles with language, with expressing something without genre, *sui generis*. Standing between the classical and medieval period, he experienced a tremendous fall, going from political insider to exile, what Amor Towles calls “the Confederacy of the Humbled” that knows that success “is borrowed rather than bestowed.”⁴⁴ Boethius must create a language and genre that can be understood and perceived, while also enabling a transformation. The imprisoned Boethius creates his *consolatio*, his combination of prose and verse that meditates on the reality of suffering and evil, and the oppression of the good, all under the governance of God. His writing is stretched as it shifts from prose to poetry (a technique used in Job), and the poems are not fluff on the hard work of the conceptual prose, but integral to the work, functioning as an emotional relief or even a Greek chorus, another perspective and commentary. Boethius’ perspectivism and irony grasp disorder and order, that IT ALL COHERES in the looming idea of God as stable, “the still point of the turning world,” but through his eclectic use of Stoicism, Plato, myth, and the *consolatio*. He ruminates with great piety without Christ or revelation, much as Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. The power is not just in the words themselves, but the lived life

and experience of the protagonist. Athanasius sparkles in his quip: "The Greek philosophers have compiled many works with persuasiveness and much skill in words; but what fruit have they to show for this such as has the cross of Christ? Their wise thoughts were persuasive enough until they died" (*On the Incarnation* 8.50). Like Socrates and Jesus, Boethius has a kind of imprimatur on the writing as they are all martyrs for their stories. Their writings would be less powerful without the account of their lives; one has to know the story to get to the depths of the writing, because the words fail. For Dante, Boethius is a star in heaven.

Attempts to order the incomprehensible has often led to new genres and forms. Apocalypticism placed suffering against a backdrop of a cosmic battle with signs, numbers, and symbols. For Plato, it meant his dialogues, dialectical encounters among various characters and points of view. The gospels mixed biography, history, and reverence, for what else could express the Son of Man come in the Messiah who was the Suffering Servant? Shakespeare is left with his problem plays and romances, and Euripides is accused having problem plays too. Balthasar innovated a systematic theology rooted in and structured by drama, a grand *theo-drama* of God's encounter with fallen humanity on the tragic world stage.

Words hint at a meaning that is ever elusive yet still hopeful. Wordsworth's "that uncertain heaven, received/ Into the bosom of the steady lake" forms an uncapturable scene,⁴⁵ much like the transition in Psalm 19 from the heavens to the law of the Lord. The only real circumscribing of suffering is possible, yet inconceivable: only an undetermined apocalypse could unveil the ultimate, reconciling coherence. Until then it remains undetermined. As Christopher Devanny observes, MacKinnon claims the resurrection as his "prius" and yet remains "elusive" as to the resurrection's implications for the final resolution to evil and suffering.⁴⁶ Where there is language, there is hope, according to Rowan Williams and Balthasar. As long as there is language, there is community; this is what troubles Balthasar about Dante, because in hell there would be no hope, no community, and no language.⁴⁷

Christianity does hold to a final resolution to tragedy; Pound's madness was right, it does all cohere, but not within human reason, theory, or expression. The language for apocalypticism's ultimate battle between good and evil is expressible in Revelation, but only as visions and unknown codes that somehow express the ultimate battle between good and evil, Blake's "For Hell is opened to heaven." Similarly, Boethius, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Blake, and then Moore's *Jerusalem* all feature dreams and visions. It is a promise and a prophecy, hoped for through the ambivalence of words and narrative that we continue to live toward. Augustine's *City of God* is "not in reality so much as in hope" (19.20). IT ALL COHERES, except that it doesn't really until the final apocalypse; until then, in the words of Blake, "To the Christians. / I give you the end of a golden string, / Only wind it into a ball: / It will lead you in at Heavens gate, / Built in Jerusalems wall."

Why not tragedy?

The ancient Greeks named tragic drama Melpomene, one of the nine muses, as a source of poetic and divine inspiration. Horace praised her, “for our Father has given you a clear-toned voice and the lyre” (*Odes* 1.24.3–4), and both Plato and Aristotle respected, in different ways and for different reasons, the power of tragic poetry and narrative. Yet Christian theology, despite its birth in the Greco-Roman world, has largely neglected tragedy as a source of theological reflection. If theological concepts of Logos, *hypostasis*, divine perfections, aseity, and *apatheia* have been useful for theology, then why not *anagnorisis* and brokenness? Perhaps it is because narrative, the dominant genre of the Bible itself, is less stable than explication and discursive modes of expression. But is theology not in the business of instability, as it wrestles with the great mysteries of God and Trinity, Incarnation, sin, and salvation?

There is a complex history to the “anti-theatrical prejudice” in Christianity.⁴⁸ This prejudice is rooted in part in tragedy’s mode of interrogation, its way of suggesting and resisting that proves deeply ambiguous for human understanding. It suggests something important about tragedy and our resistance to it, our desire to look away; it also suggests something important about theology and our desire to limit, name, and control God. Tragedy invites our consideration, a puzzle box that we seek to solve and a knot we wish to untangle. We want to look away from tragedy, we avoid it. We want to see and unseen, to avoid tragedy for its pain and its ambiguity.

Theology is inherently ambitious and risky; it’s obvious that it can move toward grand meta-narratives and epic metaphysics. Tragic literature returns us to the concreteness of particularity, of lived times and places, and without such narrative care, all discursive thought will fall inevitably for an Apollonic systems and generalities. Christianity looks to the Biblical story of God and God’s people, from Creation through to Abraham, Moses, Exodus, Law, Kingdom and Prophets, Exile and Return, Messiah, the early church, and the Apocalypse. It is a vast and diverse canon that invites and resists a final systematization. The Biblical canon balances Proverbs, with its clarity of wisdom and foolishness, and reward for the righteous (and suffering for the wicked), with Ecclesiastes and Job, which are far less optimistic about happiness or human understanding. It coheres, but doesn’t cohere. Chance can be fortune or misfortune, the former in Ruth and the latter in Ecclesiastes. Perhaps religion can only work as narrative, since human beings are naturally oriented toward narrative. It is how we find meaning, purpose, instruct, remember, and question. The genius of tragedy is not that it possesses a unique, unifying vision, message, or theme, but its innate instability that can probe, suggest, and interrogate; “by the very ruthlessness of its interrogation [it] enables us to project as does no available alternative, our ultimate questioning.”⁴⁹ Tragedy refuses to resolve. In this

mode, tragedy is helpful to theology, as it questions theological certainties, misprisions, and assumptions.

It is a shallow theology that opposes tragedy. It's easy enough to list the many times theology has gotten it wrong. "God won't give you more than you can handle" sounds good, as does "God helps those who help themselves," but such theological truisms that sound so Biblical appear nowhere in the Bible. Theologies fail when they abandon the humility that is required in using human reason and language to describe divinity. Particularity, paradox, and irony remain for Christian thinking and living. But theology has often simplified tragedy so it could be opposed, and tragedy has done the same to theology. Roger Cox notes, "the confusion about Christianity and tragedy thrives upon partisanship—acceptance of Christianity and rejection of tragedy, or vice versa ..."⁵⁰ There is the misconception that "religion leads to a period, science to a comma, tragedy raises a question mark,"⁵¹ or that literature embraces mystery while theology avoids it. In reality, though, both theology and tragedy lean more toward a realism about both good and evil, as when William James "praised Christianity as a religion that is realistic and complete in that the pessimistic elements of life are not simply ignored, swept under the rug, so to speak, but are actually developed and integrated into a more inclusive whole."⁵²

Through engaging with tragedy, theology can recover its own proper irresoluteness. The Bible itself is a plural canon, conversational and dialectical with itself, suggesting that truth is not monolithic but, as Balthasar titled it, symphonic. There is a peculiar power in tragedy's questioning. More than other modes of thinking, it can suggest an ending without closure. It may be that, as Schmidt observes, "conceptuality, the mother tongue of philosophy, does not define the limits of knowledge."⁵³ Tragedy and theology reflect deep mysteries that are conceptual to a certain degree, but which also ultimately resist rational grasp. For Tertullian, "I believe it precisely because it is absurd" is something that transcends human reason. Both tragedy and theology have paradoxical, experiential, and ineffable elements. The problem is not their difference, but that saying something conceptual without being reductionistic is always a challenge.

Tragedy suggests patterns while resisting any final coherence, and this same struggle is at work in Christian theology. "Christian dogma is about the only thing left in the world that surely guards and respects mystery," commented Flannery O'Connor.⁵⁴ As Balthasar comments, the Christian and particularly Lutheran concept of being a justified sinner, of being both absolutely forgiven and absolutely corrupted, is more tragic than anything conceived of by the Greeks.⁵⁵ Tragedy resists closure, as does theology; rather than reducing mystery and paradox, they intensify it. Kierkegaard similarly thought that the struggle of the knight of faith was one of constant tension, a fear and trembling, far greater than the pagan tragic heroes.

Tragedy doesn't merely open doors and raise theodicy, and theology doesn't merely resist and close. Theology, especially in the modern era, "consists not so much in confirming as rather in disturbing Church proclamation," as Barth noted,⁵⁶ and both theology and tragedy are, properly understood, interrogative and suggestive. What else could they be, given the material of an infinite God and the problem of tragedy? They have more in common than in difference, and perhaps, as MacKinnon and Balthasar argued, they can safeguard one another.

Systematic theologies are powerful exercises and resources for theologians, and they dominate modern theology, but are only one way of doing theology. They always fail to encompass the whole. Aquinas' *Summae Theologicae* was unfinishable; so was Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Aquinas at the end of his life said that his work was "all straw," and Barth thought his work was "waste paper," merely part of a larger conversation that would have to return yet again to the beginning. Theology coheres, but it doesn't cohere in the end. How can it, when it deals with the mystery of God, life and death, guilt and freedom, the divine freedom in relation to human freedom? There is always the risk of overreach and overconfidence, the idolatry of forcing God to fit into our systems of thought. Theologians must always be realists, aware of our human limits of understanding.⁵⁷ Christian theology has a destabilizing effect, as it approaches a Being that is beyond human conceptions of being, beyond human imagination and definition; Graham Ward puts it succinctly: the work of theology "has always been the transgression of boundaries."⁵⁸ Theology seeks to make sense of a Being that is beyond human sensibility, which is a daring, dangerous, and impossible enterprise. To speak of God is, after all, idolatry, done under the injunction that "If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city" (Rev 22:19).

Balthasar worried that the mainstream theology of his day was overly abstracted from human living, what he called the "sawdust Thomism" of a heavy rationalism. His response was to ground his theology in dramatics, to attempt a "theo-drama," and to deeply ground it in the literature and tragedy that he so deeply loved. Socrates' philosophy led to a willing martyrdom for the truth, and in a similar manner, theology and philosophy should yield real, livable results, not airy escapisms. Theology is living, not escaping, and Balthasar was drawn to a different kind of theology, the *nouvelle theologie* and *ressourcement* of his day, his mentor Erich Przywara and Karl Barth's dynamic, free, and wholly other God, because Christ surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:19).

Human reason favors conceptualization over the elusive ambiguities of narrative and tragedy, which is why they are vital resources and correctives for such tendencies. It is in this vein that MacKinnon felt tragedy was so helpful to theology, as a "proper respect for the irreducibility of the tragic inhibits ambitious metaphysical construction."⁵⁹

Notes

- 1 I am heavily indebted to the brilliant opening to chapter three of Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: Shakespeare and the Greek Example* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 54.
- 2 Stephen Halliwell, "Plato and Aristotle on the Denial of Tragedy," in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. Andrew Laird (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117.
- 3 Irving Ribner, *Patterns in Shakesperian Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1962).
- 4 George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 9.
- 5 Nicholas Lash, *Doing Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 18–19.
- 6 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord vol 4: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 50.
- 7 Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God, part 1*, Church Dogmatics, vol. 2 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 374 (§30.2).
- 8 Lewis Campbell, *Sophocles: The Seven Plays in English Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), 213.
- 9 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 213.
- 10 Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 341.
- 11 Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 10.
- 12 Halliwell, "Plato and Aristotle," 126. Plato was accused of hypocrisy by Colotus for writing in the tragic style. Halliwell, 118n8.
- 13 Halliwell, "Plato and Aristotle," 119.
- 14 Halliwell, "Plato and Aristotle," 120.
- 15 Halliwell, "Plato and Aristotle," 124.
- 16 Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, eds., *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy: 1920–1925* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 1:190.
- 17 Giles Waller, "Tragic Drama, Tragic Theory, and Martin Luther's *Theologia Crucis*" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2016), 8. The translation is Waller's.
- 18 Paul R. Kolbet, "Torture and Origen's Hermeneutics of Nonviolence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76.3 (2008), 556.
- 19 Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 119.
- 20 MacKinnon, *Problem*, 139.
- 21 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 144.
- 22 Quoted in Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 117.
- 23 Ben Quash, "Four Biblical Characters: In Search of a Tragedy," in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 27.
- 24 Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 161.
- 25 Donald MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), 104.
- 26 Horace Meyer Kallen, *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1959), 34.
- 27 Jeff Jay, *The Tragic in Mark: A Literary-Historical Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 198.

- 28 Jay, *Tragic in Mark*, 200.
- 29 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology vol. 3: Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 398.
- 30 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama vol 4: The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 336–37. Quoted in Christopher Steck, “Tragedy and the Ethics of Hans Urs Von Balthasar,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21(2001), 243.
- 31 Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998). Also, “he who knew the way to die, now finds the way to be saved,” 16.
- 32 D.D. Raphael, *The Paradox of Tragedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 40.
- 33 Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1981), 338.
- 34 Jennifer Wallace, “Tragic Sacrifice and Faith,” in *Christian Theology and Tragedy*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 39–40.
- 35 Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 97.
- 36 Billie Whitelaw, *Who He?* (London: Sceptre, 1995), 77.
- 37 Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 16.
- 38 Weil, *Reader*, 337.
- 39 Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1984), 64.
- 40 Alan Moore, *Jerusalem: A Novel* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2016), 824.
- 41 John Beer, *Against Finality: Inaugural Lecture, Delivered 4th February 1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2–3.
- 42 Poole, *Introduction*, 90.
- 43 Moore, *Jerusalem: A Novel*, 824.
- 44 Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow: A Novel* (New York: Viking, 2016), 196.
- 45 Beer, *Finality*, 28–29.
- 46 Christopher Devanny, “Truth, Tragedy and Compassion: Some Reflections on the Theology of Donald Mackinnon,” *New Blackfriars* 78.911 (1997), 35–36.
- 47 Christopher D. Denny, *A Generous Symphony: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Literary Revelations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 126.
- 48 Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
- 49 MacKinnon, *Problem*, 136.
- 50 Roger L. Cox, *Between Earth and Heaven: Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and the Meaning of Christian Tragedy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 4.
- 51 Normand Berlin, *The Secret Cause: A Discussion of Tragedy* (Amherst: Univ of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 2.
- 52 Kenneth J Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 232.
- 53 Schmidt, *On Germans*, 10.
- 54 Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 178.
- 55 Balthasar, *Explorations vol. 3*, 403.
- 56 Quoted in Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach*, 13. The quotation is from *Church Dogmatics* 1.1, 323.
- 57 Devanny, “Truth, Tragedy,” 34.
- 58 Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (St. Martin’s Press, 1996), ix.
- 59 MacKinnon, *Problem*, 145.

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4 Prometheus and the economics of sacrifice

What's a life worth?

The great war between Troy and the Achaeans had begun, but Agamemnon was unable to join the battle. The goddess Artemis had been offended, and her honor required the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia. Until then, the winds will fail, and the ships and vast army could not depart.

For Artemis' honor there must be an atonement, and for Agamemnon's honor he must join the battle. There is a necessity to war, even though this particular war is far from honorable – it's all to recover Agamemnon's sister-in-law, wife to his brother the king of Sparta. Agamemnon admits she is beautiful, but calls her a “bad wife” in *Iphigenia at Aulis* (389). Agamemnon's own wife Clytemnestra, Helen's half-sister, puts it powerfully in the same play:

If someone asks you why you will kill her, tell me, what will you say?
Or must I speak for you? So that Menelaus can take back Helen. It
would be a fine thing to pay for a bad woman with the life of a child!
We are buying what we hate the most with what we love the best.
(1164–70)¹

Agamemnon himself waffles about the terrible choice, but then he shifts, fearing dishonor, blame, and the violence of his own army. It is all for Greece and for freedom, after all – “Greece must be free” (1263–72). Isn't freedom worth any price? There is a cost for Agamemnon's glorious leadership of the Greek military, which is that Iphigenia must be the destroyer of Troy. Religion helps; in the end, he will soothe things by saying, “she lives among the gods” (1262). The price for Agamemnon is to sacrifice his own daughter, but it's a lesson he seemingly cannot learn, because it weirdly happens again. During the war, Agamemnon will again exchange a life for military victory, and again it will be someone close to Achilles.

It's not just the Greeks who have explored war, human life, sacrifice, and divine blessing. In Judges 11:29–40, there is another human exchange for a military victory blessed by the gods. Here it is a rash vow that must be

fulfilled for a past victory rather than a promised future, a past debt instead of a future profit. The tribal judge Jephthah swears that if God will give him victory over the Ammonites, he will sacrifice what he first sees from his own home. It's a kind of Faustian deal, a victory with a bitter cost. The battle is won, but it's his only daughter whom he sees. Ironically, she has come out to celebrate the battle won, leaving Jephthah to be tragically "brought very low" (11:35). Like Iphigenia, Jephthah's unnamed daughter heroically accepts her fate, with the resignation of Antigone. The tragic vow and heroic acceptance inspire George Buchanan, a sixteenth-century Scottish scholar and translator of *Medea* and *Alcestis*, to compose a tragic drama, *Jephtha or the Vow* (*Jephthes sive Votum*). Buchanan names the daughter Iphis, presumably as an allusion to her Greek counterpart, and uses an alternate spelling of "Jephtha." Handel bases his last oratorio (*Jephtha*) on Buchanan's play while adding a Greek-style chorus.

Who pays the cost? In these stories, it's someone else; the sins of the father are visited on the children for generations to come (Exodus 20:5, 34:6–7), as when David and Bathsheba's infant will die because David sinned before the Lord. For the Greeks, there was a curse on the house of Atreus that extended across generations in both directions. Iphigenia is left sacrificing not only her life but also her future marriage to Achilles, a family and children. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter's is similarly poignant. In the pained brevity of the Old Testament, "So she said to her father, 'Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions'" (Judges 11:37). It's not enough to record her plaintive request once, so the next verse repeats it again, along with the annual Israelite ritual to remember her, with weeping, for four days. Iphigenia and Jephthah's daughter embrace their sacrifice, in contrast to Isaac who remains totally in the dark and without a choice when Abraham attempts to sacrifice him.

It's definitely more palatable for the punishment to fall on the offender rather than another person and especially a child, so that "the son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity" (Ezekiel 18:20), but substitutions are sometimes permitted and the punishment is shifted elsewhere. Like Jephthah, Idomeneus makes a rash promise to a god to sacrifice the first thing he sees, which for him is his son. Mozart's opera *Idomeneo* tidies it up so that the gods spare the son in exchange for Idomeneus giving up his throne. In one version of the Iphigenia legend, an animal is supernaturally substituted for her death, as happened with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Medieval Jewish and Christian scholars theorized that Jephthah's daughter was not actually sacrificed but kept in seclusion. The conjunction in Jephthah's vow can be alternately translated as "Shall be forever Thine, or fall a sacrifice." Handel's oratorio follows this solution that she is dedicated to God, "in pure and virgin state fore'er," troubling to modern ears but something of a relief at the time. Iphigenia is similar, as her life is dedicated to be a priestess to Artemis among the Taurians. In the Qur'an 4:157–58,

Jesus only appears to have been crucified and died; some interpretations argue that another person was substituted for Jesus on the cross. Violence against a third party is repugnant and naturally invites revisionism, given the trickiness of exchanging human lives for blessings, victories, or debts – it seems so incommensurate.

But the exchange can also backfire. Deianira hopes that the Nessus' blood will make Heracles faithful to her. After being kidnapped by Nessus and then betrayed by Heracles, who can blame her for risking the possibility? But it's a ruse, and the blood tortures Heracles to death, and Deianira ends up hanging herself. In Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean*, Emperor Julian the Apostate dies for the dream of restoring a pagan and tolerant Roman Empire; "The world-will shall answer for Julian's soul.... Led astray like Cain. Led astray like Judas.... Were you, Julian, not the right one, this time either ... sacrificed on the altar of necessity?" Some sacrifices are unacceptable to the gods and thus rejected like Cain's. The Passover lamb must be unblemished. In *Agamemnon* (69–71), "Whatever's burned and poured and wept on altars / won't coax away the anger tightly fastened / to gifts no fire should touch."² Sacrifices may cause further guilt, or end up pointless. *Billy Budd* takes place in the midst of war and mutiny, yet Billy's sacrifice achieves little. It doesn't change the captain or the larger system, except by way of indicting and revealing its injustices. Rodrigues' suffering in *Silence* achieves little to nothing. Some cultures may have turned to animal sacrifice as a way to replace human sacrifice, but the sacrifice of war upends the whole thing. With war, humans turn into beasts and frightened animals, "As when two wild beasts spring in the dead of night on a herd of cattle or a large flock of sheep when the herdsman is not there – even so were the Danaans struck helpless, for Apollo filled them with panic and gave victory to Hector and the Trojans" (*Iliad* 15). In *King Lear*, Edgar realizes that he "Escaped the hunt," and is now "Brought near to beast" (2.3.3, 9). People can object to being made a sacrifice, which is why animals are so much more convenient since they cannot argue with you about the matter. Isaac's question is particularly poignant: "Where shall we get the sacrificial ram?" Iphigenia asks a similar question about the sacrificial animal, not realizing she will play that part herself.

Economics and replacement

The early tragedians explored the question of sacrifice, the "paradox of violence" in its bloody exchange and the possibility of placing a cost on pain, "the positive value of suffering, sin and death."³ The central omen in *Agamemnon* and the larger trilogy is a scene of animal hunting, where two eagles consume a hare with young, as Vernant and Vidal-Naquet note; the hunt "is an image of a monstrous sacrifice, that of Iphigenia."⁴ Hunting is rooted in social activity, the shift from nature to society, culture, and war. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, there is the myth that an altar for the Olympian

sacrifice was built when a quarrel between gods and mortals was to be resolved (535–36). Pentheus in *Bacchae* is a victim of a sacrificial hunt. At Mecone, Prometheus tricked Zeus, so that the gods received bones and fat of hunted animals for their sacrifice while the people ate the meat. Sacrifice was part of the Dionysia, the city-wide Athenian competition where the tragic plays were performed for Dionysus. The Trojan war was a kind of hunt, as is war in general. The personal message from General Bernard Law Montgomery, the Commander-in-Chief during World War II Normandy landings, to his troops makes this ancient connection between hunting and war: “Good luck to each one of you. And good hunting on the mainland of Europe.”

A sacrificial system is a measuring of the costs of such exchanges, and for the system to function substitution is vital. “The possibility of substitution is as important as the law of the talion, and together they form the basis of all culture. Money is a substitution for things, material or immaterial.”⁵ In the Old Testament law, certain animals are required for certain sins. Economic factors appear throughout Euripides. Even though Clytemnestra was taken against her will from her former husband, she has “built up your estate.” Now Agamemnon will buy what they hate (Helen) with what they love the best (Iphigenia), and Clytemnestra will be “robbed” of her child (1160–1203). Clytemnestra promises Agamemnon that “you must / Pay for a blow with a blow” (*Agamemnon* 1430), the law of *talion* that demands an eye for an eye, measure for measure. Buchanan’s *Jephtha* also uses the word “robbed,” that Iphis should “pay the penalty my madness claims,” that “with great interest she soon will pay,” but it is God alone who can pay her back what she is due. In 4 Maccabees 17:22, the mother and her seven sons are martyrs, an expiation for others, and the Greek word for *expiation* is the same in Romans 3:25 in regard to Jesus. “It must be stressed, however, that in Greek prayers, in Homer and also, as we have seen, in the tragedians, the aspect of commercial calculation in the dealings with the gods is always apparent.”⁶

Tragedy often slips into economic terms for valuing, cost, and comparison, because debts, profits, and measuring are at the heart of sacrifice. A sacrifice is an economic choice, exchanging some goods for other, more highly valued goods. The idea of substitution is basic to the whole endeavor, and it is always for a profit, or otherwise why bother? Such an exchange may look to the past, since canceling a prior debt would unburden the future. Jephthah’s obligation is for a battle already won, and Faust has to pay off a line of credit for having received the world’s pleasures. The sacrifice may end the curse and right a wrong, as with Eteocles, Orestes, Oedipus, and Hamlet. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech also uses economic language to communicate sacrifice and exchange: “In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check,” that the Constitution and Declaration of Independence was a “promissory note” that became “a bad check” for citizens of color.

A guilty conscience is a burden that can be valued and exchanged. What would we do to undo the past? Thomas Hardy is somewhat obsessed with such an exchange. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard's guilt at selling his former wife to another man spurs him to many good deeds that all go badly for him. He uses a similar motif in the short story "For Conscience' Sake," where the protagonist's regret, his need "to recover my self of being a man of honour," leads him to a similar tragic decline. Measuring the guilt, and attempting to atone for it, can cause more pain than it alleviates. Other times the guilt is measured before acting, and the cost may be higher than expected. Hardy's "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" traces the guilt two sons endure after their failure to prevent their father's death. Another possibility is when guilt is confessed so that it can be traded with someone else's guilt. In "A Mere Interlude," a wife's secret prior marriage is finally confessed to her husband; he responds in relief, as he too had a secret prior marriage that he needed to confess. It oddly works out for the couple, as the wife comes to love her stepchildren, but if it works out here it fails elsewhere. When Angel confesses a prior relationship in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess responds by attempting to trade her fears about her past relationship with Alec. But the bargain goes south, as Angel the libertine is a sexual prude and hypocrite.

