

The Ghost in *Hamlet*: Immanent Self in Tragedy

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I once had pretensions to writing tragedy instead of writing about it, and I carried those pretensions so far as to select, for possible poeticizing, The Most Tragic Story I'd Ever Heard. As my taste prefers Betrayed Innocence to Bloody Experience, I settled on a perfectly ghastly tale my schoolteacher mother brought home from her ghetto-bound, Welfare-ridden, delinquent-filled third grade class in remedial reading. One of her students was a particularly ragged, unfed, unwashed and ignored boy whose mother was perpetually with child and whose father was perpetually in jail. The boy appeared at school one morning with a fresh and only slightly-frayed shirt; his classmates, ill-at-ease with such airs taken on by such a person, wrestled him to the floor during lavatory break and took turns urinating on him. Complacently enough, and cleaned up as well as he might be, he returned to class and sat through the afternoon. Only when the bell had rung and the rest of the class had left school and the teacher was waiting to turn out the lights and lock the door and go home did he begin to cry, explaining that he was that afternoon to have been allowed to see his incarcerated dad, whom he had not seen in months and whom he would not see now at all, in order to spare him the shame of seeing his son befouled.

I never wrote the story; two pages into it, I'd find myself enraged or in tears, I'd swear to find the bullies and thrash them, to bail out the father, to adopt the child and teach him Russian novels, to bomb City Hall, to castrate the rich and privileged (what did they have to do with it?), to reorganize the world, to pray for the millennium. To fictionalize such a horror seemed too pallid a response. Moreover, when I thought of the tragic fictions that had been held up to me as models of sobering experience, I realized that my response to

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them was equally bloodless. *The Glass Menagerie* could bring tears to my eyes but failed to bring much grief to my life: give me Hamlet for a friend and I'd turn Horatio; give me Hamlet as a character, maddened, betrayed, threatened, orphaned, poisoned, dead, and I could applaud. For all the grandeur of *Oedipus Rex*, for all the fury and sorrow in *King Lear*, for all the passions inspired by *Hedda Gabler*, no literary work I knew compared, for tragedy, to the spectacle of a seven-year-old Hispanic boy dredging up, out of the inexplicable adoration of a parent who preferred knifing his neighbors to caring for his children, a shred of instinctive honor and doomed wisdom. Willy Loman had hope and ease and good fortune in comparison; in comparison, *The Lower Depths* was false and prissy; *Waiting for Godot*, an academic exercise; Lorca's hot-blooded Spaniards, parodies; Albee's and Pinter's and Brecht's and Pirandello's experiments, fopperies. Literary tragedies, I decided, were a fraud and a disgrace; literary tragedy was in the repulsive business of making that which is intolerable in life edifying in a book or on a stage; literary tragedy, I decided, was a self-congratulatory exchange between a smug writer and a callous audience.

Here my indignation always faded: what if the congratulations offered to the self in tragedy were to be applauded rather than abhorred? How, in tragedy, is that self celebrated? Aloof and artificial as tragedy is, the genre is ceremonial, and what if the rite that it performs is exorcism--exorcism of a most peculiar kind, exorcism that's meant to liberate the demon of self rather than protect its host personality? It seems to me now that tragedies are haunted works, that in every one worthy of its kind there is a spirit straining for possession of a name, a face, a history, a vehicle through which it may participate in the ordinary affairs of the ordinary world. Lukacs says that the deepest metaphysical longing is the definition, through limitation, of the self,¹ but I would argue that tragedy, if it is in fact a metaphysical allegory, is a lesson in defeating, not achieving, that longing. Scheler says, "We see the tragic only when in one glance we embrace both the causality of things and the exigencies of their immanent values."² Bradley says, "Everywhere, in this tragic world, man's thought, translated into act, is transformed into the opposite of itself. His act, the movement of a few ounces of matter in a moment of time, becomes a monstrous flood which spreads over a kingdom. And whatsoever he dreams of doing, he achieves that which he least dreamed of, his own destruction."³ In such statements about the tragic, causality, definition and action are implicitly opposed to the self, that which is dreamed or wished or immanent. That shadowed self is the allegorical ghost I sense, the spirit which, if I am right, learns through the dispossessing process of literary tragedy that

manifestation in time and space--being evident--is an illegitimate endeavor for a creature who is by nature and by necessity consigned to immanence.