Other exchanges are for an expectation of a greater blessing and a better future. Hauerwas references the story of Captain Oates, who was an injured member of Scott's Antarctic expedition. Rather than imperil the whole group, Oates chose to walk alone into a blizzard to save the group's future. His death meant their survival, and his action freed the group of responsibility because they could now say that it was the blizzard that killed him. Hauerwas is generally morally resistant to euthanasia and suicide, yet he does not consider such a situation to be suicide or euthanasia.⁷ The covenantal exchange between God and Abraham is the promise of an unimaginable number of descendants to an old man through one son. Such a promised future is prodigal and miraculous, universal and apocalyptic, beyond his lifetime and family and to the entire world. The Bible will struggle with its fulfillment, ultimately lapsing into further apocalyptic possibilities, as the promise comes with covenantal expectations that are either broken or impossible. In the New Testament, liberation and deliverance (*apolytrōsis* or a cognate) are often an exchange between the present reality and the future hope, the apocalyptic redemption of the Son of Man in glory (Luke 21:28, Rom 8:23, Heb 11:35).

The future may also be an exchange that will end current suffering. The terrible choice made by Margaret Garner in nineteenth-century America, and by Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, is to kill her children so they will not be enslaved. Wars are fought so that they will end, or to prevent worse possibilities. For Hauerwas, the sacrifice of war may be "the sacrifice of our unwillingness to kill," where we exchange a natural abhorrence of violence for a dehumanizing, violent hatred of the enemy.⁸ War teaches us

to ignore Hume's inherent morality that we would not step on someone's "gouty toes." Weil observes that the sheer existence of the enemy forces the soul "to destroy the part of itself implanted by nature, believes it can only cure itself by the destruction of the enemy ..." The presence of the enemy, this character now onstage with a role to play, defines our responsive role in the liturgy of war. Now we are called on to follow allies and friends in fighting the enemy; Weil describes that "... at the same time the death of beloved companions stimulates the desire to emulate them, to follow their dark example."⁹ War makes us all soldiers, fighting an enemy that defines us and even bonds us together. The ritual of war changes us, as all rituals do. It may create close relationships, as Lewis found in his friendship with Sergeant Ayres during World War I. It may begin as a bit of a game, an adventure, as it does in *The Fellowship of the Ring* with an exuberant war party departing on a noble adventure. It doesn't take long for the horror to show up, for the bullets to whine over the earth without grass, the "smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles."¹⁰

But how can we value a life, or compare it for a profitable exchange? Büchner's *Danton's Death* asks, "Everything has the right to live. That gnat. That bird. So why not him?" It's a reference to Lear's same comparison of incomparables, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?" "For a piece of dried fish I had made an irrevocable failure," worries Rodrigues in *Silence*, and later he renounces his faith to save five tormented peasants. Price sets a value on something. Items are ultimately fungible, especially when measured as a kind of currency, the ultimate fungible item. Vows themselves are contractual obligations that must be marked paid, while prudence extends beyond wise choices to financial matters. Loss is something to be measured, even though it is immeasurable. Wordsworth holds that "For this loss I would believe abundant recompense." Joseph was sold by his brothers for money. Judas betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, but Rodrigues in *Silence* was worth 300 pieces of silver to the magistrate: "I was worth ten times as much" as Jesus, the priest laughs bitterly.

People are often exchanged in the New Testament, which uses a conjugation of *paradidómi* 120 times for handing over, deliver, or betray. It is the word used for Judas' betrayal of Jesus, for God's handing over Jesus, and Paul's reference to the sacrifice of Isaac (Rom 8:32).¹¹ The handing over is also in the form of teaching, a ransoming from ignorance to enlightenment, so that Paul hands over the teachings that were handed to him (1 Cor 11:2). Both meanings play off one another in the famous verse that is commonly used at the Lord's Supper: Paul hands over the knowledge of Jesus breaking bread the night he was handed over in betrayal (1 Cor 11:23). To hand over is to expect a reward, so Paul lyrically describes the profit of love in 1 Cor 13:3: "though I give [*paradō*] my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (KJV). Handing over, exchanging, profit: these are ways of imagining the value of this good versus those, the valuing of a

human life against something that has relative worth. In Weil's translation of the *Iliad* 21, "Patroclus was worth much more than you."¹² In *Sophie's Choice*, a choice is made between one's children. Tragedy reminds us of the impossible choices that must be made and the costs that must be lived with.

The weight of words

Tragedies explore these exchanges, their promises and their costs. How do we name and measure loss and grief? What is the cost of justice, replacement, or consolation? The law of *talion* set a price, as did the Old Testament law, which named all sorts of specific situations (such as the one who blinds a slave must set the slave free, Exodus 21:26). A life for a life seems fair, but how to measure a life? The comparisons are never commensurate. A loved one is never equal to a stranger, after all. There is the worry that the price is too high, that "Priam's sons have paid twice over for their sins" (*Agamemnon* 537). The Bible visits this problem repeatedly, that Israel "has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:2; see Isaiah 61:7, Jer 16:18, 17:18, Zech 9:12, Rev 18:6). Job receives a double portion as his reward for his losses, but it's hard not to read this as intentionally ironic – how could 41 agonized chapters be repaired with one quick verse? Faust trades his soul for worldly success, which he deeply regrets later, and *Philoctetes* explores victory at the price of tricking, betraying, and even killing an innocent sufferer. Neoptolemus' conscience objects; Odysseus' does not. (Philoctetes is worse off than Iphigenia or Jephthah, because he does not even get a vote.) Odysseus the trickster is blamed for Iphigenia's sacrifice in *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. The exchange wins Agamemnon the war and fame, but also infamy; now he is remembered more for the sacrifice than the military victory. The same price is exacted of Jephthah; he wins, but there are lots of Israelite wins in the Old Testament – he's only remembered for his rash vow.

Words attempt to measure and weigh, somewhere between "precise weighing and valid imagining ... that pause to weigh incompatibles" in John Beer's wonderful essay.¹³ Beer evaluates various writers for their sense of weighing and imagining, such as Dickens' *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son*, with its manager who assays the words themselves by weighing them for profit and genuineness. He finds Wordsworth to be especially concerned with weight, imagination, and loss, and his images often have an earthy measurability. There is an evocative turn when unbalanced incompatibles are held in a sublime and irrational unity. In Wordsworth, "that uncertain heaven, received / Into the bosom of the steady lake" is much like the shift in Psalm 19 from "the heavens declare the glory of God" to "the law of the Lord is perfect." Sometimes the alchemy of words fails, and the incompatibles remain incompatible. Poole notes that tragedy tries to find the register for the words, but sometimes it's only a stammering, the "oh" and "ah" so common in dramas.¹⁴ How can these be represented

onstage: are they stage directions or dialogue? The words may devolve into more primal sounds, the howl and the scream. The attempted weighing with words can devolve into the non-speech of animals.

To place lives and loss within the proper linguistic register feels impossible, especially since we cannot truly enter another person's experience of pain. For Weil, "affliction is by its nature inarticulate," and we can only respond through careful attention to the other's particularity.¹⁵ Such attention is very difficult, and it's much easier to shift to ourselves, to place it in some sort of matrix of suffering. Tragedy reminds us of these impossibilities. It attempts to voice pain, to speak of loss, but it's not real, it's literature. Real life is not the artificiality of the soliloquy, the grand final speech, the noble death. Achilles' spear fatally wounds Hector in the neck, but he can still talk and give his death speech. Tragedy seeks to narrate and represent suffering, but it's still removed from the ontic nature of existence. To put experience into poetic verse, costumed acts onstage, or the scenes and chapters of fiction is to twist it, to misrepresent it in its representation. *A Farewell to Arms* ends in silence, as some tragedies do, pointing to this very incomprehensibility. Tragedies speak of suffering, attempt to measure it, but may also knowingly point to the impossibility of such attempts. In *The Republic*, Plato has a similar problem; he is forced to criticize words through words themselves, that "the riddle of mimesis is itself enacted and performed in the very texts that set forth its critique."¹⁶

Words tempt us with consolation, to hold to a kind of tragic beauty that makes the suffering all worth it. From the "... deep throat of sad Melpomene" comes a "tragic order," for Keats in "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" (441–43). Melpomene can be a consoler, an alluring source of beauty, or a dissembler. Nietzsche speaks this way in his celebration of Dionysiac dissolution – it hurts, but isn't it just grand? Clytemnestra is told her daughter has miraculously disappeared just before her sacrifice, but she responds with grieving disbelief. Given Agamemnon's sophistry (108), it's not a surprise that she fears this is a "story made up to console me" (1617), a consoling myth (*muthos*). Words encourage us to speak for others and their experiences. It's easy for people to generalize, grade, and compare when faced with another's suffering, to comment, "Well, at least ..." Kate Bowler calls such persons minimizers: those who want a sufferer to somehow deserve their compassion, once one's level of suffering has been accurately compared. She found herself worn out by their "tyranny of prescriptive joy."¹⁷ It's clear that people are uncomfortable with suffering and especially that suffering might be meaningless and deep; better to give it a value, especially a divine one. For Agamemnon, if he can call Iphigenia's sacrifice holy, then there's no conflict; the gods made me do it, after all.¹⁸ Even modern words like *rights* and *persons* fall for this trap. They seem to avoid comparing experience and suffering, but in reality they drive us toward "bargain prices."¹⁹ Rights language is inherently commercial, related to ownership and bargaining, and it assumes everyone is blameless in

striving for the best deal possible. Rights language imagines only a zero-sum world. Hauerwas observes how such modern and neutral words lead us to self-deception regarding sacrifice and exchange, because they delude us into thinking choices are about rights and principles, instead of consequences and persons. Health care may consider itself to be equally committed to each individual patient. In reality, though, it is a tragic profession, because it is a “moral activity in a finite and limited world ... the name we give such stories is tragedy.”²⁰ To care for a patient is never neutral. Modern principles and policies console us as they mask manipulation and violence.

The weight of reality

Clearly sacrifices are not limited to the ancient world and its festivals and altars, but something at work throughout human existence. Debts are owed and received. In MacLeish's *J.B.*, his adaptation of Job, J.B.'s wife Sarah helps by meliorating his suffering. In the apocryphal *Testament of Job*, his wife sells her hair for money. To be human is to be indebted to larger factors and forces, the “thrownness” of Heidegger that suggests we all live with debts, sacrificial costs, and exchanges. What do we owe to each other, to the past, to the future? Rowan Williams notes that Poor Tom in *King Lear* ultimately “ow'st nothing,” which is part of his terrible inhumanity; to be without obligation is to be a “thing itself.”²¹ The economic imagery continues for Williams: Lear has a debtless fantasy about his daughters' love, to which Cordelia responds only with duty. As Augustine and Weil realized, we live with worldly love and divine love, debts and grace, and confusing these two orders causes us great pain.

If we could assign a value to suffering, loss, and sacrifice, then it would be controllable and fungible. If the value were right, then limits could be placed and worthiness assigned. If price is an expression of value, what price is there for a human life, a sacrifice, the pain of guilt? Goods could be exchanged – this life for that cause, this person for that person. Characters in Hardy, for example, are often looking askance at a better situation or mate, switching back and forth in a mad square dance. Cora realizes, as she considers the white shopkeeper who helped them escape slavery in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*:

Fletcher had undertaken a great risk for them, even when the situation grew more complicated than he had bargained. The only currency to satisfy the debt was their survival and to help others when circumstances permitted. By her accounting, at least.²²

But tragedy is always suggesting how immeasurable people, situations, and suffering are and how pain remains frustratingly unassimilable.

The world is limited in its goods and temporality. Mortality means substitution and the possibility of being erased. We are exchangeable for

others and for the future. History means we are forced out; tragedies are often set in liminal places like heaths, storms, and forests because we are all palimpsests. Tillich speaks movingly of Barth's analysis of the line in the Apostles' Creed, "he was buried." To be buried is to no longer have a present or a future, but to be only past, and in Christ's burial he becomes "pure past," accessible only to the memory of those still alive.²³ The replacements can be adversarial. The shadowy presence of Clare Quilty in *Lolita* covets and then takes Humbert's place. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, as Henchard finds himself replaced in every way: his business, marriage, reputation, even his home, as does the protagonist in "Fellow Townsmen." The chilling words for Saul are that "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam 18:7), that Saul is being replaced by David in the people's respect, in ability, in favor, in kingship, and even God's election.

Tragedy importantly questions any simplistic notions about human action that we can simply and easily choose the good. Guilt and determination make our moral actions opaque. Instead, as Hegel long ago observed, tragedy shows how the good can be opposed to itself. We may be entrapped between rival goods and forced to choose between them. What is worse for Hamlet, to commit murder and matricide, or disobey his father and leave him unavenged and the country of Denmark rotten? Antigone's dilemma was, of course, fidelity to the state versus fidelity to her brother. Our actions are complex, having repercussions we cannot see or anticipate, and they are heightened and of supreme significance in tragic plots. To act, even to do good, is to often do harm to someone else, as one of the boys realizes in Thomas Hardy's *Our Exploits at West Poley*: "I perceive that it is next to impossible, in this world, to do good to one set of folks without doing harm to another."²⁴ There is a fragility to simply being human that dispels, as MacKinnon reminds us, the "illusion that kindness is a simple matter."²⁵

Gods and sacrifices

Sacrifices are made to something or someone, and it's often the gods who are the arbiters of such exchanges and costs. The gods have been seen as at the top of the sacrificial system so they can reconcile all the sums in the end. The Fates (*moirai*) were connected to one's portion and due in life (*moira*). This concept of balancing, receiving a fair share, an appointed allotment, or some sort of divine justice were guarded by the goddess of justice. Romans and Egyptians had a similar notion of a kind of justice and of receiving one's due.

Measurement is difficult even for the gods, and their justice is often inscrutable and unbalanced. In one version of the Greek story of Idomeneus, the gods had angrily sent a plague to punish Idomeneus for the sacrifice of his son, even though it was their own honor that had required his son's life.

Similarly, Buchanan's *Jephtha* moralizes that his daughter's punishment is to break Jephtha's pride:

lest even Jephtha
Measure himself by issue of this fight,
And in a prosperous state swell insolent,
He'll be forthwith o'erwhelm'd by loss at home
His haughty, stubborn, spirit break and yield.²⁶

In Handel's *Jephtha*, it is God's Spirit that mysteriously dictates the vow ("How dark, O Lord, are Thy decrees, / All hid from mortal sight"), although Jephthah still accepts responsibility. The cost of Jephthah's proud spirit for winning Yahweh's battle is someone else's life, but such humility is never asked of later proud military leaders like Samson, Saul, and David. Calling it holy or a divine decree is a way to duck the issue. A divine penalty may be assessed for bad choices, madness, or pride, and an innocent life or future is an acceptable currency.

Marx's concern was that religion was an illusive opiate of the people. Many religions speak of a future worthy of our present suffering, the reward of heaven; "Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs in return is the garden of Paradise" (Qur'an 9:111). The martyrs are a kind of spiritual champions, heroes who endure pain and loss for a greater glory. A sacrificial exchange may be a present suffering for a future glory, an agonizing training for a coming victory. Job suffers now, but for some interpreters it is because he knows that his redeemer lives. One can choose suffering or ignominy temporarily in exchange for a greater fame, as when Heracles tells Philoctetes that they both will "after these pains ... rise to glorious fame" (1422).²⁷ In Endo's *Silence*, Rodrigues undertakes a dangerous and forbidden journey to Japan because he wants to be a famous martyr and saint. T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* presents the temptation for Beckett to embrace his martyrdom in order to become a famous saint. It's always easy to say God made me do it, under the "yoke of necessity ... a god has outwitted me" (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 443). In *Agamemnon*, Cassandra exclaims, "The palace reeks of dripping blood and murder," to which the Chorus responds, "What? That's the smell of offerings at the hearth" (1309–10).²⁸ There is a spectacle to it all that should make us uncomfortable; valuing tragic sacrifice through religion means enabling future sacrifices and the temptation of religious fame. The financial theme rings here as well, because the future hope is purchased, exchanged, measured, and found to be of value, although risk remains. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied," admits Paul (1 Cor 15:19), and it all hangs on Christ resurrected from the dead; "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (15:14).

But other approaches to tragedy place the blame more on us more than the gods. Wilfred Owen's chilling poem "The Parable of the Old Man

and the Young” imagines a different ending to Abraham sacrificing Isaac, against the backdrop of World War I:

When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
 Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
 ...
 But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
 And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

René Girard develops an extensive interpretation of sacrifice rooted in the human impulse to covet. Because we jealously desire our neighbors’ goods and magnify that desire throughout social systems, societies eventually require release through a sacrificial scapegoat. He gives the example of the pagan Apollonius of Tyana, who helped end a plague in Ephesus by inciting a mob to kill a beggar.²⁹ Apollonius convinced them the beggar was a demon in disguise, and after his death they erected a statue of Hercules to sanctify the sacrifice. In contrast, Judaism refused to divinize the victims, who like Job were innocent, because God does not demand victims. It is human desire, society, and our imitative desires that demand a victim. With Christ, there are no longer blood sacrifices because his innocence has indicted all such systems. Hauerwas’ conclusion rings similar: “in the cross of Christ war has already been abolished,” and the church is left to authentically speak, live, and imagine a world without war, to oppose the liturgy of war.³⁰

Some theologians argue that human sin and a broken world are the causes of suffering, and God is never to blame. As with Plato, God is never a source of suffering, evil, or loss. Suffering is ultimately meaningless, and Christians should never seek to somehow consecrate it to the state or the divine, or accept a sacrificial cosmos. For David Bentley Hart, the gospel of God’s ever-prior peace annuls such notions of violence. God didn’t kill Jesus on the cross; God raised Jesus from the dead, and it is theologically wrong to ever ascribe death and suffering to God. Human civilization centered on violence killed Jesus, the defining murder of Cain and Romulus that consecrates its violence through its gods and their cosmic sacrificial system. An authentic Christian theology must recognize the cross “as a reversal of the narrative of violence that makes crucifixion seem meaningful.”³¹ Simone Weil sounds a similar note in “*The Iliad, Poem of Might*” (both she and Hart are deeply influenced by Plato), arguing that suffering is ultimately impartial. The meaning of suffering is its utter meaninglessness, and to understand the Christian gospel is to know that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. God’s “extraordinary equity” unites victor and vanquished, Trojan and Greek, and only the renunciation of might and the recognition of pity can undo the power of affliction. An argument in the early church against paganism was how the pagan gods delight in human slaughter, as when Clement of Alexandria comments, “These are your sacrifices

which Euripides represents in tragedy upon the stage" (*Exhortation to the Heathen* ch. 3). For Clement, Christianity was on the side of the philosophers and poets who saw God as singularly good. Buchanan's *Jephtha* makes the same contrast: "And think not Heav'n delights / In Moloch's horrid rites," because under what circumstance would a God of monotheism and moral perfection require sacrifice?

As tempting as such interpretations are, they remain reductive given the many ways that religions, history, and tragedies have connected the gods to tragedy, sacrifice, and violence. This connection remains as problematic for the gods as it does for us, and it is under perpetual negotiation and revision. Gods demand sacrifices, but not in ways that are predictable or clearly defined. Like tragedy, they seem to question it all but without annulling the whole enterprise. The Bible reveals a shift from Judaism as a cultic religion of animal sacrifice, to a more prophetically moral religion, that our prayers rise like incense (Psalm 141), that obedience and mercy are better than sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22, Matt 12:7). Christianity, like modern Judaism, is a bloodless religion, but that is not to say they no longer speak of violence, war, and sacrifice, and Christian history is particularly bloody toward others and even itself. Grace comes somehow violent, as in *Agamemnon* (182).

The church and theologians have disagreed about the nature of Christ's sacrifice: to whom was it made? Christian theology has struggled with this. The cultic approach sees Christ as fulfilling Jewish sacrifices to God. Jesus is priest, sacrifice, and God, meaning he mysteriously receives the sacrifice he makes of himself. It's all God; in the words of the ending of *Women of Trachis*, there is nothing here that is not of Zeus. Other approaches suggest Christ's sacrifice was made to someone else. The *Christus victor* approach of Aulén sees Christ as a ransom to the devil to free us from his power. Anselm's response was to return to God, so Christ died to satisfy God's holiness and moral demands. Peter Abelard places humanity as the recipient of Christ's sacrifice, so that the subjective impact of his death will move us from hate to love, from darkness to light. For Eastern orthodoxy, there is still an exchange; God became human so that humans might become God for Athanasius of Alexandria, and in Lossky there is *katabasis* so there can be *anabasis*, *kenosis* for *theosis*. If Christ becomes sin, then we become righteous (2 Cor 5:21) and weakness becomes power (12:9). Valuation and exchange remain. Theologians have experimented with the mechanics of it all, to whom and for whom, but the economics seem inescapable. Hannah sings of God's great reversal of the mighty and the lowly, and later Mary echoes that refrain; Jesus was made poor so that we might be rich; God "brings one down, he exalts another" (Psalm 75:7); John the Baptist must decrease so that Jesus may increase.

The New Testament interprets the Cross as a sacrificial and economic event, although the terms are not clear. The gospels resist a direct interpretation of Jesus' death, although John's gospel does connect Jesus with Passover's sacrificial lamb, as does 1 Corinthians 5:7. In Romans 3:25, Paul

famously calls Jesus a *hilasterion*, and the related word *hilasmos* is used in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10. But we're not sure how to translate it. It's difficult to translate into current English, because we have lost such words; "the English term 'expiation' has fallen out of all usage except in these specific religious texts ... [it is] a social transaction that even English-speakers do not recognize," notes Luke Timothy Johnson.³² Translators have used sacrifice, propitiation, appeasement, expiation, reconciliation, a covering, or atonement. It can be the act of appeasement to God, or to another person, but it can also be an object, such as the covering over the ark, or the ark's mercy seat. Jesus' death is understood in the New Testament as an act of reconciliation, as the sacrifice that was offered in the Day of Atonement rituals, but it's all more suggestive than definitive; it's quite telling, as well as amusing, that this key theological point, argued over for centuries within the church, remains "elusive," in Johnson's words. Jesus is a redemption in Romans 3:24, and the word (*apolytrōsis*) is rooted in the price for liberating a slave, to buy someone back, and appears repeatedly in the New Testament. The root *lytron* is used for Jesus who is a "ransom" for many (Mk 10:45, Matt 20:28; 1 Tim 2:6).

A costly, sacrificial world is the only way to speak of the atonement's mysterious exchange between the Messiah and the apocalypse of a cosmic reconciliation. Hart repeatedly explores the question of economy, sacrifice, exchange, and God's economy (*oikonomia*) in *The Beauty of the Infinite*. Although he stresses God's excessive giving and receiving that is ultimately "aneconomic," there is still the inescapability of giving, receiving, and debts in this world. In his discussion of Anselm's atonement theory, he suggests that God's honor should not be read as judicial recompense, or an inability to forgive sin without blood; rather, Anselm is more suggestive here, that honor is the fragile feudal system that held together society and economics.³³ David Ford also notes the importance of economics in the atonement. A key metaphor for 2 Corinthians and the atonement is "that of exchange. This clearly has cultic resonances in relation to sacrifice, but it also has financial and economic connections"; the Holy Spirit is a "down-payment," the gospel is a treasure, and Paul's poverty makes others rich.³⁴ There is a contingency to it all, to living in the world God created, a world of limitation, choice, and exchange, and the New Testament embraces the language of resources and economics in its words, metaphors, teachings, and parables about lost coins and wealthy landowners. Will we give of our resources to help others, as Paul asks in so many of his letters as he fundraises for the impoverished Jerusalem church? It would be easy to make it all spiritual, to ignore the hard realities of human life and need, but the Bible is full of these lovely, but vital, contingencies – Paul ending 2 Timothy with "don't forget to bring my coat" (4:13). When the temple leaders want to remove Jesus' body from the Cross to keep the Passover, the chorus in the medieval *Christos Paschon* raises the irony of the exchange, asking "Whither so fast? Run you to sacrifice/ A silly Lamb? Too mean an Offering/Is this for you, who have sacrific'd your King?"³⁵

The kingdom of God is at hand, promising a kingdom beyond limitation and might that is dimly perceived but ultimately incomprehensible and apocalyptic. In Weil's formulation, there is limitation and gravity but also the glimpses of abundance, of grace abounding more and more (2 Cor 4:15). We live under gravity but with moments of grace. The tragic economy is inescapable but is also under a promise, so that Paul remains "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (6:10). It is in this way that we might understand the idea of being a living sacrifice, as many Christian liturgies and prayers state. For Paul to be a living sacrifice is militaristic (2 Cor 2:14–16) but also a supreme act of hope.

Kings and the wheel

Perhaps the economy of exchange as a whole, the sacrifices and valuations, will all work out in the end. If we just let the market forces sort it out, equilibrium can be found and karma will do its job. Weil sees everything as under the oppression of the power of might; like gravity, it pulls all things down. But it's not just the role of power and oppression, but of replacement and valuing: things are fungible, sacrificial, comparable – "it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (John 11:50). To choose is to value something over something else, to favor and reject. For Tillich, "every decision is tragic, because it is the decision against something which cannot be suppressed with impunity."³⁶ Tragedy is inevitable, because to act in time is to make economic choices that value some things over others, even the things that seem invaluable. For God to choose Abel's sacrifice was to reject Cain's, to create a shadow and a curse. "Everything is a thief," says Timon in *Timon of Athens* (4.3.440). Choices are always sacrificial, reflecting a price and an exchange. To grow through time is both grand and tragic, as choice involves loss, the road less traveled and the not-chosen, and the choices that haunt us.