This ghost is neither a demon nor a foreigner to those of us who go to watch a play. Most real folk fear action instinctively, knowing it, at some level, for the confining thing it is. Most real people carry themselves around in experiential hampers, judging, weighing, considering, selecting the perfect spot for lunch. What the tragic hero learns is that there is no fit location; all actions are the same--inadequate and invariable--and the common niggardliness of energy and of self that Real Life seduces us to is the only real loss of self. The very idea of right action puts enormous value on any action at all; feeling ourselves inhabited by our selves, we would like to see that spirit incarnated in equally expansive and splendid actions: we'd like to see what's immanent made evident. This cheerful possibility sustains us; it speaks up in those innocent moments when people decide to change their lives by working at a different job, by refusing to beat or deciding to divorce their mates, by planting a garden or buying a dog or taking up skiing or sewing or singing in the choir. To congeal the actual out of the possible is, however, to be as much imprisoned as revealed; every investiture of spirit is partial because action makes more things impossible than it makes historical. Any act is a subtraction from what might be as well as an addition to what is: time and perception and personality are as necessarily sequential as a narrative, and just as irrevocable. How easily a man becomes, by virtue of having been, a creature that he hates or fears or prefers to disown is a measure of the treachery of the causal world. The man who finds that his past distance from his boss, his wife, his children, or his dog precludes present tenderness or respect has a sincere grievance against the narrowness of action that has not permitted the expression of a dual or multiple impulse. Such experience urges him to take a stranglehold on the vagaries of his own life.

Tragedy is meant to loosen that grip. It presents to us a better ghost than ours, one which manages to abjure its rights to a body, and gives us the courage to do the same. It seems to me that every tragic figure is double, and it seems to me that in every tragedy there is a point where the halves of a figure separate and, in a long pause, recognize and observe one another. One semi-self is named by a verb; it is a murderer, an avenger, a lover, a *persona* made manifest by what he or she has done, in strict accordance with Aristotle's formula: actions are gestures that create a hero for an audience. But for the tragic figure, action is reflection of essence, not creation of being; it has a meaning derived from and expressive of consciousness. This objectification is as simplifying in drama as it is in ordinary

experience, and it is the link between the parallel processes of living and perceiving and speaking. Actions are the language of a play; just as words in a poem represent what they are not, so actions represent but are not equivalent to character: they constitute what we as an audience know, they signify experience, but they cannot be or recreate experience. The tragic figure is trapped in the poem he acts out; a poem means to him and signifies to his observers; the tragic writer's job is to bring this figure to the point where the signification of action--which is history--fails to express the character of the figure.

It is in the awareness of that failure that the person, the character, confronts the *persona*. Objectified self and immanent self converse with one another, find themselves second-person pronouns to one another: their dialogue is the tragic climax. I suspect it is always some version of the climax of Roethke's "The Lost Son":

Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone.
Through the clear air, the silence.

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within a light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.

The voice that counsels waiting is the voice of the self-in-action, and it speaks a call to remember; it lives in a world of weeds and bones and landscapes and things, and it is itself a thing. Tragedy shapes such cardboard cutouts. Tragic figures begin as innocents assured in the assumption that what's undertaken will be a fulfillment, that the expense of spirit will be a manifestation of spirit, and in this faith, they act. What conspires against them is not a god or a king or a cosmic force that seeks to right itself but the simple fact that action constrains rather than frees. They are trapped in a history that is a sort of skin: it gives form to and shapes, but at the same time, hides the substance of the self.

To that hidden substance belongs the counter-voice in Roethke's poem and in tragedy; it is the voice of flux, stillness and light, disembodied, disparate, infinite. It is the voice of the immanent self, which shrinks from its objective illumination, which regards the tragic doer and trembles, because it has seen itself belied. It would prefer the purity of a ghost; it would rather do nothing and stay alive, stay larger and more mysterious and more complete than a cipher in a plot; it denies the impulse to be reduced to narrative; it is appalled by the too-rash commerce with events that brings ruin in the form of meddling actions. This counter-voice belongs to the ghost that tragedy exorcises.