Although Weil compares her conception of the kingdom of might to the idea of karma, they are not quite equivalent because misfortune is much too capricious to be fair. It's not that it all balances out in the end, but that it can happen to anybody. She rejected the idea that we earn salvation or punishment. The insight of the Greeks and the Christians is that we do not deserve either our punishments or fortunes, that the sun and the rain fall impartially. If time destroys all, then given time the victors will eventually be vanquished, given the wheel of fortune – whatever rises must fall. In the grand scheme of time and the epic span of the Bible, all kingdoms eventually end, from Babylon to Rome.

Fortune is erratic and unpredictable, quickly shifting to misfortune. Success, like a wind, is unsteady at best, and winds, shelter and fortune haunt *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Job finds his wealth reversed, and then reversed again, and the economic and moral success in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is likewise temporary, as Henchard is left returning to the hill where it all

began. For Weil, it is the impartiality of the universe, its Boethian wheel of fortune that like karma is “the soul of the Greek epic.”³⁷ Boethius falls prey to the whims of success and tragic decline, from political heights to depths. There may be a lesson that we should know our limits, that the abuse of our power and strength will inevitably lead to our decline. It may lead to our moral improvement, as with Boethius and Lear, but *Timon of Athens* is more cynical. A man whose generosity brings him ruin because of “Fortune in her shift and change of mood” rejects his ungrateful friends and then exiles himself. When he discovers gold, he refuses to use it and dies in misanthropy.

These reversals apply even to kings, whose place on the wheel of fortune is tenuous at best. It’s a game of thrones, after all. For Plutarch, both Demetrius and Antony overplayed their royalty with dramatic and theatrical grandeur; Antony “used a tragic mask before the Romans” and was “tragic and arrogant” when he gave his kingdoms to Cleopatra and his sons.³⁸ There is a performed role for kings and monarchs – they wear costumes, after all, and make claims to royalty and even divinity – and it’s tempting to overdo it, as when Lear gives away his kingdom for pledges of love. It can fairly quickly shift into something comic. The higher one is the harder the fall, and the power of a king is to suggest the dignity of the royal “we” until it’s shown that the emperor has no clothes. The emperors Gaius and Nero liked to appear on stage, to the shock of their contemporaries; not only was acting considered to be ignoble, but also it reminded everyone how theatrical and artificial the role of emperor ultimately was. *Measure for Measure* questions the political authority in the Duke, who fails to rightly use his authority and then abdicates. The ending is far from simple, given the brothel, imprisonment, execution, threats, and the contrast between the Duke’s condemnation of Lucio and his probation for Angelo. An accounting is demanded, and the reconciliation does not erase the ledger. Hegel writes, “the wounds of spirit heal and leave no scars behind,” but the scars remain in *Henry V*: “Then he will strip his sleeve and show his scars / And say, ‘These wounds I had on Crispin’s day’” (4.3.49–50).³⁹

Reversals are especially appropriate for the worldly and arrogant, and true wisdom is to not trust in such things. Jesus’ mocking is part of the Boethian wheel of fortune, the fallen royalty caught in unpredictable fortune, the distinction between the reality of the king and the appearance of a king.⁴⁰ Jesus is punished according to a *talio* justice, that the claim of kingship leads to mocking as a king in Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 26.⁴¹ For Jesus, it holds a special irony because “the crucified king of 15:26 is a striking emblem of the highly tragic motif of fallen royalty.”⁴² Epictetus and other Stoics saw in Oedipus’ tragedy the message to avoid worldly goods that ultimately cause downfall and sorrow. Plato would agree, as would the Apostle Paul, for whom the wisdom of the world was a human and proud wisdom, over a humble yet divine wisdom that will be victorious in the end. Epictetus

notes that “no poor person ever filled a tragedy” (*Diatr.* 1.24),⁴³ but the vicissitudes of kings are the changes in power that all endure under the kingdom of might. Political power harbors the illusion of escape, and kings don’t like being told that they will have “the burial of an ass” (Jer 22:18–19). Moderation is key, but kings and leaders don’t tend toward moderation because power is simply too alluring. Martin Luther King Jr. writes in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that “history is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.” Weil cautions against any naiveté regarding the seduction of war, violence, and sacrifice. The kingdom of might is three-fourths prestige, and prestige has proven almost irresistible in the history and experience of humanity as a social and political creature.⁴⁴ Kings, politicians, and generals may become victors, but they quickly become victims, as Boethius remembers in the *Consolation*. For Weil, the genius of the *Iliad* is its awareness that all who embrace oppression and might as a final end are destroyed by it.⁴⁵ The question of true greatness haunts the New Testament as the lowly are lifted up, the mighty are brought down, and the obscure will challenge worldly power. Nathanael’s question “Can any great thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46) may be accurate, yet it is filled with irony given John’s prologue that Jesus is the Word of God.

Tragedies also contain narratives of reversal on a national scale, as kingdoms come and go, overthrowing and being overthrown.⁴⁶ The wheel of fortune turns not just for individuals but also for groups. In both the Bible and Greek tragedy, the rise and fall of nations reveal the “precarious lives of their kings.”⁴⁷ Empires shift in the Old Testament with the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Chaldeans. Hardy’s *Dynasts* plays with this theme through the place of Napoleon’s power in the grand sweep of the world, and Abraham Lincoln ruminates on the strange equality of defeat and victory at the conclusion of the Civil War. It is hopeful to think that given the span of time, it will all work out in the end. Epic sagas such as the Old Testament and the *Iliad* sometimes sound this way, that kings and empires come and go and will eventually fall in defeat. Weil has a great confidence in the equilibrium of fortune’s wheel and its “extraordinary equity.” The strong will “go beyond the measure of their strength, inevitably so, because they do not know their own limit.”⁴⁸ Perhaps arrogant individuals will overreach, but what about institutions and cultures that have structured systemic oppression? It seems a bit sanguine to think slavery would eventually end without the work of abolitionists. It’s not clear that it will all level out in the end; the lurking fear is that grain of the universe is on the side of oppression, and dystopian novels force us to consider this possibility. Weil’s aesthetics can lead to a quietism, even though Weil herself was not a quietist by any means. She was passionately engaged in social change, although there isn’t a strong intellectual basis in her analysis for her active resistance. Weil holds to the universality of suffering and its acceptance, and to her violence and war certainly seem constant.

Holding to the universal impartiality of affliction is difficult given the constant particularities of suffering in tragedy and the Bible. The Christian martyrs are remembered for their identifiable sufferings: a sword, a fire, a wheel. Barth commented that Jesus' cross is not to be compared to other martyrs or somehow eternalized, for it is specific to Jesus – "the Cross as a kind of symbol of the limit of human existence" – rather, to witness to the Cross is to remember a concrete event, a deed and action, of God in Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ It remains an unrepeatable center. Part of Rodrigues' tragedy in *Silence* is his attempt to universalize Jesus' cross as he seeks to imitate Jesus' martyrdom. As a prisoner during a long march, he feels a terrible exhaustion and thirst, and his response is to pray the stations of the cross. He reminds himself of Christ's sorrow in Luke at the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and that his suffering is like Christ's; "this sense of suffering shared softly eased his mind and heart more than the sweetest water."⁵⁰ His sacrifice does echo Christ's in some ways: he experiences the pain of people dying for him, of betrayal by a friend, of a terrible night at Gethsemane, of being despised. But his martyrdom is different because suffering is particular. He will not suffer for others as Jesus did, but renounce his faith so that they will not suffer. His cross is not death but to live a long life as a prisoner in Japan, working for the government with a Buddhist name and identity. His is not a heroic death as he had imagined, the embrace of martyrdom like *The Dream of the Rood*, but a physical, spiritual, and moral exhaustion mapped out by the magistrate Inoue. The Japanese had learned that executions did not stifle Christianity's influence and growth, so their vicious tactic is to target the priests with a lengthy imprisonment that tormented the body, mind, and will. Eventually, all the priests recanted in exhausted resignation. There is no single formula that covers life's contingencies.

The conqueror does eventually become the conquered, but if such an analysis leads us to conclude that the defeat of empires is simply inevitable it can lead to a terrible abdication of moral responsibility. There may be a grain to the universe, as Martin Luther King Jr. and Hauerwas argue, but we are responsible to act with it and toward it as we use our time to reveal its pattern. In John Wesley's sermon "The Good Steward," he notes that "there is no employment of our time, no action or conversation, that is purely *indifferent*" (4.2). King read Niebuhr and used his language to describe the tragedies of history, but it led him on a particular path that was not predetermined by analysis. He saw in Niebuhr the complexity of human motivation and complicity in evil, and our modern tendency to be sentimental and idealistic regarding human nature and moral improvement. He freely used the word "tragedy" in relation to history, slavery, racial segregation, and the Vietnam War. Such an influence only increased his mission for justice and compassion, his life and death. His letter from Birmingham Jail argues, "All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time." To be realistic about suffering and tragedy spurs us

to social action, as it did for King, Weil, and Niebuhr. It is immoral to assume that it will work out for the best, because, King notes, progress is not inevitable. Even apathy can be thoroughly tragic if it enables moral evil to flourish, for empires and prejudice to hold sway. "There is no human circumstance more tragic than the persisting existence of a harmful condition for which a remedy is readily available." Tragedy mourns, affirms, and challenges, measuring the cost and yet challenging us to pay it. As a result of King's writing and life, a common school assignment today is to compare his life and work to Greek tragedy.

Political sacrifice

Economics, gods, and wheels of fortune: sacrifices remain. They are often explored by tragedy in the question of society and the state. The city is a place that promises justice, where the scores and vendettas are not settled personally but decided by judges, courts, royalty, or the gods. For Rousseau and Locke, the exchange is between personal freedom and a state of nature, for a state of security in society and law. It is a tenuous agreement, for the city contains its own violence, as well as the threat of reverting to the old ways. Rowan Williams points to Sophocles' depiction of "a violent and unstable Thebes" and the threat of such a possibility to Athens.⁵¹ Athenian tragedies were set outside of Athens as a way of exploring Athens itself and the constant threat of anarchy. But cities have their own brand of violence in rebellion, execution of the innocent, and the claiming of the throne by murder. In Shakespeare, the threat of violent political claims sets the stage for *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and abdication sets the stage for *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*.

The question of sacrifice is deeply political. Hart comments that "society is exchange, giving and taking, even in some sense sacrificing one thing for another, offering one thing up for another."⁵² Terry Eagleton's statement in *Sweet Violence* is, therefore, not surprising at all: "Not that the present book is itself an historical study of tragedy. It is, rather, a political one."⁵³ This has always been true, because Greek tragedy was a civic event, and most tragedies touch on the social in some way. Sacrifices are often for wars or social benefit, enacted in a public liturgy. The Dionysia was a civic event that drew all of Athens in a public display of performance, competition, and social unity. Jephthah and Agamemnon sacrifice for victory in war, and Creon executes Antigone in the aftermath of war, rebellion, and civil fracture. In *Silence*, the Japanese authorities are quick to slaughter their own peasants if it means expelling the foreign Catholicism, which threatens their political control (Dutch Protestants, who trade without evangelizing and lack a central, authoritarian polity, are still welcome). Lurking in the tragic narratives is the question of price. Jephthah is brought low at the cost, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra question it. There is a terrible *caveat emptor* for Lear, and Creon changes his mind, but it's too late.

The sacrificial exchange can be between the different spheres of public and private. People are forced to make choices between family and society, personal and social, as when Antigone holds to family over society. Tragedies can reflect the failure of society to accommodate authentic human existence: Electra and Antigone refuse the easy answers of society; Orestes is abandoned by society; Oedipus is banished even as he accepts his actions and punishment. Hamlet offers up his life, along with the lives of others, to avenge his father's death and heal Denmark. It's as if the public and private are two different currencies, and it is a question of currency exchange. We are constructed of multiple roles we play, some private and some public. Is Lear's kingship his identity, or merely the part he plays? For Hegel and Kierkegaard, the tragedy is the painful sacrifice of the individual for the community and universal. Perhaps they are ultimately incommensurate, as Luther made them when, building on Augustine's two cities, he divided the sacred and secular into two separate spheres with exchange at a minimum.

Sacrifices can be made to prove a point, to suffer like Prometheus and Antigone for one's integrity and beliefs. Death becomes the ultimate test of one's beliefs, the ultimate sacrifice. Socrates showed his mettle in the *Crito*; as an innocent citizen who is willing to die, he accepts the justice of the state and its laws despite his own unjust execution. Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons* argues for the integrity of both his own will and human law. Laws cannot be cut down; "do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?" He is unwilling to exchange conscience for convenience, his integrity and beliefs for his life. In *The Crucible*, Proctor and Elizabeth sacrifice their integrity (he confesses his adultery, she lies to the court), marvelously contradicting each other yet reestablishing their integrity as a couple. Coriolanus has principled beliefs in aristocracy and morality, and they lead him into exile and death – "Would you have me false to my nature?" he asks. In *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus suffers for love that "has loved mortals too well" (123), as did Antigone, who dies for love of her brother and friends (99). Christ is Love who "bore the blame" in Herbert's poem "Love (3)." Sacrifices inspire others toward their own altruism, to continue the fight. Orestes inspires Electra, as Antigone does Haemon. But sacrifices can also lead people away from the cause itself. Followers may regard the protagonist as greater than themselves, and they would die for such a leader instead of dying for the cause. Sacrifices can be misguided or the result of deception, and the hope of a better world can be tragic if one is betrayed by one's cause.

Dying for the future

Some sacrifices are made hoping for a political future or for social change. Iphigenia hopes that the exchange of her body for the sack of Troy means that victory "shall be my children, my marriage and my glory" (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 1400), and Handel's protagonist Iphis expresses a similar hope.

Antigone dies for love of her brother, or for a more broadly universal ethic of regard for others – even the dead enemy deserves some sort of recognition of common humanity and burial. Her sacrifice is both personal and principled. Sacrifice restores something, balances something, pays the price. Antigone changes the politics of Thebes, as does Oedipus for Athens. For Augustine, there are two cities, the human and the divine, and the Christian leans in to the coming city of God as much as possible. The Qur'an also speaks of an exchange of this world for the next and in an economic sense:

Those who readily fight in the cause of God are those who forsake this world in favor of the Hereafter. Who ever fights in the cause of God, then gets killed, or attains victory, we will surely grant him a great recompense.

(4:74)

In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude ruminates, “I may do some good before I am dead – be a sort of success as a frightful example of what not to do; and so illustrate a moral story ... I was, perhaps, after all, a paltry victim to the spirit of mental and social restlessness, that makes so many unhappy in these days!”⁵⁴

Prometheus is the classic victim when he suffers and dies for a better future, crucified on a rock because he stole fire from Zeus to help humanity. His action and guilt are past offenses with ramifications for the future. He was willing to rebel against the order of the gods to help others, and he gives himself to found human cities rooted in warmth, light, and learning. He gave us *technai* (art, science, craft, knowledge, understanding, science) so that we could control our lives, so that we were not at the mercy of *tuchē*, or forces beyond our control. Prometheus is named for the “fore-sight and planning that his gifts made possible.”⁵⁵ In Western thought, he becomes the great image of the tragic protagonist nobly fighting his fate. Thanks to Prometheus, human history and development is one of growing human control over contingency. He is also a Christ figure, a god who is crucified to benefit humanity. For Simone Weil, “Prometheus is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,” and she quotes from *Prometheus Bound*: “To mortals I have given / a grace ... Behold me enchained, a miserable god ... because I have loved mortals too well” (107–23). It ends with *paschon*, Greek for suffering and, for Weil, “so near to the Passion.”⁵⁶ Like Antigone’s living entombment, Prometheus and Christ are condemned to death by exposure, to be slowly ground down by the elements of nature because “love is not loved.”

Tragedy suggests such sacrifices, but also questions them. Individual sacrifices are a reminder of the terrible remainder to any moral calculus. The price is high and irrational, as Kierkegaard imagines Abraham’s “shudder of thought.” The future is profitable, but not without its own chilling costs that suggest an uncertainty at the exchange. For Iphigenia, her sacrifice

means the destruction of Troy. As she heads to her death, she sings, “Lead me on – the destroyer of Ilium’s city and the Phrygians” (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 1474–75), and the chorus highlights this by repeating it 35 verses later.⁵⁷ For the Greeks to win means for the Trojans to lose, and there is an awareness that that means something awful too, that victory means victims. The chorus meditates on the ransacking of Troy, its many human tears, and even empathizes with their doom: “may there never come to me or my children’s children such a prospect” (783–84).⁵⁸

America and war

What holds a nation like America together, given that from its beginning it was formed from such diverse peoples? A love for a shared space is not enough.⁵⁹ American diversity has had a powerful shaping effect as the nation has struggled with the question of the one and the many, and the nature of *e pluribus unum*. Vague notions of Protestantism and revivalism were social glues that connected the various colonies and defined American unity and identity. Political liberalism and a commitment to republican ideals, and a larger civil religion, also connected the nation. At times, a new story has temporarily unified the nation such as anti-Catholicism, anti-immigration, and the struggle against communism.

As a diverse nation with no story but its own lack of story, as Hauerwas puts it, the solution has often been war, the true *unum* that holds America together.⁶⁰ A church sign in North Carolina proclaims during Memorial Day that “freedom, like salvation, isn’t free.” Freedom always comes with a price, some sort of exchange or sacrifice, and this is a comfortable language for a people defined by war. Martin Marty notes that, for the Presbyterian Rev. John Witherspoon in 1776 on the eve of the Revolution, “the cause of God prospered best where people were free, listeners ... [who] had no choice but to enlarge their freedoms.”⁶¹ It was vital for the inclusion of Catholics in America that Catholic blood was shed during the American Revolution. This was also true for Jews, Baptists, and other religious groups who proved their citizenry by fighting in wars that defined American identity. Whether the Revolutionary War, Civil War, or World Wars, those considered outsiders made themselves insiders by joining in the fight. War had brought them together, and a readiness for war grants an identity that belongs. The places where soldiers sacrificed themselves become sacred spaces, and war itself becomes a religion.⁶²

The memorializing of soldiers and their sacrifices mixes in the American imagination with Christ’s sacrifice. Their deaths secured our freedom, but it requires a liturgy of remembrance and thanksgiving. Political appeals are made to honor the ultimate sacrifice, from military decisions to the national budget. Freedom’s cost is human life and the willingness to lay down one’s life for others, to be messiahs on the cross of the battlefield. The mixing of Golgotha with Gettysburg, Yorktown with Calvary, blends patriotism

and religious faith in a vague civil religion. There is an ambiguous violence behind it all as sacrifice creates gratitude and inspiration. The power of the sacrifice of others inspires us to be worthy of and eternally grateful for their actions. Freedom, like religious faith, is a fragile thing that requires constant vigilance, sacrifice, and war, even as the sense of gratitude and shared sacrifice brings people together. The ontology of sacrifice means "freedom is never free," and "all gave some, some gave all." The language is liturgical in its expressions of ultimacy and a responsive, grateful faith.

"To set up as a standard of public morality a nation which can neither be defined nor conceived is to open the door to every kind of tyranny," warned Weil.⁶³ A nation defined by war, that makes political sacrifice sacred, must countenance endless war and enemies. Niebuhr had similar concerns, that "constant proof is required that the foe is hated with sufficient vigor."⁶⁴ As a pacifist, Hauerwas is deeply opposed to such a language and vision. For him, America is not a Christian nation but a nation of war. Ongoing sacrifices are demanded of current generations, and the constant nature of those sacrifices cheapens the value of the lives that were subtracted from the equation. Lives are demanded of current and future generations, and the citizenry is to be ever grateful for those sacrifices. The liturgy of sacrifice is a perpetual giving and receiving to war, as in Lincoln's famous but chilling Gettysburg Address, "from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion ...". Sacrificial deaths must not be in vain, and they are never final. The public and private debt can only be repaid by a deep respect, gratitude, reverence for the cause, and a militant willingness to continue the sacrifice.

America's military might and success in the twentieth century carried its own tragic risks. For Niebuhr, America was prone to the modern illusion of perfection about human nature and inevitable historical progress, and tragedy reminds us how that kind of pride goes before the fall. Tragic heroes reach too far and find their virtues turned to vices. Irony, and the slow process of history, bedevils all of us, tempting our impatient simplification of contradictions. Tragedy reveals how human creativity is wrapped in guilt. What happens if the war is won and life is preserved, but at the cost of a nation's soul? The West has atomic bombs to prevent world destruction, yet this makes such destruction ever more likely. There is "an element of tragedy in this struggle" between America and the USSR during the Cold War. "Could there be a clearer tragic dilemma than that which faces our civilization?" Niebuhr asks.⁶⁵ How does a civilization survive modern warfare, which guarantees mass destruction, and what happens to a virtuous West if, in its war and ideology, it morally destroys itself? He was painfully prescient in 1952 in his questions about race and Vietnam for a victorious America. As America entered Vietnam, Niebuhr commented that "for the first time I fear I am ashamed of our beloved nation." He would not be surprised to see that American moral confidence after World War II led to an increased militarism. There's nothing like fighting the Axis

of Evil to provide a language, imagery, and strength to embolden future wars. For Niebuhr, tragic literature carried vital moral, political, and theological lessons.

Tragedy and Christianity find themselves in an alliance of hope and despair. Niebuhr warned that peoples and causes end up “in ironic refutations of their moral pretensions,”⁶⁶ but the salve for such a despair is the Christian conviction of hope. In a moving passage, he argued that “nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope,” and such a hope resists human pride and control. We cannot make history come out right, because it can never be coerced. What remains is hopeful, circumspect action, to be “in the battle and above it,”⁶⁷ to act with the ironic knowledge of our own imperfections and guilt. The battle for justice does not establish one’s sinlessness. Similarly, Balthasar argued that Christianity preserves tragedy, and Eagleton has called Christianity a tragic faith.⁶⁸ With the imminent defeat of the South, Lincoln’s tone was not triumphant but sad, arguing for charity and healing on both sides: “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.”

Sacrifices can be valued and still questionable. Eagleton’s point in *Sweet Violence* is that tragedy, despite its catastrophes, remains both hopeful and realistic. Protagonists like Shakespeare’s Coriolanus hope for “a world elsewhere,” and tragedy reminds us of the cost of such hope, “confronting the worst yet hoping for the best.”⁶⁹ Such realism resonates with Christianity, where only by law can law be overcome. It is through being made a curse that the curse can be overcome, through judgment there is forgiveness, and through death that death is conquered. For Weil, it is the power of *metaxis*, where walls become doors and spaces become bridges. To take a full look at the worst, as tragedy does, means to be prepared for the reality of kingdoms and power. It’s not surprising that diverse books such as Eagleton’s *Sweet Violence* and Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite* engage the question of tragedy. Nor is it surprising that, despite their deep differences about theology and tragic literature, they end similarly with a call to witness and struggle.

Rituals

How can we speak of the worst of human horrors – the Atlantic slave trade and subsequent Jim Crow era, the destruction of the American native peoples, the Holocaust? To not speak of it is to forget or misremember; but to speak of it is to slander the reality and memory of those who experienced it. Michael Steele blames Christianity for its simplifying optimism that destroyed the tragic vision and enabled the Holocaust; now only the Holocaust can speak for itself.⁷⁰ Trauma reduces us to animals or automations that are without self-expression, even as attempts to describe the Shoah fail. Trauma removes the ability to communicate; Lyotard interprets the Holocaust as primarily a destruction of speaking and thus of human

identity.⁷¹ Perhaps silence is best, its empowering refusal, as in *Bartleby* the Scrivener's "I would prefer not to." Weil echoes this idea; trauma's power leaves people unable to speak, unable to express the primal question of why me?

But to refuse speech means loss remains impenetrable and regnant. The danger is the madness of Ophelia, Medea, and *Bartleby*, the waiting of Electra for an Orestes who never returns. In Rowan Williams' account of the Russian poet Akhmatova, the knowledge that trauma *could be* told is all that is possible; yet even this remains a dignifying comfort.⁷² To have the capability of linguistic expression is to be humanized. Drama and tragedy often employ known and witnessed narratives that are unspoken or offstage. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant Wiggins is challenged to help the imprisoned Jefferson regain his dignity before his execution.⁷³ How can these African-Americans demonstrate Jefferson's humanity in 1940s Louisiana? The process begins with speech and words. To speak is to be, and to prepare to die, not as an animal but as a person. Speech means hope, after all. Balthasar sees our communicability as reflecting our social nature and the *imago Dei*; thus, he argues Dante is wrong that souls in hell could speak.⁷⁴ If we describe the Shoah and its survivors, if it has meaning for us, and if we listen to them, then the Holocaust is a speakable tragedy, Eagleton argues; where there is meaning and value, there can be tragedy.⁷⁵ The response we can give them is to not speak *for* them, but to find a language that resonates with their experience, that enables them to "find the words which express the truth of their affliction," which for Weil are the words of tragic literature.

Telling and retelling tragedy means the possibility of preventing tragedy, because we might recognize it for what it is. Without a guiding story in this "narrated, narratable world," as Hans Frei puts it,⁷⁶ the political can become sacrificial, unjust, even totalitarian. For Girard, it's the question of the first stone to be thrown in mob violence, the difference between the stoning of an old beggar by the pagan Apollonius of Tyana, and Jesus' accusation that those without sin may throw the first stone.⁷⁷ Jesus' question acknowledges the problem of mob violence and prevents it; by stopping the first stone thrown, he reclaims our unwillingness to kill. Such a setting disrupts the liturgy of war; seeing its liturgy played out, especially among enemies, reminds us of war's universal cost in the kingdom of might and the possibility of a kingdom of grace.