But this dialogue is not the end of any tragedy; it isn't just the conversation that's defining, but the answer to it. Comedy contains exactly the same voices, but in comic action, the characters can be persuaded to wait for the active self to prove sufficient to the demands of immanent vice or virtue: Helena's courtship of Bertram, Viola's entanglements with Orsino and Olivia, Prospero's machinations to regain his dukedom are examples of blessed history. In comedy, the knowledge of the gap between substance and surface is diffused by accident, disguise and trickery; what's spoken can be reversed or erased, the dead are resurrected, the heart proves ironclad. Comedy delights in spinning out personages, in taking up and putting away masks without abrasion of the complexion beneath them; the agreeable impression that one is never known by his or her lapses or errors results. Self is mutable but never foreign.

The tragic figure, on the other hand, examines his or her history and discovers that what he or she is waiting for is a stranger. The active self doesn't signify the immanent being. What is done in tragedy cannot be undone, not because Fate has so determined but because self has been so amputated from consciousness that the effort to be manifest is illuminated as pointless. Even Hamlet--or perhaps Hamlet most of all--could reject his roles, refuse to play the play, proceed directly and trust that the call to action sounded by his father's ghost, once heeded, will substantiate and complete a perfect picture of his own ghost. But what Hamlet knows, and what tragedy consists of, is that such manifestation will never be satisfactory. Should Hamlet be another thing by doing other than he's sworn to do? That's not the question that the play is eager to answer: "Why bother?" is. Actions, in a tragic context, are equally right and equally wrong; accuracy is impossible and ethics are irrelevant. The immanent self refuses to wait because the tragic experience amounts to exhaustion and to contempt for the enterprise of doing. The tragic figure accepts his history as arbitrary but his historicity as damning. Recognizing that he is neither invested satisfactorily nor manifested

properly he yields to the variety of circumstance; his fate, his death, partial or complete, is, in his ghost's perception, inevitable and triumphal.

What this suggests to me is that tragic heroes are suicides. Tragic action always encompasses the spurning of the evident by the immanent. Insofar as we the audience perceive the limitations of manifestation we share the hero's horror, or rage, or fear of them, and are encouraged to want him unfettered at any cost, to prefer the being behind the doing. As long as the character lives, nothing but the diminished self appears, in its ever-more-frustrating and frustrated attempts to be perfected. Tragedy tends to accelerate the accumulation of phenomena until they're blurred past recognition and dissolve; at the point where nothing remains in focus, the plays stop dead, and in this stillness of personality, character emerges. What we watch in tragedy is a dissection; the moment we are moved by is the moment when the still-beating heart is removed from the dying body. Actions which have constituted the animal's body are removed, in tragedy, like layers of semi-transparent tissue, and we see the immanent self revealed as the evident self dies. But the dissection model is incomplete since it requires a victim and an experimenter. Tragedy has no victims--they're reserved for melodrama--and any audience would be repulsed to see even a wretch undone by a villain in order to satisfy an existential curiosity. Self-dissection is the only possible manner of sacrifice: it releases the audience from pity and it releases the tragic figure from the burden of superfluous personality.

The pleasure we have in tragedy, then, is not a resignation, passive at heart, of the self to suffering, but a glorification of the fact that history need not be tolerated. Tragedies are plays whose plots devour their heroes only to find that a hero is indigestible. Audiences are people who find in such a spectacle a reflection of their own indestructibility, and the ability to laugh at the presumptuousness of their own circumstances. We leave a tragedy convinced that our ghosts may be better than the garbled traces we have of them in our own actual performances. The misery of ambivalence, the viciousness of memory, the obscurity of passion, the debilitation of regret--all these have an antidote in tragedy, for tragedy posits an ontological scheme that makes them trivial: what we have done is not what we are. We lose the hope of finding ourselves mirrored in our actions--but we gain the hope that such mirrors as we may be forced to face can be dismissed as inevitably grotesque.

The literary paradox is that tragedy, as a special type of poetry, best succeeds in most vehemently denying its own power to present: it indicates an essence by proving that it is inadequate to delineate it. If an audience were satisfied with the presence of a tragic hero, it

could not condone either his loss or his dissatisfaction; thus that dramatic presence is designed to disturb, equivocate, fail, and that tragedy is best which makes us grope in vain for its hero, which makes us feel that what has been killed or crushed or damaged was less than and separate from our hero. Our distrust for what we've seen authorizes the end of the play we watch. Suspense is not a function of plot complications, but a function of the search for the character that those complications promise to unfold. This is true of Oedipus, whose presence stands counter to the fragmentary reconstruction of it that the plot of *Oedipus Rex* presents, a piecemeal patchwork created by the play's minor characters and superimposed upon the hero. The play is a story of a man with history hot on his heels, a sort of scrapbook of bad snapshots held together by some crazy aunt's idea of what a child, grown up, will look like. The pictures are abstractions, frozen actions; compare the experience of a stranger looking through a family album and remarking, "Oh, that's not *you*, is it?" The answer is, of course, only to the camera. The play is not a search for identity but a rejection of identity. Oedipus' rage is not caused by guilt nor is it about fate; the one would render him a villain and the other, a pawn, and what audience would care to listen to either being lamented? His blinding is neither punishment nor expiation; the first is useless, the second, impossible. It is a metaphor for the self-substantiating self-destruction that functions as a suicidal withdrawal from the world of history and circumstance.

Oedipus seeks destruction and by searching, demeans it. He is not a victim nor a sacrifice to a fate in which a set of ironic gods are pleased to keep their quarry caged. Gods, in tragedy, I think, ought to be thought of as ordinary humans are; they are objectifications of the conflict between immaterial, inexplicable force--their immanent being--and the physical, time-and causality-and flesh-bound manifestation of it; thus they are analogues to the human dilemma, but not themselves causers of nor interferers with it. Fate is not a specific act or set of actions; fate is the fact that action is at odds with being, that doing is not pure enough or magnificent enough or inclusive enough to achieve what any hero desires and deserves. This explains why Oedipus' guilt is no barrier to our admiration for him; the personality may have done ill, but the character is judged apart from it: Oedipus is more than what he's done. In this play, particularly, the separation is hard and fast: it begins with an existent *persona* and then proceeds to diminish him by reports. The present of the play is cluttered by the past; Oedipus as King, an apparently sufficient manifestation, is whittled away by a series of other manifestations: Oedipus as infant-to-die, Oedipus as young-man-terrified-by-oracle, Oedipus as exile, Oedipus as husband, father, son. The

proliferation produces an array, not a sequence; it serves to demean the possibility of right action rather than to convict the actor.

We applaud Oedipus' blinding because it transcends the narrative. In destroying his perception, he mocks the perceptions that have convicted him: valid they may be, but never true. This is Scheler's independence of value and causality, and the significance of the independence is that Oedipus' acts cannot be used to convict him. To bring the accusation would be to chastise parallel lines for not meeting in infinity. In another universe than tragedy or non-Euclidian geometry, charges of wrong or error might be brought, but this *is* a tragic universe, and what's important is that Oedipus is returned to himself rather than brought to justice. He rejects the significance of act and circumstance and blinds himself to the world of phenomena as a sign, perhaps even a ritual one, that he no longer needs to be himself a phenomenon. His presence as a thing is thwarted and denied, and his ghost has been liberated from the same kind of bonds and boundaries that threaten the lives of those who watch the play.

That ghost is most present in *Oedipus* in the play's most painful scene, between Oedipus and Jocasta, as they confront together the possibilities and necessities urged by Creon's and Teiresias' information. Jocasta's intended consolation devastates, and Oedipus responds:

O dear Jocasta,
as I hear this from you, there comes upon me
a wandering of the soul--I could run mad.

The conversation that follows between them is almost a distraction, for this is the point where Oedipus must stop and listen to his other self. The dry exchange between husband and wife is mere corollary to an allegorical exchange that accompanies it, for it is here that Oedipus looks out on the landscape of his past, understands it as *other*--and here, I think that he hears the voices of Roethke's poem, the advice to wait, and the impatience of the wandering soul. It is the voice of hope that encourages him to call the herdsman to extricate him from himself; his hope is still in manifestation and his understanding, like his image of himself, is not yet complex enough; Oedipus grasps at numbers and straws; the evident struggles to save itself.