The speaking and sharing of tragedy as a public event can shift us toward action. Jennifer Wallace comments how "tragedy can also become a useful vehicle for anger at injustice and to express admiration for individual courage or defiance."⁷⁸ *Antigone* has inspired many to resist according to a higher moral law. Both Anouilh and Brecht staged *Antigone* as forms of fascist resistance. Weil was imbued with an interest and sensitivity to tragedy and yet was fully engaged in social transformation, as was Niebuhr. Niebuhr's transition from aloof pessimist to engaged realist comes, in part, through his

interest in tragic literature. Jean-Paul Vernant fought in the French Resistance during World War II and then went on to produce seminal scholarship on Greek tragedy. Tragedy that is shared can lead to action and even rebellion.

Speaking tragedy reminds us that war, violence, and sacrifice force us to value the incommensurate. How can we put a price on a human life, on sacrifice, on loss? Such valuing is demanded in a world that is tragic, where goodness is ephemeral, collisional, and limited, and where suffering is ultimately inarticulate. It is paradoxical in that such goods are beyond value, but still we must choose because the alternatives are worse. To not respond is to deny any meaning in sacrifice, and to fail to measure the cost cheapens human life. "Peasants are fools," says the Japanese magistrate in *Silence*, because to him they are mere cattle for the slaughter to control Japan.⁷⁹ It means sacrifice is left eternal and irresistible, a kingdom of might without a kingdom of grace. To engage the kingdom of might may mean terrible choices, but the valuations cannot be ignored or forgotten.

The world forces us to measure the immeasurable, and that is especially known in the value of human life. Yet there is no appropriate scale. In Handel's *Jephtha*:

Jephtha has triumph'd, Israel is free.
For joys so vast too little is the price
Of one poor life. But oh, accept it, Heav'n,
A grateful victim, and thy blessing still
Pour on my country, friends, and dearest father!

The questions remain: who benefits, and who decides? It's not just about the victim but also a people that receives the benefits of sacrifice and responds with gratitude. It requires an honest reckoning. The power of tragedy is that through its full look at the cost, through particular stories and places, there can be recognition and healing. Through the telling of the story, connections are made.

Bryan Doerries and Theater of War Productions schedule dramatic performances as a public health project for soldiers, veterans, addicts, tornado survivors, and people deemed "at-risk." These tragic works express the moral choices and damages of war, the many costs and sacrifices. Through a performance of *Ajax* followed by a discussion, veterans find a therapeutic experience where they feel heard and understood. Weil's prescription is that in the experience of great tragic works, one finds suffering represented, and the words resonate and express one's own losses. One way we help sufferers is, as Weil argues, "to find the words which express the truth of their affliction."⁸⁰ Sophocles' *Ajax* is a terrible story of a famous but exhausted soldier who is betrayed by his generals. Proud, humiliated, fated, and hopeless, he commits suicide. The performance inspires reflection and naming, in contrast to the brief and monologic speeches of Timon of Athens, whose venomous self-pity is the opposite of Socratic dialogue.

Through the ritual of performance and dialogue, there is a strange power to heal. Remembering the cost means exploring its value and incommensurability. Asking the value, even if it is beyond value, is itself of value.

Rituals can be a basis for freedom, forgiveness, and rebellion, and the deep connections between tragic performance and Christian worship are notable. In *The Crucible*, the public shame of Proctor's court confession oddly works, insofar as he comes to forgive himself, end his feelings for Abigail, and restore his marriage. Violence and sacrifice can be transformed within tragedy. Tragedy, like ritual, transforms trauma and war. The Furies become the Kindly Ones, and *Iphigenia among the Taurians* shows how ritual can transform sacrifice and trauma. The canon of the Bible shows the transformation of ritual animal sacrifices into morality as worship, prayer, and ethics play a greater role in ancient Israel. Abraham's ritual sacrifice of Isaac is interrupted by God's angel who ends the practice of child sacrifice. In liturgy, tragedy, and tragic performance, we are left remembering the impossible measuring of the invaluable.

Like rituals and mourning, tragedy helps us take a full look at the cost, despite the impossibility of arriving at a real value. It is a full look placed against a horizon that is beyond any comprehensive view, because such a vista is impossible to the human eye. The goods are too incommensurate, and the future remains unknown. But that doesn't mean it is without value. For Hardy, "Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst" ("In Tenebris II"). In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

Notes

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- 3 J.P. Guépin, *The Tragic Paradox: Myth and Ritual in Greek Tragedy* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1968), xiii.
- 4 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 142–48.
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- 10 Hauerwas, *War*, 73.
- 11 Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 59.
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- 22 Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016), 66.
- 23 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 166.
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- 29 René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 49–69.
- 30 Hauerwas, *War*, xi.
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- 34 David F. Ford, “Tragedy and Atonement,” in *Christ Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 119.
- 35 George Sandys, *Christ’s Passion. A Tragedy; with Annotations* (London: Jos. Blare, Bookseller, 1698), 79.
- 36 Tillich, *Shaking*, 179.
- 37 Weil, *Reader*, 164.
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- 51 Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 6.
- 52 Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 349.
- 53 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), x.
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- 58 Euripides, *Bacchae and Other Plays: Iphigenia among the Taurians; Bacchae; Iphigenia at Aulis; Rhesus*, 107.
- 59 A shared love of the land is Maya Angelou's central image for America in her poem, "On the Pulse of the Morning."
- 60 Hauerwas, *War*, 152, 4.
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- 64 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 146.
- 65 Niebuhr, *Irony*, 1.
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5 Philoctetes, contingency, and being onstage

Time and circumstance

In Greek drama, the protagonist stepped forward as the first among equals, the *proto-agonist*. This person was set against (*agon*, to struggle) the other characters onstage but also against the backdrop of the story, setting, and the chorus. Iphigenia's opening lines in Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians* tells a history. She recounts her family saga and ancestry as a reminder of the doom over her house of Atreus, which plays out in Agamemnon's attempt to sacrifice her, and how she was saved and came to the land of the Taurians. Its beginning is a retelling, because it must be set within the larger saga. For the Greeks, these stories were well known and part of larger sagas. They were told and retold in various ways, so that there is *Electra* by Sophocles and *Electra* by Euripides, and she is a protagonist in Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*. The dating of Sophocles' Theban plays is uncertain, but scholars suspect *Antigone* was performed first, then *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonos*. Yet, this is not the order of the family history, since the two Oedipus plays feature Antigone, who dies in her own play. The stories are always part of other stories.

The Jesus of the New Testament is strikingly similar. He also has a background to his story, which is the Old Testament and its prophets, prophecies, law, the history of Israel, kingship, priests, covenants, and apocalyptic imagery. His story is not easily abstracted from its larger saga; Marcion attempted such an abstraction in the second century, and other notable attempts have been made to separate Jesus from his Jewishness, but they have all failed. Jesus is preceded by John the Baptist, whose message Jesus adopts, along with the Judaism of his day that featured Pharisees, zealots, and Roman occupation. The story of Jesus is, like *Electra*, told in four different gospels that give a recognizable portrait, but like the Theban plays, their dating gets argued. Context is everything.

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is singular among the extant Greek tragedies in many ways because the contingencies and context of his tragedy are heightened to a surprising degree. His misfortune is due to a random event in the past and precedes the play itself; his loss is not due to a tragic flaw or proud

over-reaching, but bad luck. Prometheus' misfortune also preceded the play *Prometheus Bound*, but at least his suffering had a point. He had given fire and civilization to humanity after all, so it wasn't some random event. In contrast, Philoctetes was heading off to the Trojan War when he was bitten on the foot by a snake, and the wound was painful and malodorous. His fellow soldiers abandoned him and his constant and annoying cries. He was left alone on the island; unable to hunt due to the wound, he can only crawl after food and water. His suffering was not from glorious battle, not worthy of a warrior with a mighty weapon, but a chronic illness and disability that made normal physical events like walking, eating, and sleeping painful and oppressive. Tragic protagonists are not usually brought down by contingencies like random snakebites to die in ignobility. They are supposed to die valiant in battle with a rousing farewell speech on the way to victory. What is interesting in *Philoctetes* is how the context determines the tragedy.

Narratives have contexts, the circumstances that frame the events and give them specificity. Etymologically, the word "circumstance" itself points to a kind of staging, a being encircled or encompassed, to stand in relation to some kind of condition. It has taken on an economic sense as well, as when we speak of someone's financial circumstances. We are placed and staged, with props, persons, and a setting that we neither created nor chose. To be contingent is to be circumstanced in place and time. You can't understand Iphigenia without understanding her past and the various events around the house of Atreus and the gods (which seems to always involve cannibalism), nor can you understand Abraham sacrificing Isaac without understanding his relationship to Sarah and to Yahweh. The *mise-en-scène* is theological, because everything has been placed onstage amidst the circumstances of time and space. This can be part of the tragedy itself. Timing is where most everything goes wrong. If not for the timing, all might have been well, as with Othello's handkerchief and Tess' letter. Heroes may be called and shaped, or they may simply be lucky, as Luther was to find a protector in Frederick III and the rising nationalism of his day; Jan Hus was not so fortunate. Many tragedies reflect an ambiguity about causality, because choices are multifactorial.

The circumstances of a narrative include time and history, where change, chronology, and unstopability are all inevitable. Time takes all, which is why the oldest Greek god is Kronos, who consumes his own children, and the Chronophage consumes at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. For Weil, "All the tragedies which we can imagine return in the end to the one and only tragedy: the passage of time."¹ Time weighs, on a meta-level, on tragic literature. The form of knowing in tragic literature may require distance for both author and audience, in order to make the familiar unfamiliar, as Vernant argues.² The stories may be known, yet they are re-told and performed again, from different points of view and with different emphases, for the story continues to hold new resonances for the present.

Classical tragedy chose older epics and material, the events of heroes and gods, for its stories, and Shakespeare shaped tragedies about Italians, Moors, Scots, and England under the heptarchy. These characters, Edith Hall notes, live in a strange past, present, and future, as they are deeply connected to the past even while they are in the present, yet for the audience the future is also known.³ Both Prometheus and Jesus are prescient, knowing their punishment before it happens; Prometheus says, “And yet, what do I say? All this I knew in advance, / exactly, all the future ...” (*Prometheus Bound* 101–2). There is an irony of perspective, as the present imagines the past and the future, despite the gulf of time. Frank Kermode famously observed the artificial tick and tock of the clock, that we live between the past and the future, what was and what will be, and this is part of the modern novel.⁴

Perspectivism

Suffering changes the experience of time and gives a different perspective. The clock no longer moves at the same pace. When Clym’s mother dies on the arid Egdon Heath in Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*, she experiences drastic shifts in her perspective of time and space, the ants and soil life that surround her. Later, her son seems to merge with the natural life around him as his life disintegrates. Time can slow down to its most ignoble moments, as with the suffering of Philoctetes. The gospels all focus quite clearly on the Passion of Christ, from his Last Supper until his entombment. Up till this point, they have been somewhat casual about time. This more microscopic approach is reserved for the Passion, when the events are more carefully transcribed. The account of the circumstances around the death of Jesus is highly significant for the gospels and the early Christians.⁵ Time has now slowed down, as the events are more significant and more tragic. Time can be a form of punishment, as for Israel wandering for 40 years in the wilderness until that generation has died so that the next can inherit the promised land. Jesus will have to fast in the wilderness for 40 days as a kind of reliving of this era of Israel and a sort of atonement for their faithlessness; he too will feel the weight of time.

In *Jude the Obscure*, the young Jude is defeated at his academic studies, leading him to wish he would never grow up, but time remains unstoppable. Time only goes one way, and tragic literature powerfully explores this, in its collisional and circumstantial aspects. What is known cannot be unknown. Rowan Williams comments that “the suffering that has happened and cannot be made not to have happened (the irreversibility of time) is, in spite of various kinds of vacuous, insulting and brutal rhetoric, religious and political, unchangeably there for us.”⁶ In Hardy’s journal, he notes that “it is the on-going—i.e., the ‘becoming’—of the world that produces its sadness. If the world stood still at a felicitous moment there would be no sadness in it. The sun and the moon standing still on Ajalon was not a catastrophe for Israel, but a type of Paradise.”⁷ Although Hardy’s characters

may seek to escape it, their time is always “slipping, slipping, slipping,” as Eustacia mourns with her hourglass in *The Return of the Native*.⁸

Time is irreversible, and some things cannot be undone. Words spoken cannot be unspoken, and neither can deeds nor mistakes. In Ecclesiastes, the knowledge that the world is “crooked and unchangeable” is useless and painful; “what greater pain is there than to have the ability and insight to change things, but to live without the possibility of doing so?”⁹ Hardy loves to explore this, and his world is struck by time. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* was originally titled *Too Late, Beloved*, and in his children’s book *Our Exploits in West Poley* there is a character simply named “The Man Who Failed.” In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard realizes that he is too old to start over again. Time is not like the sand or sand castle, washed away, but something in iron that cannot be undone. “It may be that He [God] has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”¹⁰ In comedy there is a last-minute fix and a way out, but tragedy often points to closed doors and time lost. In *The Green Mile*, “Time takes it all, whether you want it to or not. Time takes it all, time bears it away, and in the end there is only darkness. Sometimes we find others in that darkness, and sometimes we lose them there again.”¹¹

Time and the future are unstoppable, but so is the past, which is never truly past, oddly enough. The past can return as a tragic undoing to spoil the present and future. In Hardy’s short story “For Conscience’ Sake,” the main character notes how “our evil actions do not remain isolated in the past, waiting only to be reversed: like locomotive plants they spread and re-root, till to destroy the original stem has no material effect in killing them.”¹² The past is closer than the characters think. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard is undone, in part, by the reappearance of his past and the arrival of his wife and child and then the return of the furmity-woman who witnessed the sale. His secret affair with Lucetta is revealed when old love letters resurface. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Tess’ past affair with Alec will return again and again, even though she has “dismissed the past – trod upon it and put it out,”¹³ wrecking her marriage to Angel. Her final desperate phase has Alec reappear yet again. The “implacable past which still engirdled her” resurges into the present, making her narrative one of perpetual “pleasure girdled about with pain.”¹⁴ Jude’s marriage to Arabella, hidden from Sue, will stir Sue’s jealousy and secure Sue’s mismarriage to Phillotson. Arabella disappears for a time, but she returns as a barmaid – and even a widow from far-flung Australia – to mar Jude’s life and romance with Sue. Hardy’s poems are also rife with the past’s resistance to extinguishment. Hardy’s heroes are nearly always ruined by time, either in its inescapable results or resurgent past. But nothing is really over. “In the end’?” asks Doctor Manhattan at the end of Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*; “Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.”¹⁵

The titles of some of Hardy’s works, like *Life’s Little Ironies*, *Poems of the Past and the Present*, *Time’s Laughingstocks*, and *Late Lyrics and*

Earlier, attest to time's *parataxis*, ironic repetitions, and resurgences. The past is never really gone, so ghosts tend to appear, or old actions reverberate into the present: the ghost of Hamlet's father, the doom over the house of Atreus, and the wife-sale by Michael Henchard. Ghosts recur in tragedy in surprising ways. Hamlet's father, Saul's raising Samuel from the dead, King Darius in *The Persians* – the past has a way of returning and resurging. Ghosts may lurk over the narrative, only to reveal the person is actually alive, as with Orestes. Tragedies may describe a liberation from the past, as when Orestes avenges his sister and Hamlet his father. Tragedy, as Adrian Poole observes, most always deals with the “toxic” inheritance of the past.¹⁶ The past is never really gone, but can leave its problems, unsettled grievances, unfinished affairs, and haunting ramifications for the present. It can return in surprising, painful ways, as when Elizabeth-Jane's true father appears before the adoptive Michael Henchard in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, or Oedipus' rash errors of patricide and incest are exposed in *Oedipus the King*. Time and history remain in flux, even regarding the past, which may be gone yet can unpredictably return.

Hope and pessimism

How heavy does the past hang over the present, and is there the possibility of liberation? The long scope of time may provide an optimistic conclusion, even with tragedy. The tragic betrayal of Joseph by his brothers hangs over their reunion and even salvation, as Joseph confronts his brothers. It may be a long path, a *saṃsāra* that is circuitous and blinded, but there is an exit door somewhere to finally leave the stage. Time might work out in the end, as Weil hints at, given that the wheel of time eventually grinds down the powerful. Time does progress upward, as the grain of the universe is finally made visible for both Hegel and Martin Luther King Jr. The Ode to Man speaks of humanity's power and progress, the technology of Vulcan and the arts of Apollo. The chorus in *Oedipus the King* holds that the future is ordered.

Great laws tower above us, reared on high
born for the brilliant vault of heaven—
Olympian Sky their only father
nothing mortal, no man gave them birth.

(957–60)¹⁷

If it's all chance, as some protagonists say, then the circumstances can make a tragedy into a comedy. The odd connection between comedy and tragedy is that they can shift between each other; comedy may just be tragedy plus time. Richard Sewall notes their odd mutual interdependence in Socrates' comment that every writer can do both. Comedy “gains its power from its sense of tragic possibility, and the profoundest tragedy presents a full

if fleeting vision, through the temporary disorder, of an ordered universe to which comedy is witness.”¹⁸ Hardy notes how comedy and tragedy are related, if one but scratches on one it switches; in Beckett, “The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. (He laughs.) ...”¹⁹ Shakespeare is famous for his problem plays and romances that shift between tragedy and comedy.

Niebuhr is hopeful that time is somehow victorious, in the end. We are creatures and creators of history, which is thorny but ultimately hopeful, as we “engage in a patient chess game with the recalcitrant forces of historic destiny.”²⁰ Our impatience with history is our undoing, a Promethean overreach that compounds our actions with our ideals that seek to master existence and history. Historical reality ultimately defeats such overreaching, but not without a cost; pride goes before the fall. Balthasar is similar in that “all disobedience, all sin, consists essentially in breaking out of time,” to anticipate illegitimately and without faith.²¹ For Balthasar and Hart, time is not linear but cyclical, a coming from and a return to God.

But it might also be the other way, that history is a declension, a falling away into worse evils, a dystopian *Blade Runner* or *Hunger Games*. Modernity trusted to the progress of a Christian century under the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, a war on poverty and a social gospel to build God’s kingdom. It crashed in World Wars that were wars to end all wars, which are not optimistic phrases. For Tess, “you seem to see numbers of to-morrows just all in a line, the first of ‘em the biggest and clearest, and the others getting smaller and smaller as they stand farther away; but they all seem very fierce and cruel and as if they said, ‘I’m coming! Beware o’ me! Beware o’ me!’”²² A pre-millennialism is required, because the world is so broken.

For Beckett, time is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but flat and meaningless, a ceaseless cause and effect with no result. The expected end never comes. Humanity is ill formed or ill evolved, too sensitive and maladapted to life in our cosmos as we seek ultimacy amidst contingency. Perhaps there can be joy in an earthy acceptance of horizonless, human boundaries, where meaning is our own. But if time is flattened, then why bother? Political action feels pointless, a weirdly abnegating self-decision. Oddly enough, many existentialists fell into that trap: Nietzsche claiming Wagner had come, Heidegger identifying with the Nazi state (which also co-opted Nietzsche later). History may be meaningless and human choice is meaningful, yet it can quickly ally itself with fascism and hopelessness.

Place and circumstance

The circumstantial is known not only in time but also in space, in places there and not there. Hardy’s fiction often features people looking off-stage, at something else, as Tess looks to Angel and Alec, Jude at women

and Christminster. "There is a world elsewhere," Poole quotes from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (3.3.137),²³ another world, a place not here that reflects the realities of here. For the Athenian tragedies, it was Thebes, or Colonus, or in *The Persians* Susa, an elsewhere that enables a distance where we can examine ourselves and this place through another place, to come to recognize and know it as us, as our place. "Who knows whether this holds in the other world?" asks Antigone, in Weil's translation.²⁴

Another world lies offstage, either perceived or imagined. Nathan Scott Jr. writes that, within the catastrophe of a tragedy, there is normally a "dream of some brave new world or country of the spirit wherein the brokenness of man may be repaired and healed."²⁵ Felice Charmond says in *The Woodlanders*, "O! why were we given hungry hearts and wild desires if we have to live in a world like this."²⁶ Lear's words at Cordelia's corpse include "Look there, look there!" (5.8.312), which has been interpreted as either hopeful or delusional. The old, shamed man's dream of a new life with Cordelia, "a soul in bliss," is more tenuous, given his awareness that "I am not in my perfect mind." Othello also references heaven and hell, but are they real, or merely part of a psychological catastrophe? In *The Green Mile*, Dell is promised the Mouseville All-Star Circus for Mr. Jingles the mouse. It is clearly a concoction of the guards as a comfort to the condemned Dell, but Coffey, like Lear, dreams of it, and the vision of such a place haunts the novel repeatedly – "Mouseville, I kept thinking for some reason."²⁷

Boethius was also imprisoned and facing a death sentence. For him, the offstage is his true home because it is the true reality behind this world's appearances, as it was for Plato and the Buddha. Earthly fame and fortune are mirages for the true world that is our true home, with God, what he knew but has forgotten, as Plato argued. To recognize it is to exchange one's ignorance for the truth. Prison helps one to reconsider these things, of course. Worldly distinctions matter little after affliction, and prison keeps us honest. For Lear, it's a cheery thought, as he embraces his love for Cordelia, "Come, let's away to prison." Paul Edgecombe's life is also oriented around a prison, and he too is a reflective old man like Lear. Lear painfully learns that the world is far from benign, and so does Edgecombe, who transitions from a prison guard to an elderly man imprisoned in a nursing home. There is a cruelty to the world and in the mysteriously spiteful bullies that seem immune to punishment: Percy Wetmore returned in Brad Dolan, Iago, Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado," and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Edgecombe mourns that "we each owe a death, there are no exceptions, I know that, but sometimes, oh God, the Green Mile is so long."²⁸

To see such a world can seem, or be, madness and cause greater suffering and evil. *Jude the Obscure* is a kind of madness that rejects the world as it is, for a world as it should be. Jude is a frustrating protagonist, who chooses poorly and seems unaware of the enclosing trap he has, in part, created for

himself. He pines for Christminster University, a place he can never reach academically or afford. He pursues a romantic relationship with his own cousin, when he has been forewarned against her and she shows signs of mental disturbance. He and Sue persist in an unmarried state that causes them great personal grief and economic hardship; their progressive religious and sexual beliefs bring them grief and social exile rather than liberation. Jude has a kind of tragic madness, as he is “born too early” and fails to see the world as it truly is. To him, the city of Christminster has a halo about it, and so does Sue; both of the sources of his doom appear, to him, to be bathed in a kind of glowing goodness.

Shakespeare also shows how the circumstantial can cause madness. In *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *A Winter's Tale*, there is a madness of doubt that grasps the protagonists, so that they disbelieve someone's love and faithfulness. For *Lear*, it is the love of his daughters; for *Othello*, the poisoned doubting of Desdemona's marital fidelity; for *Leontes*, it is the faithfulness of his wife and friend. *Lear* is a tragic figure whose momentarily mad delusion regarding the love of his children leads him to a true suffering madness as he is dethroned, exiled, and punished. For Shakespeare, it is not the divine *atē* of the gods, who act capriciously or spitefully against mortals, that causes these lapses of judgment (their tragic *hamartia*) from ordinarily sane persons, but the madness of love and human jealousy, fear, and vulnerability. Shakespeare, in a sense, has modernized and democratized tragic *atē* by psychologizing it, making it part of human love and desire, rather than the work of the gods.

Simone Weil directly connects theophany with times of great affliction, suffering, and God-abandonment. If a soul is at its breaking point, with no reason to believe in God's reality, but loves and holds to God, then God will come. For Weil, it is our desire for something not there that gives it its possibility, and this applies to God as well. Weil sees this truth evidenced in Greek tragedy, such as *Electra's* recognition of *Orestes*. She finds lines such as 1218–31 to be deeply mystical; they speak of “no longer question elsewhere ... hold me forever.”²⁹ Moments such as these are common in Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, where people separated by death and loss are reunited. There is a powerful theme of masking and unveiling in many tragedies (especially Shakespeare), of blindness and recognition. This is true also in the gospels, as when *Mary Magdalene* encounters the risen Christ and thinks him a gardener, or the disciples on the road to Emmaus encounter the risen, hidden Christ. For Weil, the soul in affliction enables God to find and enter the soul, and the soul in its passion is able to perceive God in God's poverty and suffering. There is a double seeing, as it were. One can see how this connection of suffering, tragedy, and divinity provides a powerful connection between tragic literature and the Cross. It is a connecting of God and suffering, of God's presence even in extreme suffering, that is of interest to theology. For Balthasar, this is one of tragedy's most powerful theological aspects. Tragedy, and especially Attic tragic drama, refuses to

ignore the reality of the gods in moments of terrible affliction. In contrast to modernity and its secularism, where the divine is simply marginalized, ignored, or even ridiculed, the ancients saw the world as “god-soaked.” The gods were everywhere and mysterious, present even in times of crisis and *hamartia*. Lear does discover “the face of love behind the veil of the world.”³⁰

For Simone Weil, those who share in love belong to another world and can expect nothing but violence and death from this one.³¹ She sees this at work in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, which she clearly considers to be one of the most powerful of the Greek tragedies. Sophocles is the most overtly Christian. When Antigone says, “I was born not to share in hate but to share in love,” this seals her doom and her identity. She is now aligned with the forces of the gods, with a world that is just and demanding, where love is to be impartially shown to everyone – and this is clearly not our world. Like Christ, this world is not her home. This world is one where the just suffer and the unjust prosper. “For what transgression of Heaven’s ordinance?” asks Antigone; “For reverencing the dues of piety” she concludes (921, 924).³² For Job, “O earth, do not cover my blood; let my outcry find no resting place” (16:18), and in Hebrews the saints are those “of whom the world was not worthy” (11:38). Stoicism may accept the real, but many tragedies do not. Another world can be radically transformative, because it rejects this world in the hope of a better one.