Much of the majesty of the play depends upon the ferocity of that struggle, since the strength of the evident is a measure of the power of the immanent that defeats it. The "brink of frightful speech and frightful hearing" has been in view from the beginning of the play, and Oedipus has danced alternately away from and toward it, urged first by the voice of the evident, then by the voice of his unenacted nature. Once he peers over the edge of history, the

immanent voice gains ascendancy; self-punishment results in the exorcism necessary, and Oedipus sloughs off the skin that binds and marks him: having become a thing he hates, he destroys it to mock it. His death is a model of the survival of the immanent; what's actually dead is the real world: the end of participation in it marks the end of Oedipus' evident existence, and in the solemn rejection, he proceeds to become a blank to the readers of his story, both in his city and in his audience. Creon says, "Do not seek to be master in everything, for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life." Nor could they, for Oedipus or any tragic hero, since mastery of things opposes immanence. I'm not sure that what I feel for Oedipus is anything akin to pity; I am certain that if I see waste in the play, it is waste of effort rather than waste of self. That he can dispose of himself disallows any condescending sympathy; that he has evaporated into a mystery which can despise the large mistakes and trivial correctnesses of story and memory means that the only loss he has suffered is of a soured objectivity.

That ripening-to-rottenness besets the most self-conscious doer of all, who changes disguises so quickly, so often, and with such dexterity, that a side-tracking epistemological problem almost seems the issue of a play that finally despairs of knowledge of all kinds. Prince Hamlet's problems are neither epistemological or ethical; neither his father's ghost nor his uncle's treachery is what moves Hamlet to his tragedy. Knowledge and revenge are only preliminary concepts in a struggle for objectification, which precede Hamlet's more profound--and more heroic--reason for refusing to act at all. Hamlet's quarrel is with himself, not Claudius.

And Hamlet knows as much, announces that he has that within that passeth show. The natural, supernatural and unnatural elements--grief, ghost and civil decay--alike urge him to action. This superfluity of motive, though, is countered by uncertainty of impulse: we watch Hamlet posing for and dispensing with so many other *personae* that an image of perpetual motion results. What ought to channel that energy is the overriding purpose of revenge; each motion that might complete the action, however, diffuses it, because Hamlet never resists the impulse to make use of whatever part of himself a situation could serve as stage for. He spends the first four acts of the tragedy pouring himself into whatever vessel comes to hand. This is, I think, the innocent and urgent desire of the immanent for shape and evidential presence; this is Hamlet Junior's own ghost attempting to possess a body and thus show itself; this is the urging of the puzzled will that prefers to suffer rather than to disappear, that still has time enough and hope to wait.

The allegory in *Hamlet* has a curious climax: the debate and

resolution occur offstage. It seems to me that the Hamlet who returns from the miscarried voyage is a different Hamlet than the one who sailed for England. I think he returns a dead man--in fact, a corpse. The new Hamlet who leaps into his lover's grave has already discovered that he is already interred himself--in his own flesh and roles and purposes and schemes; this Hamlet is capable of seeing what may be done in "perfect conscience," but prefers to suffer the interim rather than perfect the act; this Hamlet is capable of disavowing his manifestations as madness, of setting such madness counter to himself, of seeing himself as "of the faction that is wronged." This behavior is prompted not by love for Ophelia or by impotence in the face of Claudius nor by charity for Laertes, but by the shipboard recognition that his actions have consumed him and will force him into purpose no matter what he does. The pirates' interruption of the Prince's story is the equivalent of Oedipus' oracles and deities: they are the figures for the dead process of history that surrounds the living creatures that are themselves becoming skeletons. Hamlet is returned to Denmark by the arbitrary business--not accidental, not incredible and not fated--of other actors in a different play, and in the moment Hamlet sees himself a tangent, a footnote, an "attendant lord," he sees the folly of his own busy manipulations and articulations. He is himself an actor in a play-within-a-play: there is no end to plays, and none is realer than another. The actions that have created the series of formal facades he used to confound his friends and enemies and relations and to obscure himself are not to be discarded at his own discretion; in fact, they can never be discarded. When Hamlet thinks to step out of the castle he has taken refuge in, he finds it hasn't been of his own making, and that there is no door. True, he has selected the blocks of stone, but the material itself is as impermeable as history is irrevocable. Action's source in character is more obscure, more tenuous, more incomplete than Hamlet knew: ambiguity of representation, which Hamlet adopts to please himself, is still not inexpressibility of self, which human nature and the nature of the world decree to be inaccessible and inexpressible. His ghost surely is with Hamlet on his voyage; surely it has refused to listen to the playactor's appeal to wait, to temporize, to continue to act until so many acts are done that the spirit is encircled on a stage. When Hamlet returns, he is a figure of mere evidence, whom his ghost has given up.

The schemer who has been so prolix in speaking his mind, soliloquy after soliloquy, is suddenly shy of anything but dialogue; even as he muses on Yorick, he is in sight of and in conversation with other figures. Suddenly, he is a shadow and a puppet who may be summoned and instructed. The closer he comes to fulfilling his purpose, accomplishing his revenge, the further he withdraws from the audience of

the play. As for that revenge, it is Claudius' own poison as much as Hamlet's thrust that kills him, and the murder of the wicked king is the single incident in the play that is unpremeditated and unmediated by a conscious decision. Ghosts make no plans. Hamlet has retreated from his program of evidence. Because he sees the fraud, he has chosen immanence. Hamlet, in Act Five, has abandoned his flesh to the exigencies of a plot, and in that abandonment, released himself from the vain attempt to suit the spirit to that flesh, the character to the phenomenal personality, the nature to the act. He has allowed himself to dwindle into a *persona*; he is reflexive, not creative; he is a suicide. To have been embroiled in actions is not to have substantiated the evident self but to have muddied and betrayed and thwarted the immanent one. Like Oedipus' blinding, Hamlet's withdrawal from his name's part is his victory, and his audience's. The narrative remains for Horatio to repeat, but there is more in Hamlet's silence than in his words or deeds. The "rest" is immanence, privacy, abeyance, mystery, and its escape reassures: Hamlet's death in a duel has been superseded by his suicide; the destruction of a shell should be no horror after the joyful discovery that the shell was the least part of the creature. We are anesthetized to the last act's dissection because we've seen that Hamlet himself is insensible to it. That he cares so little for his part in the realistic denouement confirms the allegorical triumph of his ghost: Hamlet has been successfully exorcised from *Hamlet*.

Lear, Macbeth and Othello are Hamlet's cousins in that they share his allegory. Lear is in the process of killing himself when he first appears on stage: he forswears activity, divests himself of external marks of self, and plans to use his retirement into passivity as a way to garner information without recourse to action. A word will do for Lear, not because he is a senile fool, but because he'd like to see and be an immanence. This is not just a question of inner versus outer truth, or of hypocrisy, or of lilies that fester: it is a legitimate, if premature, longing for a boundless and unimpinged experience that transcends perceived and petty actions. Lear's error is that he'd like to see the "light within" of other natures before he's seen his own; in the course of the play, he is educated and brought to himself. He would withdraw into a prison as he had withdrawn from his kingship, but the only withdrawal that is finally sufficient to him is physical death. Lear's gentle release is a willed one; he dies seeing the life that no one else can see. Having seen the immanent, the breath, he passes into it. All sorrows are redeemed--not by death, but by the fact that evident death is no bar to hope or love. Lear's power to erase history and even momentarily discover being that has no evidence is the play's tragedy--tragedy in which an audience

discovers not a cause for grief but a hope of circumventing it.

Othello has not Lear's original sophistication, and I think he's the real fool in Shakespearean tragedy. He is seduced by a love of evidence, not by a trust in Iago; consequently, he can be disgraced with ease. Othello shares Hamlet's sense of presentation and manipulation, but in Othello that imagination earns all the more discredit: Hamlet had no picture of almost selfless (because so perfect) virtue before him, and Othello has the genuine article in Desdemona. If anything, *Othello* is almost pure immanent/evident allegory: Iago has all logic, all perception, all proof on his side; he is a perfect figure for the evident, active mode; Desdemona is as ghostly, steadfast, uncharacterized a figure as imaginable in Renaissance drama, and so much unexpressed that she can neither defend nor save herself. Othello sways back and forth between the two, not as pulled between two angels good and bad, but as pulled between two ways of being by two alternating voices, the same that speak in Roethke's poem. Othello embraces the advice of the evident mode and allows Iago to function as an extension of his own capacity for interpreting cause and effect: Iago is dangerous only insofar as Othello is credulous. Articulate logic can defeat mute affection only in the mind of a man who has more faith in demonstration than feeling for faith. An audience, too, must assess Desdemona's quality briefly and indirectly, for she is much less often before us than her counterpart, and yet she is tuned so consistently to the same key, that like an echo, her presence is enriched into a reverberating chord. When Othello strangles her, he kills the reflection of his own unifying nature: immanent self is harmonious because it includes the possibility of all sounds; it is action that creates discordancy when it tries to pick out a tune upon the instrument of self. Othello's murder sets him apart from his best counselor; his suicide, the sacrifice of the active self, is the necessary sacrifice: he speaks of it as the murder of a distant foe and makes a parable of his life. Not, I think, until this moment is Othello a tragic hero, not until he realizes that there is, in fact, no place for Othello to go in an impoverished world where actions and activity are most convincing and most false.