There needn’t be an offstage at all, of course. For Nietzsche, another world was life-denying and escapist, and such sermons of death deny this world. Some tragedies show how being onstage is the only true reality and tragedy. But most do favor some kind of offstage as a point of comparison, judgment, or hope. Majorie Garber called it an “un-scene” in Shakespeare, the vital parts of the story that are offstage but reported to the onstage protagonists,³³ and Greek tragedy featured this too, as in the news of Antigone’s death and Oedipus’ *apotheosis*. Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* died offstage as well, his absence inscribed in his misspelled last will and testament. Even the atheist Sartre couldn’t resist in his plays the gesture toward the offstage; *The Flies* made liberal use of gods and myths, and *No Exit* had its haunting door that was most often locked, but at least one time was not.

Modern tragedy

Many tragic works suggest the power of contingency. Nussbaum’s work traces the role of luck, the *tuchē* that can create catastrophe. Beckett is often taken as indicative of meaninglessness, but the same can easily be said of *King Lear*. There is no answer in *King Lear*, no transcendence, no moral horizon, no *deus ex machina*, and it can be read as a deeply atheistic work as words fail in Lear’s mournful “no no no no no.” There is an extreme contingency when Cordelia dies unexpectedly due to unfortunate timing.

Shakespeare's religion is much debated. Was he Catholic, or Protestant? His work has scriptural allusions, but not directly nor concretely. Like Ecclesiastes and Esther, there is a sense of God without the direct use of tradition. But this absence doesn't make a work unreligious, or irreligious. For William Lynch, any exploration of human limitation can be an exploration of divinity. A motto of Father Luigi Giussani at Cometa in Como, Italy, is that "reality will not let you down."³⁴ Yet what is modern literature but an exploration of the limits of words, communication, meaning, self-awareness? Nietzsche declared himself anti-Christ, and his work has remained richly useful for Christian theologians. One simply cannot rule oneself out of the theological game.

King Lear is a beloved play for theologians to explore for precisely these reasons. Some argue for the play's atheism or paganism, its resolute pessimism about justice and meaning, but others for its Christianity and optimism. "The worst is not yet" can be ominous or hopeful; to speak the worst might contain it, or it might just be a prelude to something unspeakable.³⁵ There is a raw power in *King Lear*, an anarchy and an emptiness, that is vital to understanding humanity and God, even in God's absence, what MacKinnon called the borderlands of theology. It is "wholly Christian in search for blessing, forgiveness, reconciliation – 'as if we were God's spies,'" notes Ulrich Simon, and it ends in mysterious emptiness, "the mystery of things" (5.8.15).³⁶ Works can be religious and Christian, even if by way of absence and abjection. Mark's gospel can include Jesus' cry of God-abandonment while the centurion understands that "truly this man was God's son."

For Weil, it is precisely in such meaningless abjection that God is most present, the "why?" that is the last, lingering question of both *Lear* and Jesus. To protest the world's order is to imagine another one, to place a different world offstage but on the periphery. Gods and governments ought to be better than this; "it is not fitting that God should be like mortals in their rage" says a rather brave Cadmus to Dionysus (*Bacchae* 1348), and "Did heaven look on / And would not take their part?" (*Macbeth* 4.3.225–26). Can we love the good even in its deprivation? This is Plato's haunting question, echoed in Weil and countless others. It doesn't matter whether it's ancient or modern. If Shakespeare's absences and ellipses can be seen as Christian, then so can Beckett and other recent authors. The line between the absurd and the mysterious is not easily drawn, because there is still a striving and a desire for an order not seen. The horizon remains, even if it is pointless, Schopenhauerian striving. Kant supposed the possibility of an order that we can't truly know but is real nonetheless.

Sartre's vital concern is that the circumstantial is what leads us to lose our authenticity. He worries about our external justifications and how we need the world to tell us who we are and to forgive us. Thus, in *No Exit*, there are no mirrors and the characters confess to one another. Authentic life is lived without circumstance and misfortune, in the sense that they

never justify our choices – only we do that. This is not a modern idea, though. Boethius struggled with the same problem of external justification; he would get the bit about the mirrors in *No Exit*. The world wants us to trust in its riches and prestige instead of the true spirit of philosophy alone. Hinduism and other Asian religions also point to the mirage of *maya*, that the world is wrong about our value. Weil also focuses on the question of prestige, how the world tells us we are important or unimportant. Sartre is strangely optimistic in *The Flies* that the desire for prestige can be overcome.

With the modern world, tragic forces can be secular and prosaic, such as poverty, economics, and war. Modern tragic protagonists are partly victims of larger forces, and their actions have a lesser scope. Joseph Krutch's "The Tragic Fallacy" argued that modern knowledge has destroyed the possibility of tragedy, because a modern, scientific cosmos destroys our sense of fate. We are not noble anymore, but determined by heredity and animal reflex and Freudian complexities. God and human glory have left the stage, leaving modern culture to be vulgar and barbarous. Modern calamities lack tragic dignity; we simply don't make a difference anymore. The parlor is too bourgeois in its depiction of the ordinary and common individual, and such impersonal forces in the universe just aren't awe inspiring like the ancient gods and forces.

Certainly modern tragedy is different, but is it fair to argue that it is less tragic? Krutch and others are far too reductive regarding tragedy literature. The ennobling dignity is scarce in *Medea*, *Philoctetes*, and *Bacchae*, where the chthonic forces are maddening and terrifying, even as modern tragedy still deals with calamity and dignity, responsibility and determination, madness and illusion. We have exchanged mental illness for demonic possessions, and modern tragedy reflects that changing knowledge and understanding. Irony is not gone at all but continues, given that modern political and personal freedoms have led to totalitarianisms, anxieties and psychoses. Western cultures, which define themselves as civilized and modern, engage in world wars and genocides. The struggles remain frighteningly similar. As Hauerwas observes, "the task of being human may have peculiar and distinct form in our time, but when all is said and done it is about birth and death and all that comes between those two realities."³⁷ Hell can be other people whether you're Boethius or Sartre. Other people invite us to justify ourselves in them, in images and cultural trappings. For Boethius, justification is in God only, but worldly fame and prestige tempt us to justify ourselves in them. When they inevitably disappoint, what is left? Boethius is modern in some ways, understanding that we might be the cause of our own misery.³⁸ Sartre's authenticity is in the freedom of the self, without external approval. The simple presence of another person leads us to seek their approval. The ancient Chinese thinker Chuang Tzu taught how encountering an empty boat is vastly different from encountering a manned boat. There is an incommensurability of being human that

is present in various tragic literatures, and such incommensurability invites the theological.

Circumstantial tragedies such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* can disturb the possibility of the sacred or some sort of offstage. There is no horizon from which the gods may appear, no intercessory appearance by Heracles to fix things – the great, grand *deus ex machina*. But how clear and grand were such visions, after all? Sometimes they were purely offstage, as in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and other times present only through announcement or oracle, as in *Oedipus the King*. Euripides is accused of being more agnostic or atheistic, as is *King Lear*. Nor is such a moral horizon comforting when we consider *Medea* or *The Bacchae*, which raise more questions than answers, and the Gospel of Mark and Revelation are also horizons that trouble rather than ease. Modern works can be more subtle and suggestive regarding an offstage, and this troubles Balthasar. Redemption is more discrete, subtle, and troubling, but redemption has always had these elements. The gods are absent or present only obliquely; it is a more difficult journey, with a more hidden God. The old path of the direct divine presence, as found in Dante and the medieval imagination, is now gone. There is the more difficult, more oblique path of modern prose, which is doubtful, circumstantial, historical, and complex.

What is lost by a focus on contingency, on history and particularity? With modernity there has been a concern that to focus on contingency is to lose God, that the muck of ordinariness means non-transcendence. Hegel worries over this, as does Balthasar. But this doesn't follow at all. Contingency, as in the factual and the given, doesn't preclude another world or something offstage. For Taubes, history and myth "testify to patterns that are contrary to the law of nature in which we live."³⁹ Such contrary patterns have been a fairly constant feature of human existence – *dharma*, *gnosis*, heaven, *nirvana*, Pure Land Buddhism, a hidden moral order, a political vision, or utopia. For Marx, it was the end of economic class struggle; for Antigone, it was preference for the gods of the dead rather than Creon's civic gods; for Augustine, it was the City of God. Such an ordering may be hidden somehow, by *maya* or sin, or the forgetfulness of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Plato. If we have forgotten then we must come to remember somehow, through Socratic dialogue, secret Gnostic histories, or Eleusinian mysteries. Taubes sees Gnosticism as revealing a comic Creator who gloats at creation but also at the tragic, transcendent pneuma of another God.⁴⁰ This is not to equate these movements into some reductive archetype. Nor is it to simplify deeply troubling questions about the relationship between contingency and transcendence. But human history, and many tragic works, is persistent in the possibility of an offstage. A fundamental Jewish and Christian distinction is between our current world and the world to come, so that Taubes quipped, "You have to excuse me, I can't live in just one world!"⁴¹

This is not to argue that another world or a contrary pattern must or does exist. There needn't be an offstage at all. Our sense of gods, heavens,

and human meaning could just be a weird human maladaptation, our Freudian guilts, insecurities, and ghosts. Beyond definitional and mathematical truths, Hume saw only contingency and habits. Perhaps the contingency is all there is, and all the possibilities are interior, psychic artifacts as Freud argued, or the working out of a historical process in Marx and Hegel. Humanity may be the measure of all things, and meaning is not innate but existential. For Northrop Frye, apocalyptic symbolism and demonic imagery are solely human affairs, representations of human desire and rejection.⁴² The New Jerusalem, the Garden of Eden, domesticated animals like sheep, and many other elements show “the forms of a human universe,” while hell, fate, and monsters point to a resistant cosmos. Materialists deny an offstage world, especially a religious or superstitious one, as with Democritus, Epicurus, Jainism, some forms of Buddhism, and recent popular atheists, or the creed-like materialism of some people, places, and politics. Notions of transcendence have oppressed, denied, and exploited our bodies, environment, and world. Transcendence and materiality have never been easy.

Human reason is spatial and temporal, as Kant realized. We live within boundaries, imagining heres and theres, an onstage, a backstage, and an offstage. Atomism may deny gods and heavens, but it too is another world, a nonobvious ordering, as is Marxism, or Jain teachings on nonviolence and asceticism. Even the most basic orderings (such as cause and effect) suggest another world, as Hume has shown us, and have some kind of synthetic propositional status. There may or may not be another world; in one of his mental exercises, Pascal was willing to give it a 50/50 chance. The point here is that human history shows how contingency and transcendence are not mutually exclusive. To focus on history and contingency, the onstage, does not preclude the possibility of an offstage; in fact, given the scope of human history, they have often been deeply connected. For a species that is thoroughly circumstantial and historical, we have often moved toward an offstage in our religions, stories, and imagination, for reasons unknown, and we continue to seek some kind of ordering, some foundation for what are humane qualities and aspirations. “Look there!” says Lear, “There is a world elsewhere” for Coriolanus (3.3.137); “your wisdom appealed to one world – mine, another” says Antigone (560).⁴³ Tragic literature powerfully reminds us of all the ways an offstage may be real or imagined, denying or affirming, rebellious or oppressive.

God and contingency

Jesus’ message and power are triumphant in the opening of Mark. The gospel opens with a Spartan auspiciousness: Jesus is the Son of God in 1:1, and John the Baptist prepares the way with “the whole Judean countryside” responding to his message. But the resistance to Jesus, foreshadowed in John the Baptist’s fate, is ironic and potent. The beginning of Jesus’

ministry coincides with John's arrest, and the success of the disciples leads to John's execution. Jesus is opposed not by demons, illness, nature, or death, as he has power over these forces ("even the wind and the sea obey him," 4:41), but his own people who oppose him out of fear, jealousy, suspicion, and necessity. The Gerasenes beg him to leave after healing their demoniac, the Pharisees seek to destroy him after healing the man with the withered hand, and he is accused of being insane by his family and of being Beelzebul the demon by the scribes. The coming Kingdom of God means not triumphant restoration, but the struggles of persecution, the doubts of Gethsemane, and execution.

His family, people, and disciples perpetually misunderstand. In the midst of his struggle against fame and misunderstanding, Jesus attempts to keep his identity a secret, and he heals a deaf man in private (7:33). The reader understands that Jesus is the Son of God (1:1), but the people do not, not even Peter whose confession of Jesus as the Christ immediately veers into misunderstanding and resistance. To be the Messiah is to meet resistance and death from his own people. The pained question of Jesus is, "do you still not perceive or understand?" (8:17). It's rather appropriate that some manuscripts repeat verse 10:48 in two other places (10:44, 46), because it's a theme of Mark that repetition is required as the message of Jesus faces blindness and hardness of heart. There are many repetitions in the gospel, with two similar miraculous feedings, many exorcisms and healings, three passion predictions that result in incomprehension among his disciples, miracles over nature, and teachings about children and powerlessness interrupted by the disciples' vying for authority in the coming kingdom. Jesus can heal physical blindness and deafness, but not spiritual blindness and stupidity, and the original text of Mark ended in failure.

There is human frustration and fatigue for Mark's Jesus. He is often seeking out solitude, avoiding the crowds and attempting to maintain his messianic secret. When he goes to a house in Tyre, he "did not want anyone to know he was there" (7:24). The Syrophoenician woman asks for help, and Jesus curtly compares her to a dog, although he relents and heals her daughter after her clever response (7:27–30). But there is no amazement at her faith or at the healing, but a dismissal and cure. It's far different from Matthew's version, where Jesus is wordy and complimentary toward her. Mark shows Jesus' flashes of anger at people's hardness of heart toward illness (3:5), and toward illness in general (the alternate text for 1:41). Jesus is indignant at the disciples for screening the little children after his specific teaching (9:37, 10:14) and calls Peter "Satan." The Mosaic law may not reflect God's will, but the reality of humanity's hardness of heart (10:5). His last act of power is to curse a barren fig tree (11:14), a symbolic act in the mode of other Jewish prophets. The barren fig tree is Jerusalem and its temple that requires cleansing. There is an exhaustion to Mark's Jesus, one who knows a physical and spiritual fatigue. The people respond with a demand for a sign, eliciting here a deep sigh of wearied frustration at a

faithless generation and their incomprehension. Twice he asks how much longer he must endure them, as his disciples also find their healing power waning (9:19).

From the beginning Jesus faces opposition, and his power and authority are diminished as his healing and teaching ministry progresses. Jesus' power seems to lessen in the face of people's unbelief and resistance. Telling is 6:5, where Jesus could "do no deed of power there ... he was amazed at their unbelief." Amazement and fear are common (10:32). Meanwhile, one woman's strong faith can simply touch his cloak and command a healing outside of Jesus' control (5:28–29). The healing of the blind man requires repeated treatments (8:23–25), unlike the earlier healing of a deaf man, which is immediate (7:35). Jesus feeds 5,000 people, but when soon after they need to feed 4,000 people, they ask where they can possibly get bread (Mark 8:4); the second feeding requires more food for less people. Hardness of heart is found not among the demons or illnesses such as blindness, but community leaders and his own disciples. It is a theme repeated in the Gospel of John, the ironic wonder at the Word who came to his own, but they did not know him. In Revelation there is the final battle, a cosmic resistance to God at work in the world.

Contingency, creation, and God

The Bible is historically contingent in rich and profound ways. The New Testament epistles are not self-aware as scripture, but are reflections of circumstances, the church divisions, crises of leadership, varying interpretations, and questions of Jewish law and Gnostic controversy. The people and problems are real, snapshots of a time that seems far from the twenty-first century. The Bible as canon and as a series of documents is profoundly contingent, dependent on church councils, ancient authorities, and old controversies. We possess no original documents, but copies of copies that disagree at times. Scholars are left to wrestle with the terrible circumstantiality of manuscript copyists who made accidental mistakes, or who intentionally altered the text to correct a mistake. The language of the Bible is ancient and has been lost, translated, recovered, and remains enigmatic. God's revelation in history and context means a shaping and limiting of God's power. There is much that is not understood. Mark has a reader-aware moment when he says, "let the reader understand" regarding the desolating sacrilege in 10:14, but we are far from understanding. In his commentary on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Milton Horne notes how the Bible is a "product of human processes,"⁴⁴ which doesn't mean that that's all it is, but simply that the circumstantial is part of the end result. But, as Horne notes, we do have to "take seriously the role that historical context plays in our reading." There is much we do not understand about the Bible, because of its rich historicism rooted in a time and place long gone, its wondrous particularity toward people and places of its time that are

repeated in human names and places today, the Mt. Gileads and Nathaniels that persevere. For Christians, God's relationship to contingency means a shift in human understanding from tribal god to monotheism, from animal sacrifice to morality, from monotheism to the Holy Trinity. Theology is worked out not in the Bible alone, but with later church doctrine, arguments, and councils. To read the Bible is to embrace an ongoing history that asks about following Jesus today, about the Trinity and church order, about how many sacraments there are and what they mean. For Catholicism, the dogmas about Mary and the Pope develop through history. Revelation is rooted in God's authority, but expressed and understood in history, in time and place.

Christianity struggled with Gnosticism, but ultimately rejected it as contrary to the God of the Bible, because God had created a world of contingency, particularity, and embodiment. For C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* (2.5),

There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.⁴⁵

The gospels had to be prosaic narratives because only those genres can convey the circumstantiality of the world, its earthiness and historicism. Nothing else would do. Poetry and drama omit the details; epic loses the details in a different way; the lyrical mode also omits the particular; a discursive essay loses the paradoxes, performance, particularity, and historicism as events lead to other events. As scholars suppose, the Q document is a list of Jesus' teachings, but who would want just that? Only some form of prose would do, as with the Bhagavad Gita.

With contingency comes the question of God's absolute power. Is God somehow constrained by goodness? It's a problem that goes back to Plato and the basis of the good. Is goodness arbitrary, or rooted in an order even beyond God? Theologians have responded by distinguishing God's power before and after creation and salvation history. Before God created the universe, God's absolute power could do anything; after creation, God's power is ordered according to the divine choice to create. God's gracious choice to create means a relational change to God, a freely chosen responsibility. To create means an exchange, a sacrifice of not-creating for the choice to create. For God to speak is to create the possibility of resistance; even for God, perhaps, every choice includes its own negation. The distinction between God's absolute power and God's ordained power points to God's strange power after creation, constrained by the order of the world, its goodness, historicity, and limitations. This does not necessarily mean God is permanently constrained, in a process theology way. What it does mean

is that for God to relate to the world, to respect its boundaries and realities, is to respect its circumstantiality and finitude.

The contingency of the world that God created means a choosing, an embrace of the Jews over the Gentiles, Abel over Cain, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his brothers. It stretches to the universal, as the Jews are to bless the other nations, Jacob and Esau find reconciliation as do Joseph and his brothers. But the circumstantial is not erased, and God relates to the world through its particularity. The lingering question of particularity means the choosing of Abraham, Joseph, Leah, and Jacob, and thereby elevating them over the Gentiles, Joseph's brothers, Rachel, and Esau. It reflects a world of mimetic jealousy, as Girard warned, where rivalry becomes violent. Everyone is guilty with Heidegger's "not," the possibilities that were rejected as a choice is made.⁴⁶ It is a world of scarcity, jealousy, and might in its economic and militaristic forms. God may not directly reject Cain, but in choosing Abel's sacrifice there is an implicit rejection that, like the brother of the Prodigal Son, ends in jealousy. To choose is to reject, the choice to honor Abel and not Cain. For Tillich, "It was a profound insight in the tragic element of guilt when Kierkegaard questioned the right of anyone to let himself be killed for truth. He who does so must know that he becomes tragically responsible for the guilt of those who kill him."⁴⁷ This applies even to Judas, whom Jesus picked and knew would be betray him. Tillich notes the circumstantiality that is always behind the existential.

But every decision closes doors. And that cannot be avoided; it is an inescapable destiny. Life makes decisions in every moment; life closes doors in every moment. We proceed from the first minute of our lives to the last minute, because we are growing. The law of growth lends us greatness, and therefore tragedy. For the excluded possibilities belong to us; they have a right of their own. Therefore, they take their vengeance upon our lives which have excluded them.⁴⁸

There is something that opposes God and human flourishing, it is not simply a lack of the good, as Augustine and Plato held. It is some sort of real unreality, a kind of theological "dark matter" that has greater pull than such privative notions of evil. MacKinnon's concern is this *surd* that clings to moral actions. There are moral remainders in the unintended consequences and unfortunate results.

The basis for God's self-limitation is found in the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6–7 and the kenoticism where Christ empties himself. Here too there is a recognition of circumstantiality. To live as a historical human being is to wrestle with the reality of circumstance, of being somewhere at sometime. As Hauerwas quips, one cannot be a citizen of the world, it's an oxymoron; we are always from *somewhere*.⁴⁹ For Jesus, this meant a human mother and father, the Aramaic language and the contexts of shepherds, sheepfolds, Pharisees and Sadducees, and apocalyptic Judaism.

It also meant being obscure, lowly, and a servant. He is thoroughly grounded in his historical reality, or else the incarnation was a gnostic sham.

The sovereignty of God means God's purposes will be ultimately realized, but circumstantiality remains a defining element to the story. How it all works out remains unknown. The glory of the Lord is the defeat of Pharaoh (Exodus 14) and the presence of God with the Israelites, but that glory is tested in the wilderness (Num 14:22), humiliated by the Philistines, and departs shortly before Israel's request for a king (1 Sam 4). Israel no longer wants God as their King, and God's response is wistful and sad, even "Niebuhrian," Brueggemann notes.⁵⁰ Brueggemann goes on to observe, in regard to David, that "biblical faith characteristically holds together high faith and political faith ... because biblical faith and biblical texts live so close to historical reality and speak about such reality."⁵¹ Creation and covenant mean the possibility of rejection and sin; with law comes sin, as Paul argues in Romans. So Christ who came as Prince of Peace and to restore relationship with God heightens the tension, makes a greater and deeper sin possible. "My peace I leave you, my peace I give to you" (John 14:27), and yet "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt 10:34). Grace may be free, the response is judged. The people who reject God will find themselves rejected (Jer 6:28–30). For Calvin, this points to an inscrutable yet irresistible God. But how these purposes are realized in the end, in the face of the growing power of resistance, remains unknown.

The creation, its otherness and circumstantiality, takes on a personal element for a "palpable God" as Reynolds Price phrased it, who is anthropomorphized in many ways. God's gifts can and are resisted, and how will it end? God offers a gift of reconciliation, and its rejection leads to further condemnation and judgment. Churches dispute where that rejection is headed and what blasphemy against the Holy Spirit means (Mark 3:29). To reject a gift is perhaps the worst sin. The hope of universalism in Paul (Rom 11), Barth, Balthasar, and others is that God will still, somehow, overcome our rejection in some unimaginable way while respecting our freedom and contingency. Tragedy does not have the last say. But what does this mean for God? God is burdened in the Biblical imagination, as in Genesis when God wants to give up on his people. The pain of the broken covenant, especially in that it is personal, is the sin of idolatry, the rejection of God, and a false loyalty. "They do not know me" (Jer 9:3) is personal, a repetition from 8:7. For Balthasar, it all hints to some kind of tragedy within God.

We are not saying that the eternal separation in God [between Father and Son] is, in itself, 'tragic' or that the Spirit's bridging of the distinction is the sublation of tragedy, that is, 'comedy'.... However, if we ask whether there is suffering in God, the answer is this: there is something in God that can develop into suffering. This suffering

occurs when the recklessness with which the Father gives away himself (and all that is his) encounters a freedom that, instead of responding in kind to this magnanimity, changes it into calculating, cautious self-preservation. This contrasts with the essentially divine recklessness of the Son, who allows himself to be squandered, and of the Spirit who accompanies him.⁵²

In Greek tragedy and Biblical prophets, oracles invite resistance as people explore the possibility of negation, as words (and especially words about the future) must do. To say something is to embrace a possibility that enables other possibilities, varieties of interpretation and rejection. Oedipus powerfully shows this reality, but so does the Garden of Eden that contains a serpent. The Jews ask for a king in 1 Samuel as a path of resistance to God, yet Jesus will inherit that title while on the cross. The oracles and prophecies predict a future, giving a necessity and ultimacy to time and understanding. How will these oracles work out exactly, given history, actions, and the story? There is always a narrative uncertainty, a believing and a disbelieving. Jeremiah's enemies disbelieve him; Oedipus ignores Tiresias and the possibilities of the prophecy, Joseph's brothers reject him; Rodrigues disbelieves his predicted apostasy and identification with Ferreira. The Greeks seeing the plays, like the Christians hearing and reading the gospels, knew the outcome but waited to see how it would work out. Perhaps fate can be avoided *this* time. Contingency introduces questions, even if it does not change the final outcome.

Incarnation

Barth develops how Christ is both a man of His time and the Lord of time.⁵³ To be both is a peculiar position and revelatory of God's relationship to a contingent creation. For God to enter time and space means to be made vulnerable to opposition, rejection, and time. Jesus' choices will be real choices, which means consequences for good and for catastrophe, such as the destruction of the Temple and the division between Jew and Christian. Christ's entering into the world means that God has entered a broken world, and the Incarnation was, for Boethius, a "tremendous tragedy." He comes to save, but salvation through him means he also brings division, bringing not peace but a sword (Matt 10:34). Jesus is onstage as a real human being, part of the contingencies of human living. For William Lynch, "the [human] weakness is permanent, and hence a permanent gate, not to be discarded in the name of some fraudulent and cheap leaping out of the skin of our helplessness into the arms of God."⁵⁴ It means human rejection, which opposes God in its rejection of him, and opposes mercy in its desire to not see people healed. Divine love is masked and hidden due to sin, and even God finds that good actions elicit sin, Balthasar observes.⁵⁵ Now the Israelites can turn to a golden calf, the Pharisees can reject Jesus as

Messiah, and the teachings of Christ can be perverted and used for immoral causes. Although God's power can be made known in weakness, it is also open to abuse, and the church will gather under the Cross to persecute. It is the knowledge that people everywhere kill each other with their love that makes Coffey desire his own execution in *The Green Mile*.