It's Othello's own senses that work against him; Macbeth's enemies are subtler but just as much his own: Macbeth is cursed with a sense of his own immanence that will not square with the process of enacting it. The witches of the play are emblems of potential history, neither makers of history nor projections of nature and desire, but a conjunction that momentarily obscures, for Macbeth, the radical opposition between being and doing. He feels himself king (and murderer) before he can be king: immanence of character and history of action converge until the present of the play is squeezed to nothing. The

difficulty is that, in practice instead of in mind, the two form no very reliable continuum: one cannot be essentially without being actively. Macbeth is capable of nuance and ambivalence; actions, even his, even devised in an agonized and inspired imagination, are not. Once Macbeth steps into history, he is doomed; he yokes himself to an obligation to perform, to consequences he can't avoid. The proposition is a losing one, not because it is a personal moral error, but because it is an impersonal ontological stupidity. Macbeth sees the discrepancies between acting and being—his obsession with time is an indication of how clearly he sees them and how intolerable he finds them and, which is extraordinary in a tragedy, prefers to wrench his ghost into the straightjacket of action. Macbeth nearly manages to incarnate himself into his actions; he comes so close to success that he is, unlike his cousins, incapable of suicide. He clings to his name and stays on his feet to the end, though he knows the idiocy of the struggle, though his ghost has power enough to speak the tomorrow-and-tomorrow lines through and despite the stubbornness of the incarnation.

What this suggests is that the tragic allegory of struggle between two modes of being admits of different types of resolutions. To see Macbeth dismembered (as a symbol of his own willingness to dismember being) is as satisfying to an audience as to see Hamlet ushered whole into silence. As long as the immanent/evident struggle is involved in a play, as long as tension exists between ghost and *persona*, tragedy is possible. The reason for the apparent insignificance of which wins lies with an audience's ability to respond variously to various characters. The exorcism and dissection are tragedy's claims on our attention, so we can be equally interested in Hamlet's purity or Macbeth's perversity. But for a writer to select a hero whom we'd rather not, on ethical grounds, be associated with, gives that audience a different set of concerns for that hero. If he is, like Macbeth, mired in manifestations, then his moral failings simply combine with his failure to find immanence, and an audience is pleased to be shown that wickedness and preference for action go hand in hand. The good hero, in tragic allegory, is obliged to rebuff the active self, to show us that he finds it barely worth the making; the bad hero is obliged to embrace that self, expire horribly in its embraces, and so demonstrate the same wisdom: that evident self is a seduction and a fraud. An audience needs no suicide in Macbeth because it needs to see him punished as much as it needs to see Hamlet transcend punishment. In both, we know the same exhilaration, learn the same lesson, receive the same solace; in both variations of the allegory, the immanent self is the preferable self, and we are released from the failures of our own inconsequential *personae* through that vision.