Resistance in Mark is powerful, but not complete. Christ's penultimate work of power is the healing of blind Bartimaeus that is, like the earlier miracles, immediate and potent (10:52). Incomprehension, as blindness and resistance, is not the end of the story, which ends not with crucifixion but an empty tomb. The cost is high for discipleship, but the cross and the resulting fear are not final. The disciples are terrified and scattered, but perception and good news remain. The Centurion understands, as does Mark's gospel and the New Testament itself. Jesus' life, ministry, and power continue in his disciples and the communities that form around them, for whom blindness is not the last word. A full look at the worst is not pessimism but realism. Buddhism has been accused of the same thing. The desire for an easy, triumphant world is understandable, but it says more about human nature than it does our world, which history shows to be blind, hard of heart, and resistant to a cure. This is why tragedy is so compatible with Christianity, as Eagleton has argued; both demand a full look at the worst, with a deep hope of something better, a final cure found in a slow, painful transformation that is offstage, yet still nearby.

With the Incarnation comes new forms of misunderstanding and blasphemy. To enter history as Christ does introduces the possibility of parody, misunderstanding, and misuse of God's message. The God of Deism is hard to mock, but Jesus as the Incarnate Word means God now has an image, breaking the Second Commandment. The Savior is now historical, enabling what Stephen Prothero calls a "cultural Jesus," given that claims of divinity can be defamed and mocked, misused and misconstrued.⁵⁶ Blasphemy is now intensified. In Judaism and Islam, God is imageless, and blasphemy is by words. But with Jesus, there is now an ability to mock, to twist, to misinterpret. The *graffito blasfemo* mocks the worship of Jesus' particular death and veneration. The medieval *Toledot Yeshu* portrays Jesus as illegitimately born, an impostor and magician, because the specificity of his death invites the possibility of parody.

This entanglement means that unfortunate possibilities are created. Covenant, Bible, and incarnation mean new possibilities for apostasy, atheism, and rebellion. It is not reckoned as sin until there is law (Rom 5:13). With the Sixth Commandment comes the possibility of taking the Lord's name in vain. With texts and laws come misinterpretation, mistranslation, misunderstanding. There is a new form of hypocrisy, which is the religious hypocrisy of the New Testament Pharisees. Religion and revelation can be used to subjugate and perpetrate evil. Eli's sons can use their place at the Shiloh temple for greed and better meat (1 Sam 2:13–14). It also means that Paul must struggle with the reversal of Jew and Gentile, that the Jewish Messiah

has been rejected by his own people. "It is not as though the word of God had failed," he admits (Rom 9:6) and struggles, and yet his confidence is in the purposes of God that will be achieved, even though he anguishes over the status of the Jews in a Christian world.

Contingency means that suffering will always be irreducible. The Beloved Disciple may escape martyrdom, but the other disciples may not (John 21:23). Some tragedies, despite their darkness, reveal the strange power to transform darkness into light, humiliation into exaltation, suffering into redemption. A "tragedy under grace" is how Balthasar termed it, when shame is transformed into praise (Zeph 3:19). In chapter 5 of *The Epistle to Diognetus*, the early Christians "are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified." Other tragedies resist the idea that suffering is redemptive, because not all find honor in their shame. Paul writes that God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9), but to what extent? The contingencies remain, and their impact is uncertain. One of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is "lead us not into temptation" because future circumstances remain unknown. Rowan Williams is cavalier here, as is his text from Cassian, that "God never drops us into the heart of temptation with no equipment to face it and no way out."⁵⁷ God might not place us in such a terrible position, but history and contingency might. The petition might be more of a plea for ignorance than anything else. Would one's faith remain intact if one were among the Donner Party, snowbound in the Sierra Nevada, for example? It's a bit like the canard that "everything happens for a reason," which is a terrible denial of history and contingency.

Time can exponentially raise the price of pity, as Rodrigues learns. In Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Mr. Phillotson comes to a similar decision when finds his code of kindness and mercy, his abhorrence of cruelty, undone by the "grind of stern reality."

No man had ever suffered more inconvenience from his own charity, Christian or heathen, than Phillotson had done in letting Sue go ... Gillingham looked at him [Phillotson], and wondered whether it would ever happen that the reactionary spirit induced by the world's sneers and his own physical wishes would make Phillotson more orthodoxly cruel to her than he had erstwhile been informally and perversely kind.⁵⁸

"God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Cor 10:13) is often given as a basis for a brash confidence against contingency, but it's a trickier matter than one such verse. Tannehill observes that in Luke's gospel the disciples are "blind to God's way of working in the world, in which rejection and suffering become the means by which God's purpose advances. They expect triumph without suffering, even though Jesus had told them the opposite."⁵⁹ Sacrifice may be mixed with triumph, but it's impossible to predict given the world's contingency, and it may cause yet greater suffering. Pride goes before the fall, as Oedipus discovers. The prior verse is

Paul's warning against spiritual overconfidence, after all; "if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

Hardy's warning is clear in "Panthera": it is a mistake to speak of "sheer joy / So trustingly" that we "blink contingencies." Niebuhr warns us of "the temptation to become impatient and defiant of the slow and sometimes contradictory processes of history."⁶⁰ Time and space can be totally defeating, as some tragedies remind us. Lear just barely loses Cordelia. Weil's willingness to fight in the Spanish Civil War is thwarted by her terrible eyesight. While with her militia, she is badly burned by a cooking fire and must leave the group, much like Philoctetes. In Endo's *Silence*, Rodrigues is defeated by "this swamp of Japan."⁶¹ He had thought he would overcome Ferreira's apostasy, but he ends up repeating it, just as the interpreter had promised would happen. Like Oedipus and Peter, his resistance only feeds his eventual defeat. He is left wondering at his own apostasy without honor or exaltation. Kichijiro realizes that he would have been a great Japanese Christian before the persecutions, but he was born at the wrong time. The context has a lot to do with it, and who knows one's own mettle? Rodrigues aims for the triumph he sees in Christ's crucifixion, and he is unprepared for the reality of the circumstances in Japan during the Edo period. His imagined strength results in a terrible defeat – "how wretched it was, miserable ..." ⁶²

In the end, it's better not to know, to be a Japanese Christian before 1597 and never be tempted at all. But if you are among the unlucky, the Judases, Kichijiros, and Rodrigueses, perhaps the mercy of God will cover all in the end, as Rodrigues considers: "There are neither the strong nor the weak. Can anyone say that the weak do not suffer more than the strong?" ⁶³

Apocalypse

Jacob Taubes saw history as thoroughly relative and fungible, but to him this was hopeful because it meant change was always possible. If time is interchangeable, then it can be converted to something good. The apocalyptic and the messianic were revolutionary for him, a way of engaging the spirit to counter a flat, dull nature; "what was, can end."⁶⁴ Apocalypse is a revelation, an uncovering of a true reality and a coming transformation. Apocalyptic literature holds a unique place in Jewish and Christian writings with its visions, numerology, imagery, hidden battles, and struggles with an imminent but painful restoration. There is a living between the two worlds of this present one and the coming one, the real and the ideal. The gospel of Mark as a whole can be read as an apocalyptic drama where God's disciples preach, are imprisoned, and await Jesus' return.⁶⁵ Apocalyptic literature is both cataclysmic and historic, for the massive change is not instantaneous but a progression through phases. There's a historical staging to it all. The seven seals of the book of Revelation have to be opened in an order, but the timing is kind of vague. The triumphant coming of the new age

is chronologically certain but unpredictable. Demonic and human resistance is not overcome through annihilation, but in staged battles with the dragon and the beast, wars and famines, the appearance of the Son of Man and the anti-Christ. For thinkers such as Taubes, history means relativity, change, and transformation, antagonistic forces that distinguish and transgress. Messianism is not an abandonment of history but its transposition through revolution.⁶⁶

Another world lies offstage, in contrast with the circumstances and contingencies of being onstage and in the performance. It may be a place that is a world elsewhere, or it may be a transformative future for those who live “in the midst,” between the past and the future.⁶⁷ Omens are found in celestial occurrences, eclipses, and odd signs that mark and order terrestrial events. Thucydides observed the unusual number of eclipses before the Peloponnesian wars, and Herodotus saw an eclipse that presaged the fall of Xeres and the Persians.⁶⁸ The magi saw an unusual star as an omen of a great political change. Onstage is an imminent destruction, because tragedy’s reversals can be world-changing, immense and apocalyptic. Both tragedy and apocalypse focus on crisis. *King Lear* features an eclipse as a sign of change and a new order, the threat of the “hell black-night,” while Edmund dismisses astrology as a “foppery.” Cataclysms and calamities are portents for what lies elsewhere and offstage, and how it influences those in the context of being onstage. Storms and omens dominate *King Lear*, along with paths and destinations rarely desired by the characters; Lear and Gloucester journey into ignominy, and Kent follows an “obscured course.”⁶⁹ Both *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* connect the protagonist in a place that is a world’s end, an *eschatia*.⁷⁰

The future can be threatening as a new order emerges. Lear moves from sun to storm, and with such a transition sight and language break down. There is blindness and uncertainty during storms and darkness, Edgar’s “I nothing am” in *King Lear*. Now proverbs are spoken by fools, and characters switch roles as daughters become mothers. It could all end in disaster, as the Greek audiences knew with *Oedipus the King* and its grim foreboding and ironies. In *Antigone*, the Chorus’ famous Ode to Man praises human cleverness that culminates in cities like Thebes. The Ode ends, and then Antigone enters the stage. She is the disjunction who reveals Thebes’ injustice and violence. Our cleverness may be our undoing.

The fear that our clever and hopeful creations contain, like Frankenstein, our undoing is a particularly modern emphasis. For Frank Kermode, the most consistent worldview of the modernist movement is the apocalyptic.⁷¹ The apocalyptic has inspired the transformation of the present, but it has also led to new repressions, as the best of visions can be undone, especially when the promised new world order tarries. What to do when the end does not happen? Apocalypses must be continually revised as they struggle with an unknowable, unrealized ending that impinges on the present, and the vision itself can turn tragic. The Anabaptist Jan Matthys advocated a holy

war to prepare for the new millennium and that the righteous should kill the godless. The Anabaptist vision of an ideal community that shared property and goods had turned violent and oppressive. Preachers spread his message to Münster, and the city took it to heart in 1534 with a revolution and a declaration that the city was the new Jerusalem. The coming new world turned into a dictatorship under the Jans (Jan Matthys and his disciple Jan Bockelson), with executions, polygamy, forced marriage, and a mandate to kill the unrighteous. Bockelson was crowned king, and he ate cake as the people starved and froze, until the Catholics finally captured the city the next year. The apocalyptic can be weirdly tied to dictatorships: Cromwell, Jim Jones, Stalin, the Reign of Terror in France, Jim Jones. Groups that promised liberty end up oppressors, and a promised equality hides a new class system. The apocalyptic becomes yet another ideology that betrays itself, hiding oppression behind bread and circuses. Tillich observes a terrible pathos for a Jewish gravedigger during the Holocaust, who knew “the infinite contrast between the things he saw and the hope he maintained” in the coming Messiah.⁷² None of this would surprise Niebuhr and his deep awareness of circumstantiality, how human history can become tragic in the aspirations that backfire, the real *peripeteia*.

Oedipus the King ends with “bide the coming / of that final day” (1528–29).⁷³ Like oracles and prophecies, the future is unknown, uncertain, and strange. It is open to perpetual revision during the biding and the waiting. To bide is to live with the uncertainty and expectation. The gospel of Mark indicts the disciples and the world for all its blindness, and yet still it was written, because someone came to see their own blindness. Christian communities formed, a people who record their not-seeing. For Rowan Williams, tragedy indicates how otherness can be not just opposed, but somehow thought and lived through, in a recognized blindness.⁷⁴ None of the gospels end with the disciples truly understanding; John has Jesus twice saying to the disciples “Follow me” as they question their possible fates (21:19, 22). There is a triumphal understanding in the early part of Acts, but that confident, certain success is quick to fade amidst resistance and division. Oracles and the future remain open, as does the past. *Oedipus the King* does not preclude *Oedipus at Colonus*, because the ending remains undetermined. The past can’t be undone, but it can be redeemed, as Barth hoped even for Judas.

An eschatological vision is an ironic one, because it denies our reality even as it brings hope of bettering it. To know the ending is not to know how it will all work out. Oracles and prophecies love to remind us that the gods speak paradoxically, and language is surreptitious. Apollo’s oracle reveals that Socrates is the wisest man on earth, but how can this be so since he claims to know nothing? Jesus’ prediction about the destruction of the temple gets confused in its reporting and becomes evidence that he meant to personally destroy the temple (Mark 14:58–59). Oedipus and Macbeth struggle with predictions that are unpredictable, as do Abraham and David.

Nussbaum notes that, for Aristotle, “the universal account *ought* to be regarded as only an outline, not the precise and final word.”⁷⁵ Narratives have the peculiar power to preserve human freedom with divine authority, meaning with contingency, which is why Balthasar valued them so much, and why there is some comfort in the terror of the book of Revelation; if it’s a story, the ending may still be revised and open to interpretation, in the end.

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6 Oedipus, the novel, and guilt

Freedom and sin

“I shall not be to blame for the failure of the god’s oracle,” says Orestes in *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (120–21).¹ Freedom and divine necessity can be strangely intertwined; even divine oracles sometimes require the work of humans. In Mark there is a necessity and fate to Jesus’ death (8:31), for Judas and for the disciples’ lack of understanding – it is in the Greek *dei*, necessary (Mark 13:7, 10; 4:11).² For Aristotle, tragedy was about a mistaken action and thus an inevitable guilt. Culpability means responsibility. Ajax may have been driven mad, as was Agave, yet there is still a horror at their actions; it was still their hands that killed friends and family. Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* is the paragon of the dilemma, because he acted without knowledge yet still bears the blame and punishment. His free choices were mysteriously pre-ordained, and responsibility and determination are paradoxically intertwined for him. The play’s characters and audience feel both repugnance and pity for him.

As Eagleton cogently argues in *Sweet Violence*, causality is simply a tricky thing, both in life and in tragic literature. *Peripeteia*, the ironic reversal of action and intention, points to human freedom and contingency. We don’t have limitless, libertarian freedom given the many predeterminations in our lives, the past, culture, language, parents, and environment that precede us. To be onstage is to be placed, and it could mean being abandoned like Philoctetes on an island, a victim of prophecy like Oedipus, or trapped by poverty and war like Mother Courage. But we are not wholly constrained, nor is every decision predetermined. We have that strange, human notion of “I could do otherwise.” Oedipus is not wholly determined by the curse on him; it is his own obstinacy to uncover the truth of Thebes’ plague, and his willful resistance to hearing Tiresias’ warnings, that are just as much a part of his downfall as the prophetic curse on his head. (One would think that a truly clever person who knew the curse would avoid all murders and relationships of anyone a generation older!) There is blame for Oedipus, as there is for Tess and Jude, because pride and self-reliance easily form part of the web of tragic suffering.

Our moral acts are never wholly free or determined, yet somehow mysteriously they are both. Nuances remain; being human is vertiginous. We are onstage and in a performance we did not choose, with a history and acts that precede us, yet we have a strong sense of freedom and that our lines are improvised. Sometimes tragedy suggests that we have less freedom than we thought, as when an oracle comes true in the case of *Oedipus the King* or in *Silence*. King Saul and Judas are, like Oedipus, doomed figures with set fates. Causation is plural and inscrutable, leaving us responsible for our choices but also strangely not responsible. If the causes are ambiguous at best, and no action is entirely one's own, then who's to blame?

Tragedy questions simplistic notions about our actions, that we can somehow simply and easily choose the good. As Hegel realized, the good can be opposed to itself, and we can be pulled between different goods like loyalty to the law and loyalty to our family. We may be forced to choose between rival goods. Guilt and determination mean our actions and motivations are opaque, even to ourselves, as Hamlet struggles to come to grips with his mandate, fear, conscience, and guilt. Equally troubling is how goodness may be hidden, as Jesus' identity is ungraspable to his enemies and even his disciples. Among the many mysteries in Mark's gospel is how a centurion, seeing Jesus' execution as a criminal, perceives that this man was God's son (15:39).

Our actions and motivations are complex, having future repercussions that, by definition, we cannot see or anticipate. Actions and memories reverberate, spreading from David to Absalom, from Heathcliff to Catherine. Oedipus is helped offstage in *Oedipus the King* by Antigone, whose own death is in her future. Many of the Greek tragedies feature sequels and retellings: Agamemnon and his children according to Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Seneca, the lost sequels to *Prometheus Bound*. The consequences of our actions are unforeseeable, since they are in the future and prey to the same inscrutability as the past and present. Choices can go terribly wrong, or there can be unforeseen consequences like the death of Cordelia, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the death of Jonathan. For Arthur Miller, "the consequences of actions can be as real as the actions themselves."³

Shame is a defining element of tragedy, as scholars such as Krook and Jaspers observe.⁴ For the Greeks, guilt and blame were a pollutive curse (*miasma*) on a place or family. Ulrich Simon argues that the Bible goes further, placing a history of guilt far beyond Greek notions of curse and pollution. Cain is the central figure because he murders his brother Abel, but the result is not his own death (the law of *talio*) but his ongoing guilt; Abel is not avenged as compensatory justice dictates.⁵ Instead, the guilt is set on a global scale; the long history of the world is impacted by rebellion and sin. It's still a contamination like *miasma*, but as in Origen's *Homilia in Leviticum* (12.4), the *contaminatio* is on everyone born into this world. For some of the New Testament it's even cosmic: that creation groans

(Rom 8:22) and all things will be redeemed (Eph 1:10). It's all polluted, all connected to the Bible's grand story where actions continue to reverberate in their effects; sacred history is perpetually disjointed. Tragedy, and especially Biblical tragedy, struggles with the paradox between what Ben Quash calls our culpability and capability: that we may be responsible for things we could not control.⁶ Oedipus, Saul, Samson, Judas, and Jesus were all more culpable than capable.

"Freedom and determination govern Christian tragedies from the outset,"⁷ notes Simon, because moral responsibility is tricky in the Christian context. Original sin struggles to express the mystery of an inherited blame that is paradoxically unnecessary and yet inevitable. St. Augustine struggled to balance providence and moral responsibility in *The City of God*, as did Paul in Romans and Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. A good God is in control, and yet there is evil for which we are blameworthy. Martin Luther King Jr. explored Niebuhr's view of original sin, that "it is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness."⁸ Irenaeus sounds like Tillich when he says that our guilt was inevitable because we are imperfect, created beings in time (*Adversus Haereses* 4.38.1). Sin clings closely, working both ends of our culpability and capability, which means that tragic characters may struggle to avoid guilt and blame, oracles and prophecies, only to find themselves further enmeshed in responsibility and determination.

The mixture of good and evil is inseparable, and it's difficult to draw moral conclusions. Like a tangled mess of kite string, the strands cannot be separated cleanly. To act, even to do good, can mean harm to someone else. In *Macbeth*, "I am in this earthly world where to do harm / Is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly" (4.2.72–74). For Balthasar, Christ is "an infinite revealing love that immerses itself in a world of sin."⁹ There are powerful connections between the ancient notions of fate and Christian conceptions of original sin, because both mysteriously temper free human actions without removing responsibility. It is irreversible and contagious. The sins of the father are passed on to the son, whether from Jacob to his conniving sons, or from David to Absalom. For Balthasar, the real tragedy is ongoing as one lives as a justified sinner, in the opacity of guilt and innocence that even Jesus did not resolve in his life and death.¹⁰

Societies are built on history and traditions of shared guilt, as well as shared responsibility. For Girard, it is rooted in primal violence and murders, such as the founding of Rome in Romulus' killing of his brother Remus. Cain slew Abel and founded a city (Gen 4:17). For Niebuhr, it is rooted in the Biblical story of the ark and the temple. Solomon is able to build God's temple only because of his father David's violence and misdeeds, just as America's prosperity in the twentieth century was built on past transgressions. Niebuhr's early adherence to the social gospel fell apart with World War I and the Great Depression, where complex suffering and oppression made God's kingdom an ideal and not a reality. God seemed absent, and

history was tragic. Niebuhr resisted the twentieth-century approach to see people as essentially good and rational; such a view led to moral irresponsibility and eventually totalitarianism. Scott Erwin concludes, "What appears to have prompted Niebuhr's more hopeful appraisal of history was his greater appreciation for human sinfulness or, more specifically, its profound consequences."¹¹ His deeper awareness of sin and guilt, of human complicity, led to a greater hopefulness and a lifetime of political and social engagement. God's will may be largely inscrutable, especially as the present moment lacks the hindsight to properly understand, yet moral actions are demanded of us. An uninvolved despondency about sin leads nowhere, but so does a glib optimism that everything is getting better, that this is the best of possible worlds. For Niebuhr, "Christianity and Greek tragedy agree that guilt and creativity are inextricably interwoven."¹²

Plato, performance, and deception

Tragedies invite us to consider our guilt and responsibility, but in complex ways. For Plato, tragedy was problematic because its words and plots encouraged an immoral view of the cosmos and human action. Platonic thought also resists tragedy's performative aspect, where people are pretending to be something they are not. Reason and morality are anti-theatrical and question such pretense, since dramatic performance is deceptive and can be insincere, immoral, and frivolous.¹³ Tragic performance had been in a cultural decline for centuries before Christianity, and theater was part of a larger shift to gladiator fights and spectacle. The Romans persecuted the actors like criminals. The church tended to follow this line of thought, and in general the early Christians adopted Roman culture's suspicious regard for tragic drama, performance, and performers. Greco-Roman culture and ideas were part of a larger moral corruption that sowed immorality and idolatry, and Roman dramatic performance could be violent, immoral, and debauched, along with the public displays of Christian executions. The theater was a place of immorality that Christians should not participate in; it was a spectacle to be avoided, much like the gladiator fights.

Aristotle thought the catharsis of emotions such as pity and fear was a safe and healthy exercise, but the Platonic perspective disagreed. Tragic art inflames the wrong passions. In Book 4 of the *Republic*, Leontius observes executed bodies and finds himself struggling to both see and not see. He desires to see them but also dreads such a gory vision. Covering his eyes, his desire to see finally got the best of him. Forcing his eyes open, "he ran up to the dead bodies, saying, Look, ye wretches, take your fill of the fair sight!" Tragedy leads us to gaze, with fear and desire, upon spectacles of pain and horror. Socrates offers a moral to the story: that it reveals the problem of the divided self. Tragedy might itself *cause* real tragic suffering, ironically enough. A tenth-century story about St. Mansuestus describes people attending a festival, and as some parents watch a tragic performance, their

child drowns. The grieving parents end up embodying the tragic laments that they just saw being performed.¹⁴ The lines between reality and art can be thin, and possibly causal, so it's far cleaner to keep them separate.

Narrative has the power to be morally and existentially deceptive. Don't dramatists and poets inherently deceive as they hide shortcomings and excite passions better off restrained and thus encourage our own deceptions? Why not encourage proper social morals like fidelity and truth-telling? The public display of human vice and unrestrained passion might inspire immorality and the baser passions; when the married Phèdre incestuously lusts for her stepson Hippolytus, there is little moral good and much moral harm. The stage was an imaginary world capable of great moral harm through its imitation of evil acts, and it's inspiring us to go and do likewise. Zeus was a rapist, after all; Clement of Alexandria notes in Chapter 2 of *Exhortation to the Greeks* that Zeus may give birth to Heracles, "the god whose work it is to avert evils," but Heracles ends up brutal, violent, and a doer of evil in the *Iliad* (5.403). Actors muddy things such as morality and piety, since they display a pretense of virtue and piety. Fiction confuses a clear morality and human reality by suggesting a certain mutability where evil may be good, and good evil.

The early church did not think of the scriptures as narrative, but as some sort of historical recounting. Much later, the Puritans followed a similar logic, ordering themselves against drama and the literary imagination. Even in regard to Scripture, the Bible was to be read, studied, and preached, but never re-fictionalized in a drama, play, or story, despite its deep narrative structure. Barish notes:

The Protestant André Rivet reminds his readers that the discipline of the reformed church in France forbids the faithful to attend theatrical performances, above all when the Scripture is profaned. Occasionally, at school, for the instruction of youth, it may be permissible to present a story in dramatic form, but the story must not be taken from Scripture, which exists to be preached, not played.¹⁵

Literature must have appeal, as every author has an eye on the audience. Tragedy is no different, and many tragic works stray into tragicomedy, melodrama, and even the occasional, unintended farce. Grand speeches are written to strike the heart, and death scenes must have something vitalizing or important to them before the protagonist's death. Shakespeare often explored the artificiality of dramas, the distinctions between art and life. The disenfranchised have no voice but their own, and it is not a voice we would care to listen to anyway, except as spectacle and entertainment. As the Epistle Dedicatory to the *Christos Paschon* notes, "There is a Fault, which Painters call, Too much to the Life. Quintilian censures One, that he more affected Similitude than Beauty; who would have shewn greater Skill, if less of Resemblance."¹⁶ Ben Jonson found that his theatergoers were as

worried about their own performances – their clothes and style, and that of their neighbors – than his dramas.¹⁷ There is a gap between reality and literature, even as they are connected in representation.

Drama and the imagination are dark arts, darker than the devilish gambling and other vices that are devilish in a less subtle way than the dramatic imagination. With drama and literature, new worlds are opened up and impressed on the mind, and what the mind sees it imitates. Dramatic narrative and performance, rooted in the deceptions of costumes, masks, and the stage, hold a moral and theological danger. Why not be insincere, immoral, and frivolous? Pain may be inevitable, but tragedy can deceive the moral mind and inflame the wrong passions and cause real suffering. Sometimes silence is best, an un-saying, as Hardy would have put it. It's better to be silent than to speak for someone else, to put words in their mouth that make them conform to our entertainment, interest, or comfort.

Tragedy has to be honest about the moral dangers of gazing at spectacles of disaster, as Plato worried about. There is a prurient element to our gazing at catastrophe, as Ben Quash and Jennifer Wallace warn.¹⁸ Tragedy is an artistic mode that distorts, bending suffering to the interests of the writer and audience. The true nature of tragic suffering, of existence, is always lost. Hardy nods toward this in *The Return of the Native*:

Clym had been so inwoven with the heath in his boyhood that hardly anybody could look upon it without thinking of him. So the subject recurred: if he were making a fortune and a name, so much the better for him; if he were making a tragical figure in the world, so much the better for a narrative.¹⁹

Tragedy can be its own tragedy, ironically enough, when tragic theories and philosophies that are, by necessity, only partial claim to be absolute. A philosophy of life can become self-delusion because it is too narrow regarding tragedy's diversities. It can glamorize a certain type of suffering or self-awareness, as Karl Jaspers notes, so that ignoble loss "is pushed aside as unworthy of notice by minds that are blind with exaltation."²⁰ Such an approach excludes the wide variety of human loss that can be ennobling and ignoble, meaningful and meaningless, speakable and unspeakable. It denies value to non-Western cultures and art forms, since they are not properly Shakespearean or Attic, as if they have not reflected on sacrifice, loss, conflict, and doom.

The word "hypocrisy" itself dates from St. Augustine and the moral pretense of actors, after all.²¹ Everyone can be totally faking, like in Agatha Christie's *Murder of the Orient Express*. We can even perform for ourselves, and we may believe our own performance. The Pharisees are blind to the reality of Jesus, but how do you convince the patient that she is sick? Plato is concerned with seeing properly, since seeing is understanding. In

Oedipus the King, the surprise is not the story, which the Greeks knew well. The surprise was the ironic distance in knowledge between Oedipus and the crowd, that he is in ignorance until truth is revealed. His doom is not given by the gods or chance, but through his self-realization, through a gaining of knowledge and of history. The hero is the enemy, is the destroyer. In *Oedipus the King*, there is nothing to do; it's already done. Oedipus is blind until he understands, and that insight leads to the punishment of physical blindness and exile. Guilt may simply be inevitable, especially since reality may be unknowable, as Hume and Kant realized, for the world may not be as it appears to us. For Weil, to be helpless is, at least, to truly be beyond self-deception,²² as happens for Oedipus and Rodrigues in *Silence*. The action is recognizing the truth about the past, about what was unknown or forgotten. Self-knowledge comes at a high price, as even Oedipus' name indicates; the root in Greek is *oida*, "I know."

Rowan Williams and others describe how we are narrational creatures who tell stories. But we can add to this our terrible deceits, the untruthful stories we tell about ourselves and others. To be like God, Eve lies about the story of the apple. In contrast, Hauerwas holds that the gospel, and Christian ethics as a whole, is a matter of truth-telling. With *Oedipus the King* there is a confidence of the civic progress and improvement, a maturing beyond the cultic past. *Antigone's* Ode to Man praises our resourcefulness. But these two tragic catastrophes point to how we find our own ignorance; we are not the measure of all things, but rather we are measured and found wanting. Mark ends with the disciples who, like tragic heroes, are sympathetic, virtuous, yet fallible.²³ Every success comes with a moral warning, as Boethius came to remember. We are quick to become ignorant of ourselves and our motivations. To wash someone else's feet as a servant, as Jesus does, is to risk a spiritual arrogance, MacKinnon warns.²⁴ Our power of self-deception cannot be underestimated, nor can the many factors behind our actions, motivations, and conditions. The Dunning-Kruger effect reminds us of the power of blindness, that our supposed superiority is illusive. Yet how can you know what you don't know, Plato asked?

Hauerwas, in his usual incisive way, declares that "in general I distrust most theories."²⁵ Theories and words invite a terrible self-deception, because then I can tell untrue stories about myself. The words and the theories invite a willed blindness and a partial knowledge. Ideas that lack circumspection slide easily into the epic, because they are removed from the particularities of human experience and literature, and from the mystery of God. Being overly confident regarding what a particular life or experience means is to misperceive, as Roger Cox observes, to be one who "approaches a piece of tragic literature with preconceived definite notions as to what such a piece should be like, and then fails to find what he is looking for ..."²⁶ A lack of understanding is a lack of recognition, and pollution is a tragic and epistemological problem. The problem is hypocrisy, of being

an actor playing a false role, wearing a mask of self-deception, being a Pharisee. But how does one know that one is a hypocrite? The mask and the blindness can run deep, part of our identities and vision.

Aristotle and the novel

The power of tragic drama is evident in Balthasar, who uses it as a conceptual frame for his five-volume *Theo-Drama*, which is the center of his systematic theology. Performed drama follows vital human experiences where all the world's a stage and we all have roles, parts, and masks. We perform our parts through speech and acts in relation to events and others, and the story has acts that precede and succeed us. We are actors in events that are ongoing and unstoppable, but we can also be spectators who perceive and consider the actions of the past and present. More could be said, but it's clear that the idea of dramatic performance has had a powerful influence in literary, philosophical, and theological thought.

But performance is not everything. Aristotle knew that tragedies are sometimes read and not just performed, and he notes that the power of tragedy is without scenes, costumes, and actors, but in the action itself.²⁷ Aristotle valued the real rather than the Platonic ideal. His interest in tragedy was the whole of the narrative, the choices, actions, words, events, characters and relationships, and circumstances that form a tragic plot. For Oedipus there is more to the story than his solving the mystery of Thebes' plague; there is the oracle, the history of his parents' actions, his own triumphal past at solving riddles. There could be no tragic action if there weren't a setting that impinged somehow and some way. The protagonist is never onstage and alone, without a context, but surrounded by people and a language, culture, and assumptions. Shakespeare's soliloquies would be meaningless without the events of the play and the people that surround the character: an aside that only makes sense within the narrative and setting, a *caesura* amidst the larger action and dialogue.

Dramas and poetry can be performed but also be read, as can closet dramas, prose, and the novel. Literature that is read is a different kind of experience. It can be stopped, paused, and revisited; it is immersive in the perspectives of the narrator or characters, as well as the context of the events. Circumstances matter in all things, and especially in the novel. Sometimes the circumstances are more squarely in focus than a tragic misdeed. Poverty might not be your fault but due to economics and politics, as Henry George argued in *Progress and Poverty*, as industrialization and the novel came to dominate Europe and America. Martha Nussbaum's marvelous *The Fragility of Goodness* reminds us of the power of *tuchē*, of luck and chance. Giles Waller sees *tuchē* as "something that inserts itself between intention and consequence to bring about a *peripeteia*, a sudden reversal in fortune."²⁸ Philoctetes suffers due to sheer accident and for being a nuisance. Who likes a whiner, after all? His companions didn't want to

hear his inconvenient cries as they headed for war's glories, so they left him in exile, and so he is left to crawl and struggle around the island, foraging for food and passing out from his painful, stubborn wound that will neither heal nor kill him. Oedipus suffers a similar ignobility between *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, but at least he has Antigone to help him and Athens to receive him. Philoctetes' suffering redeems nothing, much like Rodrigues' in *Silence*.

In some ways this idea of circumstantial suffering is not new, as there are moments of circumstantiality in classic tragedies. Io is cursed by Zeus. Heracles dies somewhat accidentally through a poisoned shirt in *The Women of Trachis*. *Othello* is a tragedy of circumstance, largely turning on the evidence of a handkerchief. *Oedipus the King* plays with divine determination, but *Macbeth* is more mysterious regarding the place of prophecy. Oedipus didn't know the prophecy, so his fulfillment was out of ignorance, but Macbeth is told the oracle by the witches. The lingering question is, if Macbeth hadn't known, would he still have enacted it? Was it knowledge of the prophecy that created its own fulfillment, or was it solely the prophecy itself? Contingency has a greater, and more complex, role in *Macbeth*.

The argument that premodern literature is superior because gods are present, as Steiner and Balthasar argue, is wrongheaded. Classical gods are, after all, polytheistic, immoral, or amoral. It's odd to revere Zeus considering he is a god who commits sexual violence, and the church fathers were quick to criticize the immoralities in pagan literature. Modern literature deeply explores subjectivity, but so did Homer, Euripides, and Shakespeare. Literary criticism prioritizes that interiority in the struggles of the characters and the glimpses we have into their psyche and delusions. It's always about the interior, in the end, and literary critics explore the psychology of ancient tragic heroes as well as modern ones, how Oedipus' cleverness, persistence, and pride struggle with his conditions of malignant oracles and exile. It's the psychological aspects of Oedipus and Antigone that interest us in the end, their inner struggles in relation to their resoluteness and questions of absolute determination.

Madness and mental illness appear frequently in tragic literature. Saul had an evil spirit; Heracles had a time of madness (*The Heracleide*). Dramas such as *Medea*, *The Bacchae*, *Ajax*, and *Hippolytus* have a violent madness. Madness can also be a ruse, as when both Hamlet and King David pretended to be mentally ill as a gambit. Madness has a sharpness in fiction and the novel because the reader has a greater intimacy with the characters' minds and with the narrator. Prose can develop the depths of the human psyche and its ability to project and create illusions. Mark Twain joked about the power of mental anticipation that "My life has been a series of tragedies, none of which actually happened." Mental anguish is real though, as in the mammoth novel *Clarissa* where nothing directly tragic happens. *Jude the Obscure* develops Sue's mental instability and crushing guilt, forcing her to return to Phillotson in a terrible, punishing self-loathing. Tragedy can be a

crisis of action, but it can also be an internal collision of the self. The space and depth of prose enable it to develop the illusive power of the mind.

Why would a genre that can so powerfully develop a context be given second-class status? The novel lends itself to Williams' thinking well,²⁹ because the novel can explore with greater detail the historical contexts of actions, words, lives, and losses. The prose of the novel displays what Hardy calls "the grind of stern reality"³⁰ in far greater detail and awareness than a drama. A dramatic performance is limited to its stage design, blocking, speeches, and the attention of the audience, while a novel is a longer experience that is immersive in the circumstances. Prose can develop a circumstantial tragedy far beyond drama; the *tuchē* can be more than the offstage snakebite that incapacitates Philoctetes, but something multifactorial and repetitive. There are tragic cadences to history and lives, situations and human perceptions. For Eagleton, "As for tragedy being a question of crisis, it can surely be quite as much a condition as an event, which lends it to novelization remarkably well."³¹ Hardy's tragic novels feature loss, recovery, then further loss; the respites enable renewed catastrophes, what Benjamin Sankey calls Hardy's "rally-rout,"³² that are unlike Antigone's singular decisive act of burying her brother.

In *Christ and Apollo*, William Lynch sounds like MacKinnon in his opposition to Apollo's generalities, the Parmenidean unity that flees from the particular and the prosaic. In Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, the heath is often considered by critics to be another character of the story, as its presence is overt and domineering throughout the work. Jude's interiority, his motivation and move to kindness, drink, and escapism, is developed against the exteriority of poverty, bad luck, cultural changes, and social stigma. Erich Auerbach highlights this in a work such as Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, where the historical context is absolutely inseparable from the story itself. This repressive era of France in which the book is set is critical to the plot, since it is the boredom of the era that leads to the romantic risks taken by the characters. Similarly, *Moby-Dick* is riven with the context of the whaling industry, cetological facts and explanations; its text cannot be abstracted from the dense world of whaling ships and harpoons, the many details of life that make the book an extensive immersion in contingency and history. The novel is a complex self-knowing and interiority as it relates to large and complex forces, an extensive focus on the particularities of setting that is worked out in the perspectives of writer, reader, narrator, and numerous characters.

Balthasar likes tragedy for its "embrace [of] frail finitude"³³ – but can't modern literature do this just as well as other forms and eras of literature? Modern works may omit the certainties and assurances of premodern worldviews, but that doesn't mean it's hell in a handbasket for theological concerns (as some have argued). The novel is a way of coming to thought, to gain distance on the self through the vicarious experience of other persons and other selves.³⁴ Christian thought is rooted in particularity because of

the centrality of Jesus' birth, life, and death that is a narrative and a history, to the point that some theologians are accused of being Christomonists. Christ's incarnation as a first-century Palestinian Jew places an inextirpable emphasis on context on who he is and even what he can do. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James?" his hometown asks with unbelief, such that the context of hometown familiarity means even Jesus can do no deed of power (Mark 6:3–6). As the mature Barth sees it, it is this very particularity of Christ that reveals the humanity of God, God's gratuitous action in creation and redemption. To celebrate creation, incarnation, and redemption is to also laud frail finitude. If tragedy is a form of thinking, as Williams holds,³⁵ then the tragic novel keeps us especially close to lived reality, its circumstances and frailties, in ways more potent than drama and philosophy. To invite thinking about suffering that is wedded to context and ambiguity, without closure or certainty, is the proper way to approach suffering, especially from a Christian standpoint.

Grief

Drama and the stage make human living explicit, so that we might think well,³⁶ and modern tragedy is especially potent in its explorations of the many ways we are blind, deceived, and pressed by circumstance. An antidote to our blindness to circumstance and hypocrisy, as P.T. Forsyth saw, is someone like Ibsen.

For him, as for all the rest of the tragic poets, guilt is the centre of the tragedy. 'Guilt remains guilt,' he says. 'You cannot bully God into any such blessing as turns guilt to merit, or penalty to reward.... To save your soul from sunny or silly piety ... read Ibsen. Yea, to realize how it [evil] thereby imports the element of death even into the moral order of the universe read Ibsen. It inflicts death on whatever power you call God.... These pessimists are a gift of God to us. Their bitterness is a tonic to our time. They are the protest of a self-respecting conscience against an idyllic, juvenile, sanguine, and domestic tyranny of life. It is the great dramatists that are the great questioners, the great challengers, the great and serviceable accusers of current, easy, and fungous sainthood.... They lay bare not our errors but our shams.'³⁷

Ibsen's dramas powerfully explore and reveal our shams and self-respecting consciences. Note that Forsyth tells us to "read Ibsen." It's not just a performance that can save us from our silly piety, it's also the experience of reading. Hegel, Balthasar, and Rowan Williams prioritize performed dramas, but the novel makes our lives explicit as well. The novel can explore our shams on a deeper and more ambiguous level, because it develops deeper contexts and richer perspectives. Causality is more ambiguous in the novel, and narrators may be deceiving both themselves and us. For example, one

of the haunting questions in Endo's *Silence* is the purpose of Rodrigues' mission to Japan. As the narrator for most of the book, Rodrigues tells himself and us that he desires martyrdom, but can we trust his narration? It may just be the story he tells himself, after all. For him, a martyrdom is an act of heroism and fame. He prepares himself for suffering and death, but when he is arrested he feels "an inexpressible dissatisfaction – a kind of disillusion that he was not privileged to be a tragic hero like so many martyrs and like Christ himself."³⁸ Rodrigues also tells us that he went to Japan to save his former teacher Ferreira, who was a great Jesuit teacher and missionary until he renounced his faith. Rodrigues is curious about his fall from grace, but he has also dreams of saving and even besting him by enduring to the end. The Jesuits were a military-style religious order, and to endure suffering to the end for glory sounds like *The Iliad*.

When he is confronted with the terrible choice of renouncing his faith to save the tormented suffering of five peasants, what will Rodrigues do? He is a priest, which for him means his calling is to help people. Who is the true priest, the one who lengthens the suffering of peasants by refusing to apostatize, or the one who ends their suffering by renouncing Christ? Part of Rodrigues' suffering is to give up his expectation of a righteous martyrdom. He has spent a long time preparing and imagining Jesus' passion, because he assumed his suffering would imitate Christ's. "He had believed in his pride that he alone in this night was sharing in the suffering of that man [Jesus]."³⁹ But Rodrigues finds that his Gethsemane is different from Christ's temptation, for his pain is the suffering of others on his behalf, as the five peasants are tortured until he recants. Is it selfish to confess Christ is Lord, or is it an act of Christian compassion to deny it? Rodrigues' sacrifice is to apostatize, and as the last Catholic priest in Japan his stamping on the *fumie* (an image of Christ) will end Japanese Christianity. Now, like Ferreira, he is an apostate; instead of saving his mentor, he has become like him. His tragic downfall is partly due to his sense of spiritual superiority over others such as Ferreira, Kichijiro, and the impoverished peasants who are "ignorant beasts."⁴⁰ Such confidence leads him, like Oedipus, into an *anagnorisis* that he too is an apostate. We can be undone through moral exhaustion, as the reader comes to understand with and through Rodrigues' growing self-awareness. *Silence* raises many ambiguous questions and perspectives because, as a novel, it is a lengthier development of context, characters, and plot. It can pose issues of causality, identities, and narrators, because to read a tragic novel is to see the tragic losses with sympathy on a deep, personal, and extended level. There is not the distance between stage and spectator, but rather a more intimate involvement in making explicit the challenges of human living.

Tragedy is a full look at the worst, and the power of the tragic novel is that in its ambiguities, perspectives, and contexts we come to consider, on a deep and personal level, our own limitations and motivations. Rodrigues moves from blind self-justification to the realization of self-incrimination, just as Oedipus does, but the novel makes it a more deeply personal

experience for the reader. It's Rodrigues' story, and he has told it to us intimately, over many hours and through his words. Such an experience raises our own culpabilities, capabilities, and contingencies. Aristotle held that the emotions play a key role in our use of tragedy, and part of tragedy's effect is to bond us in sympathy with the sufferers, be they unlucky like Oedipus, filled with jealous madness like Medea, or victims like the Phoenician women. The Greek chorus was often in the role of knowing and grieving, and such grieving is a deep part of the Bible. The Psalms, Job, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Lamentations, Saul and Jonathan's deaths, Revelation, the gospels, and Jesus' passion have strong passages of mourning for people, situations, and places.

For Aristotle, tragedy raised feelings of pity and fear, but it's also an experience of grief. For the reader and the spectator, the irony is mournful because we perceive the *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* well before the characters do. There is grief not only for the characters' losses, limitations, and difficult choices, but also for the clashing perspectives and the inability to understand each other or the events that surround them. We feel pity for Oedipus' inability to know what we already know, to understand what was painfully obvious. With the chorus and characters we mourn our viewing of the spectacle and our inability to intervene. We grieve with Jeremiah at being doomed to proclaim a painful reality, while others ridicule, ignore, and fear. For Tiresias in *Oedipus the King*, "How terrible—to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees!" (359–60). Electra, Tiresias, Antigone, and Cassandra are people who suffer the blindness of others. Tiresias and Cassandra are physically blind but see the truth and the future, while those around them have sight and yet are blind to the truth.

Who can be blamed, in the end? History, other people, bad luck, pride, ignorance, and blindness are inscrutable factors, and given such complexity we grieve at the whole of the action. It is the grief we feel for Rodrigues, Ferreira, Kichijiro, and the peasants that involves us in the story, identifies us with the characters and action, and inflames our pity for those in such situations. The gospel of Mark quotes from the psalms of lamentation to evoke a tragic atmosphere, as the Greeks and Romans did in their own literature.⁴¹ Psalm 51 has moved Jews and Christians for millennia as David moves from knowing his transgressions to having a broken spirit. It's not just David or the anonymous Psalmist; it's us, as it is read, recited, and chanted in worship and at home. To sympathetically recognize guilt is to become involved, to move from spectator to participant. We are not to remain in some sort of tragicism, "a lustful abiding with our sadness," says Tillich,⁴² but seeing, acknowledging, and then moving forward. Tragedy is a revelation and *apocalypsis*, "a stripping away what conceals the truth" for Balthasar.⁴³ But what is revealed is the paradoxical relationship of contingency and responsibility in the suffering and catastrophe.

To move from guilt to grief can be a kind of liturgy, the work of the people that forms our living and working. Tragedy, like self-awareness,

grief, and liturgy, shapes our ability to sympathize and perceive, and it can even challenge us to *do*. The documentary *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North* traces questions of racial guilt, blindness, culpability, and reparations. What happens when an average white American family discovers their ancestors in Rhode Island were the largest slave-trading family in American history? “They were just the most prominent actors in the North’s vast complicity in slavery, buried in myths of Northern innocence... secrets hidden in plain sight.”⁴⁴ Bristol, like much of the coastal northern USA, had revised its participation in the slave trade by portraying itself as abolitionist and patriotic; Bristol claims to have the oldest Fourth of July parade in the country. It’s easier to consider the Southern plantations as the problem, and not the slave trade in Bristol by generations of the DeWolf family that was a cornerstone of Northern prosperity. A kinder story is to imagine the North as free from Southern racism, or to claim that white people today are not culpable for the past because they were not alive then. In reality the city’s participation in the slave trade included almost the entire economy and built its present prosperity, even though it was technically illegal at the time. A family, town, and region can choose to forget, can will its own blindness, telling itself and everyone else an untrue story. But tragedies remind us how we must see rightly, how we come to know as Oedipus did his true identity, and they remind us that the culpability of guilt may exceed capability. Tragedy plays a vital role in personal and societal self-understanding. It can reveal our sinful self-deceptions and untrue stories, as well as the grief that enables transformation.

Tragedies can remind us that the ghosts and the past are never really gone. Montgomery’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice remembers the victims of lynching by white supremacists, which is a history that many would rather forget. But memorials are only a beginning. Like liturgy, their remembering is not just about the past, but about the present and future. Atonement is difficult, because the past is beyond punishment; what is required is a costly transformation. *Traces of the Trade* is not just about a truthful past but also the present: what do we do about this? To ask this is to engage questions of white privilege and reparations, and in the documentary the DeWolf family members wrestle with these current questions as much as they do the past. For William Blake, pity might simply cover up moral culpability and complacency: “Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody Poor” (*The Human Abstract* 1–2). There is no accurate price for past and present misery, but restitution is required if we are to live with the past honestly and truthfully, with both culpability and capability. Through the performance and discussion of Greek tragedy, Theater of War Productions helps war veterans understand their experiences; similarly, the Tracing Center has engaged people, groups, and congregations about *Traces of the Trade* in the hopes of education, dialogue, and transformation. Tragedy means sadness, but it also means self-awareness, transformation, and action.

Notes

- 1 Euripides, *Bacchae and Other Plays: Iphigenia among the Taurians; Bacchae; Iphigenia at Aulis; Rhesus*, ed. James Morwood, Reissue ed., Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.
- 2 Jeff Jay, *The Tragic in Mark: A Literary-Historical Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 188.
- 3 Quoted in Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48.
- 4 Dorothea Krook, *Elements of Tragedy* (Yale University Press, 1970), 17. Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy Is Not Enough* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953), 52.
- 5 Ulrich Simon, *Pity and Terror: Christianity and Tragedy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 6.
- 6 Ben Quash, "Four Biblical Characters: In Search of a Tragedy," in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).
- 7 Simon, *Pity*, 75.
- 8 Martin Luther King Jr., "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr," https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230449/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/papers/vol2/540600-The_Theology_of_Reinhold_Niebuhr.htm.
- 9 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord vol 1: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 519.
- 10 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology vol. 3: Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 403.
- 11 Scott R Erwin, *The Theological Vision of Reinhold Niebuhr's The Irony of American History: "In the Battle and Above It"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 49.
- 12 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1938), 165.
- 13 Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 82–83.
- 14 Carol Symes, "The Tragedy of the Middle Ages," in *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the Fourth Century BCE to the Middle Ages*, ed. Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Revermann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 354.
- 15 Barish, *Antitheatrical*, 199.
- 16 George Sandys, *Christ's Passion. A Tragedy; with Annotations* (London: Jos. Blare, Bookseller, 1698).
- 17 Barish, *Antitheatrical*, 133.
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- 19 Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 166.
- 20 Jaspers, *Tragedy Is Not Enough*, 100.
- 21 Augustine's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount interpreted the *hypocrita* (Luke 6:5) as a professional actor playing a part, such as Agamemnon in a tragedy (*De sermones Domini in monte libros duos* II:2,5), sealing the fate of the word "hypocrite."
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- 29 Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 144.
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7 Dionysus and perception

Tragedy and blindness

The gospel of John begins with the irony of nonrecognition: “the world came into being through him [the Word]; yet the world did not know him. He came into what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (1:10–11). When Jesus weeps over Jerusalem in Luke, it is also over a failure to recognize, “if you, even, you had only recognized ... but now they are hidden from your eyes” (19:42). The failure is not knowing, as tragedies like *Oedipus the King* often remind us. *Antigone* also opens with questions of knowing things hidden: “do you know?” (3). Many tragedies revolve around questions of ignorance and blindness, as with Oedipus, Creon, and Lear. Boethius realizes he has forgotten the true nature of the world. To see is to know, *oida* in the Greek language and Platonic philosophy. It is also a root word for Oedipus’ name. Another root for Oedipus’ name is foot (*pous*), and Oedipus is lame because his feet were pierced when he was abandoned as a child. To be lame is an ambiguous status; it is to be unbalanced, different, and impeded, but it also points to an unbalanced strength and destiny.¹ The riddle of the Sphinx that Oedipus solved was about feet and the odd gait of being a tri-ped with his cane. Jean-Pierre Vernant observes that “the whole of the tragedy of Oedipus seems to be contained in the play to which the riddle of his name lends itself.”² In tragedy, *anagnorisis* is perceiving rightly, but at the wrong time. A perceptive knowledge comes, but through suffering. For Weil, “One of the principal truths of Christianity ... is that looking is what saves us. The bronze serpent was lifted up so that those who lay maimed in the depths of degradation should be saved by looking upon it.”³

Tragedy reminds us how the resistance to gracious love can be rooted in blindness. The rejection of grace is a persistent Biblical theme: the eating of the apple, Sarah’s laughter, the golden calf, the rejection of the prophets, the Prodigal Son going to the far country. Jesus’ death on the cross is its culmination. It is very reasonable to expect the Messiah to not die as a criminal, or to descend in some apocalyptic fashion (Mark 15:29–32). For the crimes of political and religious pretension, Jesus is mocked as a fraudulent king,

but the irony runs deep because he *is* a king. His kingship means he cannot descend from the cross, which is his throne. The “Let’s see” of the spectators at the cross is a confirmation of either blindness or understanding.⁴ For Jesus’ opponents, his execution as a criminal confirms his falsity, but for the gospel writers, it proves his authenticity, because his mocking means he is the Messiah. There are ironies upon ironies, and at times it’s hard to know where the irony stops and where it starts, because irony itself is a matter of perspective. Misperception is the true tragedy, especially when it results in the destruction of the good. In Jesus’ crucifixion, the Messiah dies as an unrecognized criminal, but how can this be? Evil, sin, rejection, and blindness remain great mysteries.

Tragedy and hiddenness

We fail to see and understand because, in part, good and evil can be deceptive. Our natural blindness is rooted, in part, in the illusive nature of the world. For Weil, “imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating.”⁵ True beauty is wonderful and true evil is boring, but they can be hidden with their opposite. The world has a mirage quality to it; it can be different than it appears. Love can be hidden and unperceived, even in its opposite. There is a primal deception, because ignorance is rooted in misperception (*avidyā*) and the illusive magic show of reality that is *māyā*. When Plato describes the cave analogy in *The Republic*, Socrates begins with “let us make an image.” But word-pictures and analogies can be misunderstood, since an image/idol (*eidolon*) can be an *eidos* (form) or an idea. Because we misperceive, it requires Socrates’ explanation and interpretation. But how do you know an image, or its explanation and interpretation, is the correct one? The challenge of perception is to see rightly, to have *insight* despite our predilection for appearances over reality.

Dionysus was an ancient and foreign god who reveled in the question of perception. Even for the Greeks he was a strange figure: immortal yet ever youthful, male yet with feminine qualities, foreign yet divine. His coterie, the female maenads, were thought to be a cult from the barbarians, and he arrives a stranger to Thebes in Euripides’ *Bacchae*. The god of drama and the face behind both comedy and tragedy, his power led to serenity, ecstasy, or violence. He was a figure of the hills, where he tended to reside, but also of the city where the tragedies were performed in his honor. He was feral in his origins and *bacchanalia*, but civilized as the patron of civilized drama. Like tragedy itself, Dionysus was destabilizing and confounding; his presence meant roles were reversed, that the sane went insane and the mad became sensible. *Bacchae* is self-consciously about performance and drama, as characters are disguised from one another, playing different roles within the same play. Shakespeare, and others, have also enjoyed such

meta-dramaturgy. Drama is an illusion, a grand pretense maintained by the actors, setting, and audience, but somehow this unreal thing of costuming, speeches, stagecraft, plot, and mummerly is absolutely real. Books are also an illusive object, marks on a page that, like alchemy, can create worlds. Narratives are illusive in their power to feel real in their telling, and afterward when the persons and events linger in the mind. Confusion reigns as to what is true and false when Dionysus appears, but doubting him can mean destruction.

Epiphanies are inherently problematic, after all. Courtney Friesen observes how for Dionysus in *Bacchae*, "the god's self-revelation entails his own disguise."⁶ Dionysus is both hidden and self-disclosed, the son of Zeus transformed, in his opening lines in *Bacchae*, and he will reveal himself in the end. For Nietzsche, all tragic heroes are masks of Dionysus the original hero.⁷ For Vernant, "The invention of theater, a literary genre that presented fiction on stage as if it were real, could only make its impact within the framework of the cult of Dionysus, the god of illusions, confusion, and the constant muddling of reality and appearances, truth and fiction."⁸ Dionysus is the patron of drama because of his power over illusion and identity. His representation is a mask; in *Bacchae* he wears a mask as part of the play, so that the actor plays the god who plays a human stranger, who proceeds to disguise Pentheus. *Bacchae* revels in its disguises, reminding us of the pervasive problem of hiddenness.

Jesus' life and death encourage his hiddenness and the resulting blindness. Mark's gospel is famous for its messianic secret, where Jesus instructs people and demons not to tell anyone who he is. In the gospel of John, Jesus is both concealing and revealing, going to the Festival of Tabernacles, not publicly, but in secret (John 7:10). Worryingly, the parables intentionally hide the truth, Jesus says as he quotes Isaiah, that others "may indeed look, but not perceive" (Mark 4:12). There is confusion over Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and upbringing in Nazareth, given the Messianic prophecies; as Nathaniel asks, can anything good come out of Nazareth? (John 1:46). "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" (John 9:16). For Balthasar, "it is as if God could no longer do what he wants, because his good actions elicit sin,"⁹ leaving C.S. Lewis to comment that God "is the tragic redeemer."¹⁰ Jesus' identity is confused with sin, sinners, deception (Mt 27:62), abjection, performance, and criminality. He is the Son of God (Mark 1:1) who is ironically unrecognized until, paradoxically and frighteningly, his crucifixion: "Truly this man was God's son!" (15:39). To think in terms of human power makes no sense in relation to powerlessness and rejection. For Balthasar, Christ is "given the seemingly contradictory task of being manifest and hidden at the same time... the manifestation of God's incomprehensibility ..."¹¹

Christ was often compared to Dionysus. The early Christian art in Rome's Callistus catacombs used Dionysian imagery,¹² and well into the Christian era the poet Nonnus composed both a tale of Dionysus (the *Dionysiaca*)

and a paraphrase of the gospel of John (*Metabole*). Lines from *Bacchae* were simply copied over in the Middle Ages' tragic setting of the crucifixion, the *Christos Paschon*, which is the only proper, extant tragedy from the entire Middle Ages. Christ's comparison to Dionysus is an odd one, given the brutal and random violence of *Bacchae*; why not a more likable deity, like Apollo the god of light and truth, or Prometheus the suffering hero? There is no conclusive evidence, but there are suggestive possibilities. Both Christ and Dionysus are narratives of divine incarnation and disguise, and neither god can be defeated. For Friesen, the *Christos Paschon* shows how "the presence of a divine person in human form continues to stretch the theological imagination, and the theater continues to provide a conceptual metaphor with which to express it."¹³ Clement of Alexandria writes in his *Miscellanies*, "The savior himself clearly initiates us according to the tragedy," and then proceeds to quote the *Bacchae* extensively to describe Christian teaching, and elsewhere he uses the *Bacchae* to describe Christian worship.¹⁴

Clement of Alexandria identifies Jesus with Oedipus disguised as a stranger.¹⁵ Antigone is "always a stranger" in Eagles' translation (850),¹⁶ and so is Oedipus who moves from Thebes to Corinth and back, Moses the Jew who was raised an Egyptian, and Jesus the son of God born in Bethlehem and raised by Joseph and Mary in Nazareth. After his downfall, Oedipus is disguised again, this time as a suppliant at Colonus. It's a powerful insight to realize that the stranger is actually someone familiar but in disguise, and the Bible has poignant recognition scenes such as Jacob returning to his blind father Isaac, Joseph's brothers recognizing a grown Joseph in Egypt, Jephthah seeing his daughter, and Mary seeing Jesus in the garden. In Sophocles' *Electra*, Electra waits for Orestes as a worker in her father's house, "clothed in humiliating rags / I must wait" (191–92), as does the Prodigal Son in Luke. For Weil, such waiting and recognition represents God's disguised search for us; "He comes to us hidden, and salvation consists in recognizing Him."¹⁷ Through tragedy a sympathy is created with others, the stranger and the beggar, because "pain marks our faces, and makes us look like family."¹⁸ In the *Sibylline Oracles*, "For not in glory but as a mortal shall he come into the world, pitiable, dishonored, unsightly, to give hope to the pitiable" (8.317–20).¹⁹ For Weil, "We are like the impenitent thief if we seek consolation in contempt and hatred for our fellows in misfortune."²⁰ The humane response to affliction is compassion, even if the affliction was due to blindness and stupidity, the self-caused *hamartia* in tragedy.

The ending of Mark's gospel encourages compassion and even a community that sympathizes with the disciples despite their "clumsy recognitions," unreliability, and terrified running away at the empty tomb.²¹ The disciples, who cannot recognize God's power present in Jesus' powerlessness, become for us a self-recognition. As we identify with the disciples, we are made aware how our own stories are partial, blind, and untrue.

There are limits to our human understanding, and we are reminded of our own poor judgments and inhospitable structures. Mark uses the psalms of lamentation to bond us with those who understand that discipleship is costly, that there is a sympathetic forgiveness for failure, and to feel the awe at a victory that also means loss.²² Living with suffering and hope, as Mark's shorter ending does (16:8), means living with both a fearful running away and the promise of restoration.

The disguises of the world remain a riddle that even Oedipus could not solve. Goodness and evil can be hidden, just as reality can be stranger than fiction and strangers can be loved ones. Part of the riddle's depth is not just reality's disguises but its reversals, the *peripeteia* of tragedy that is a strange mixture of defeat and victory. The great Christian *peripeteia* is that "a marvelous and mighty paradox has thus occurred, for the death which they thought to inflict on Him as dishonor and disgrace has become the glorious monument to death's defeat," writes Athanasius of Alexandria in *On the Incarnation*. For Balthasar the division finds unity through identity, secrets, and solidarity, as he describes Christ dying between the two thieves.

The Cross is judgment and therefore division: one thief is on the left, and another is on the right. But it is wholly dialectical: Jesus openly makes a promise to the thief on his right and says nothing to the thief on his left. But in order that the thief on the right may win the promise, Jesus unites himself in secret with the thief on the left in the solidarity of being rejected. The Christian is exposed to this situation of being torn; and what other name than tragic could one find for this, if one looks back to the Greek stage?²³

Desire and sight

The knowledge of our blindness sometimes comes through suffering, the *páthei máthos* in *Agamemnon* (177) that is "the effect on us of what we do not know," as Rowan Williams puts it.²⁴ But not all knowledge comes through suffering, and not everyone suffers in an illuminating way. Except for the centurion in Mark, it is not clear that Jesus' opponents learn anything at all from his death. In Plato's cave, there is no illuminating suffering, and it's not clear how anyone comes to see at all. If you have always lived in a cave, how would you know you are in one? "Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly," says Jesus in John 7:24. Jesus is the light of the world, but how can the blind possibly know that? In John's gospel and letters there are children of light and children of darkness, but spiritual blindness means not knowing which one you are. The Pharisees ask a reasonable question when they say to Jesus, "are we blind too?" (John 9:40). The problem with being spiritually blind is you don't know you are blind.

The question is Plato's: if one doesn't already know something, how can it be learned? In *The Republic*, he illustrates the way knowledge can

illuminate with his allegory of the cave. Caves have a natural darkness, in contrast to mountains that are illuminated by a natural closeness to the heavens. Mountains have an immediate, perceptive scale, but caves are disorienting. Mountains mean enlightenment, while caves are about ignorance. To see and perceive in a cave requires an unnatural light that, as Plato describes, is a painful and disturbing transition. Some forms of knowing are unnatural yet transformative. Socrates' fate is determined in part by the words of the Oracle at Delphi, and Oedipus is transformed by both his former ignorance and later knowing. For Macbeth, the knowledge of the witches' prophecy changes everything. For Plato and parts of the Christian tradition this meant an epistemological ascent, to emerge from the cave for Plato, or to move up a ladder for Bonaventure. In the gospels Jesus is fond of healing the blind, and these healings often occur after his teachings because the goal is seeing rightly. Physical blindness reflects a spiritual blindness, just as Jesus is consistently misperceived in the gospels. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and temple leaders see him as a threat, and the crowds see him as a strong Davidic king and miracle worker. Most painfully, his own disciples chronically misunderstand Jesus, seeing him as a powerful king and dispenser of political favors. Blindness and hiddenness are deep and structural tragedies to human existence.

Tragedy can show us how blindness is known through suffering. It can also show us our blindness and reality's hiddenness known through love. In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates asks where is Phaedrus? Phaedrus responds, "He is here, quite close beside you, whenever you want him."²⁵ Longing to see enables visibility, even in darkness and blindness; it is "the stream of beauty entering his eyes" (*Phaedrus* 215 A-E).²⁶ It is desire that enables perception despite the reality of blindness. It is the longing for what is not perceptibly there. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus oddly asks the blind man Bartimaeus (Mark 10:51). The question comes at the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Peter has confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus has predicted his own death and begun to teach about being powerless like children, humble and serving. The response from James and John is incomprehension, as they ask for glory in the coming age, and to which the other disciples respond in jealousy. The section ends with Bartimaeus shouting repeatedly for Jesus' attention to make an obvious request: "My teacher, let me see again," and his faith means that "immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way" (10:52). It is the last healing story in Mark, and a marked improvement over the prior blind man at Bethsaida in 8:22, for whom it takes Jesus repeated attempts to heal. Both blind men desired sight, but Bartimaeus has the advantage of being a conclusion to this section in Mark. Structurally, it indicates how following and loving Jesus, despite our incomprehension, enables our sight.

For Diogenes Allen, Christ's resurrection is not how we begin to see who Jesus is. To start with the resurrection is to follow Jesus because of

his power, or because we believe there is some historical proof for the resurrection. We would miss Jesus' goodness, his identity hidden in the midst of powerlessness, sin, and loss. In this way, the resurrection can, oddly enough, be a stumbling block to authentic Christian faith. "To look to Jesus because there is proof that he rose from the dead is not to *follow* him ... there is no escape from the need for faith," Allen says.²⁷ To attempt to escape life's limitations and contingencies is false, even for (and especially for) religion, because we cannot know the answer before the final resolution, which is apocalyptically not yet. Kierkegaard described faith as a journey of risk, without guarantees, and such a vision of the Christian faith sounds a lot like tragedy. Tragedies are risky, and some have happy endings and some don't; regardless, we don't start with the ending but begin at the beginning, and through the narrative we come to love and sympathize with the characters and the action as a whole, as well as mourn their losses.

The resurrection is not to be understood as a magical proof-text that wards against tragic suffering. Christ's resurrection itself remains irresolute and indeterminable. For MacKinnon, this was the great contribution of tragedy to Christian theology, and why he neither looked away from tragedy nor omitted the resurrection. He called the resurrection his "*prius*," but never in some optimistic way divorced from the reality of tragedy.²⁸ Describing MacKinnon, Paul Janz summarizes that there remain "aspects of human experience and episodes of human history, for which resolution cannot and may not properly be sought,"²⁹ and the resurrection cannot be approached in a way that is unambiguous, finalizing, or triumphant. For Allen and Weil, the resurrection can be truly known only through a grieving, abiding love by those who already loved Jesus as a person. One comes to love him through his life and death – in his healings, teachings, compassion for the lowly, and most of all in his trusting love as he died under the evil power of the kingdom of might.

The disciples, Allen notes, mourned his death without an expectation of his resurrection – they never understood, after all – but in the midst of their blindness and waiting, their love meant the discovery of the empty tomb, and Jesus showing himself to them. The poignancy is clear when Mary Magdalene weeps outside the tomb with no expectation of resurrection; "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13), and then Jesus appears, first as a stranger and then as himself. To recognize him as a stranger on the road to Emmaus is to recognize what is already there. Blindness is healed through recognition, which is seeing the goodness that is present but hidden. The journey of narrative, tragedy, and the gospels, is, like, our lives, steps along the way, and such steps of love lead to sight. It is an alchemic wonder for Weil that patient waiting transforms separation into presence, distances into bridges, gravity into grace. Love and desire can enable sight, which is why Balthasar begins his systematic theology with perceiving the form of beauty, truth,

and goodness in the glory of the Lord. Weil used a parable to communicate love's insight:

An Eskimo story explains the origin of light as follows: 'In the eternal darkness, the crow, unable to find any food, longed for light, and the earth was illumined.' If there is a real desire, if the thing desired is really light, the desire for light produces it.³⁰

Choosing blindness

The gospel of Mark traces the growing unbelief in and rejection of Jesus' ministry and message, which impacts Jesus' emotional state and ability to work wonders.³¹ He sighs deeply in his spirit when the Pharisees come to test him by asking for a sign (8:11) and is indignant when the disciples fail to heed his teaching about little children (10:14). His final miracle is cursing the fig tree, after which he cleanses the temple (11:14). The unbelief of the crowds can surprisingly limit Jesus' power to heal, but his amazement is not at his own lack of power but in their resistance and rejection (6:5–6). His cursing of the fig tree is a judgment on those who are chosen but respond with a knowing blindness; under the mask of ignorance, they serve privilege and power. Creon ignores what doesn't serve the power of his authority, scornfully saying "no woman is going to lord it over me" (593).³² Oedipus disbelieves that he is Laius' murderer by accusing Creon, who "schemes against me" (771).³³ The blindness is not just for kings and politicians, but also for priests and religious leaders. The temple leaders are offended that Jesus forgives sin and heals on the Sabbath, because God's authority and power are their domain. In *Jude the Obscure*, cruelty is rampant in the many failures at kindness, and religion's letter of the law is part of the suffering for Jude and Sue, from their impoverished wandering to her mental breakdown. The passive participle of "Do you still not see or understand?" connotes a sense of fatedness in Mark 8:17–18 and echoes the earlier blindness of Jer 5:21 and Isa 6:9 (LXX).³⁴

The willed blindness can be on a national scale. For Martin Luther King Jr. slavery was a tragedy not just in itself but in its effects. It meant a resulting slave mentality that was often invisible to its victims, and it created the national tragedy of African-American citizens having "no stake in their own society."³⁵ The willed blindness of seemingly good people is surprising and painful. King called it a "tragic blindness" that people can be so "misguided" and "misinformed," that "Christ's words from the cross are written in sharp-edged terms across some of the most inexpressible tragedies of history: 'They know not what they do.'"³⁶ It was such a vital point that King restated and reworded the following sentences many times:

... History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the

appalling silence of the good people. Our generation will have to repent not only for the acts and words of the children of darkness but also for the fears and apathy of the children of light.³⁷

For Niebuhr, the story of King Solomon was illustrative of a self-righteous pride and chosen blindness. King Solomon famously built the temple, but that was only possible because his father David had previously shed blood. Similarly, American prosperity is built on its past sins. At least Solomon knew his father's sins; America, however, is "a Solomonic civilization that denies or forgets it ever had a David preceding a Solomon."³⁸ Places and peoples choose blindness when they choose to forget the past. The documentary film *Traces of the Trade* explores Bristol, Rhode Island, and the larger Northern USA, and how their enormous involvement with the slave trade was conveniently forgotten.³⁹ Tragedy reminds us of the things we think we have forgotten, but what of the things we have willed to forget? Tragic blindness can be forgiven, as when Jesus prays for the forgiveness of his enemies because they are blind and do not understand; "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). But what about the blindness that is chosen and willful, that resists knowing at all through forgetting? After Jesus heals a blind man, the response by his neighbors is that they claim to not recognize him, while others simply disbelieve he had ever been blind at all (John 9:8, 18). The rejection of miracles and goodness is a chosen blindness, and the most disturbing of all. This is why Jesus curses the fig tree and cleanses the temple; religion is supposed to see, but it can just as easily choose a corrupt blindness.

What will God do with the evil of chosen blindness and final human rejection? In the Bible, the final resolution of human rejection is left unclear, with only the inconsistent images of a lake of fire, an outer darkness, and an apocalyptic battle. Whatever the final act is, it cannot be a hell that is a place of eternal, conscious suffering and punishment. Suffering is dependent on contingency; the idea of an eternal torment is therefore impossible and nothing more than Apollonian fancy. There are no final contingencies. Infinite suffering would be an eternalizing of tragedy in a way that tragedy itself does not do. An attention to particularity and suffering questions any notion of eternal suffering. What resurrection and its rejection will finally mean in the end is unknown. Perhaps the apocalypse will be a fire that consumes,⁴⁰ such that both contingency and suffering are ended, or perhaps all will be saved. But the idea that suffering and alienation are somehow eternal is not coherent with either tragedy or Christian theology.

Tragedy's end

Through a sympathetic entering into and abiding with tragedy, we are, in the oddest of ways, able to see something beyond it. For Terry Eagleton, it is "from just such a tension between taking the full measure of despair,

and refusing to acknowledge it as quite the last word, that the most fruitful tragic art is born.”⁴¹ At the death of a friend, Horace invokes Melpomene, the Greek muse of tragedy: “Teach me a song of mourning, Melpomene, for our Father has given you a clear-toned voice and the lyre...” (*Odes* 1.24.3–4). Tragedy names, expresses, and therefore circumscribes, because pain does end. There is a *deus ex machina*, a call to leave the theater; the “mass” has ended, in the original use of the word *missa*. In *The Tragic Imagination*, Rowan Williams underlines how tragedy’s speaking of suffering suggests its borders and final transcendence. For Rowan Williams, to express suffering is inherently meliorating. The acknowledgement that it *can* be expressed implies language, meaning, and limitation. To speak tragedy is to mysteriously be between two worlds, suffering and its end. For Tillich, “our despair itself, our inability to escape ourselves in life and in death, witnesses to our infinity.”⁴² Words and liturgy in their circumstantiality limit suffering, as photos and paintings have borders that establish a boundary to the pain. “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens ... a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (*Eccles* 3:1–4). Tragic narratives end, as all narratives do. For the ancient Greeks, the *deus ex machina* was a signal to the ancient audiences that the performance had ended and it was time to exit the theater. Endings enable changes and beginnings, and tragedies and suffering do end, because they are rooted in contingency and circumstance, time and space, which by definition are passing away.

Pity is always shared and communal. Balthasar quotes a poem by Claudel that the poor man “has no friend to rely on except one poorer than himself.”⁴³ In tragic literature there is an implied other because words intimate an audience. Language is always shared, always implying another, and tragedy helps us to have pity as Colonus did for Oedipus, Neoptolemus for Philoctetes, Achilles for Patroclus, and the mourning women and disciples for the dead Jesus. Tragedy points us to respond with charity to all the countless ways that people suffer. Jeremiah’s cry in 20:14–15 is a soliloquy not directly addressed to anyone, but the fact that it is expressed in language means there is a witness, if only by implication. Language is always dialectical because words, their meanings and significances, are communal, but tragedy goes further in witnessing a way past the grief. Martha Nussbaum observes that tragedy’s form and style effect a love for the tragic hero in the end,⁴⁴ and to witness is to share in respect, love, and concern for the other. For Wendell Berry, Mark Twain is a great writer who failed to realize the deeper role of community in bearing suffering, “that no community can survive that cannot survive the worst.”⁴⁵

The gospel of Mark’s shorter ending is the disciples’ fear. But the fact that the gospel was written presumes a story that has not ended. Someone thought it worthy to record the events, both the hope and the despair, and its recording is its own witness to the hope that someone understood, and someone

will hear. Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred writes in hope that someone is there to read her accounts of the totalitarian regime of Gilead.

But I keep going on with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.⁴⁶

Notes

- 1 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 209.
- 2 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 124.
- 3 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 192–93.
- 4 Jeff Jay, *The Tragic in Mark: A Literary-Historical Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 255.
- 5 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 53, 70.
- 6 Courtney Friesen, *Reading Dionysus: Euripides' Bacchae and the Cultural Contestations of Greeks, Jews, Romans, and Christians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 43.
- 7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51 (*Birth of Tragedy* §10).
- 8 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 205.
- 9 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord vol 1: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 519.
- 10 C.S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (London: Collins, 1983), 93.
- 11 Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 1, 517–18.
- 12 Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 187.
- 13 Friesen, *Reading Dionysus*, 257.
- 14 *Stromateis* 4.25.162.3–4, *Protrepticus* 12.118–23.
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- 16 Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1984).
- 17 Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), 5–6.
- 18 Stephen King, *The Green Mile: The Complete Serial Novel* (New York City: Pocket Books, 2017), 159.
- 19 Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 91.
- 20 Weil, *Waiting*, 453 (“The Love of God and Affliction”).
- 21 Jay, *Tragic in Mark*, 257–68.
- 22 Jay, *Tragic in Mark*, 204.
- 23 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology vol. 3: Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 406.

- 24 Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 97.
- 25 Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 211.
- 26 Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 215.
- 27 Diogenes Allen, *Temptation* (N.p.: Caroline Press, 1987), 149, 150. Allen is heavily indebted to Simone Weil here.
- 28 Christopher Devanny, "Truth, Tragedy and Compassion: Some Reflections on the Theology of Donald Mackinnon," *New Blackfriars* 78.911 (1997), 35.
- 29 Paul D. Janz, *God, The Mind's Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 174.
- 30 Weil, *Waiting*, 107.
- 31 Mary Ann Tolbert, "Mark," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1823.
- 32 Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 86.
- 33 Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 200.
- 34 Jay, *Tragic in Mark*, 189.
- 35 Martin Luther King Jr, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 137, 613, 360.
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- 37 King Jr, *Testament of Hope*, 475.
- 38 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1938), 58. Scott R Erwin, *The Theological Vision of Reinhold Niebuhr's The Irony of American History: "In the Battle and Above It"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51.
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- 42 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 23.
- 43 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama vol 5: The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 312.
- 44 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Revised ed. (Oxford University Press, 1992), 17. Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 131.
- 45 Wendell Berry, *What are people for? Essays* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), 77.
- 46 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 268.

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