Tragedy, then, is a canvas that can be painted with different palettes and still be able to produce the effect that viewers are anxious to see. The disintegration of the form doesn't occur in the substitution of a different moral color for a background wash, but in the substitution of pigment for canvas--in the disappearance of the basic allegorical material under a blanket of moral conflict. When right-versus-wrong becomes the whole point of a play, when being has but one voice and but two dimensions, tragic effect is impossible. In fact, we lose tragedy and get--Dryden. Heroic drama is precisely that: a narrative of a *persona* who finds it problematical to conform to heroic standards. Unhappily for plays like *All for Love*, a choice between honor and love is not nearly as compelling as a choice between being and refusing-to-be in the phenomenal world, and it really doesn't answer an audience's need to be absolved of the terror of choosing between equally inadequate ways of converting itself to phenomena. Being torn between Ventidius and Cleopatra is not the same as being torn between Iago and Desdemona. Dryden's characters are both active alternatives; both counsel living well, and instead of a quarrel between immanence and evidence, we have a quibble over manners. I doubt Dryden even concerned himself with immanent being in his play; certainly he saw no way for his Antony to unite his conflicting impulses by retreating into a presence that, as unexpressed and potential, was able to muster up disgust for the world that lies in wait for *personae*. Antony keeps trying; Ventidius keeps trying; Cleopatra keeps trying; even Octavia decides to try; the victory will go to the actor who tries the hardest to work his or her will upon the others. But real tragedy is a lesson in giving up the battle as irrelevant, as necessarily lost, in learning to eschew as crippling the very actions that Dryden's characters are willing to expend themselves pursuing. Consequently the suicides are not: there isn't an immanent self, capable of unburdening itself of an evident one, in the whole cast. In fact, the world is a murderer in *All for Love*. When Cleopatra has recourse to an asp as an end to anguish, she's accomplishing no triumph and ending no tragedy; Shakespeare's lady realizes "all's but naught;/Patience is sottish, and impatience does/Become a dog that's mad." She sees the vanity of acts and things, interchangeable and wide of the mark. Dryden's Cleopatra is obliged to prove fidelity and aspires to the title of wife to a corpse--and will have no truck with Caesar as a safeguard to her reputation. Her suicide shows her a victim; tragic suicide shows its hero a survivor; Dryden's Cleopatra has no self to be exorcised, and unless it sees the ghost, an audience can correctly assume that it has not seen tragedy.

Heroic drama, then, can't present a tragic action, but what of unheroic drama? The grim contests that *Miss Julie* and *Hedda Gabler*

depict are not, I think, unheroic: heroism is a type of dramatic presence that doesn't suffer from occurring in a housewife rather than a prince. As long as the figure is divided, it is fit for tragedy, and both Julie and Hedda are nothing if not divided. Julie's is the simplest case, although her extended self is best seen not in her alternating passions for Jean or her male-female roles, but in her vulnerability to her father--and in her father's omnipresence, which is an analogue to Julie's own ghost. In his and, by implication, its, absence, Julie allows herself actions, in which she is shortly so disgracefully enmeshed that her personality loses all cohesion. When he, and it, return, Julie must commit herself to actions or refuse to endure them and their consequences; she chooses, like Hamlet, to refuse to wait, and her suicide, like his moulting of the player self, is the casting off of dead skin. An audience could bear to watch Julie, vibrant with her life and sex and power, reach the point of investing herself in seducing or abusing Jean; we couldn't tolerate, however, seeing her energy absorbed, seeing her meekly yield to re-enacting an already-made choice for fifty or sixty years. Once created, performed, the *persona* of Julie is dead to most of an immanent nature that can't be expressed in the historical self; that she is able to hear the ghost of that nature urge her to step out of time and back into immanence is the triumph of her tragedy, and the source of her audience's gratification and relief at seeing the actions of the play disavowed.

Hedda seems to me involved in the same trap; Lovborg is a handy mirror of her ghost. He is gifted with all the shadowy qualities of immanence--vagueness, danger, frenzy--and when he finally ruins Hedda's hope that she may see the spirit tamed to action, she is wise enough to die. The botched suicide is not just her lover's incompetence, but the treacherous inability of the physical and actual to receive the imprint of the spirit that surrounds and animates them. The material is too coarse a medium for the ghost to shape and too cumbersome for it to inspire or control. Hedda sees the inescapable botching of action, and by avoiding it, restores herself to spirit. Judge Brack, Tessman, once only the wrong men, become emblems of the universal wrongness that Hedda must suffer if she lives. Her escape is thus not a defeat but a vindication; her suicide absolves her of all panic, all unkindness, all ill-temper, which are the inevitable consequences of living with a body that's too small for its own heart.

Both these plays fulfill the allegory of self; both point to and praise the immanent, but in a way that seems to me to verge on dramatic disaster; both, for one thing, rely on ghost-analogues, instant symbols, to indicate immanent character. Classical and Shakespearean drama prefers to rely on shifting images, sequential manifestations, to create the sense of substance from which this flux must come. Motion

and mutability create immanence; in modern drama too often a static character (or characters) is expected to indicate it. Much of the tension of straining for a glimpse of the immanent behind the evident is lost this way; moreover, the evident *personae* themselves are less interesting--and less seductive--when they're upstaged by obvious, pat, and unworked-for immanence. In the best tragedy, immanence grows as evidence dies: Hamlet emerges out of a series of puppets. If immanence is granted and given, the allegory still exists, but without the suspense that struggle gives it: the laboratory animal that is marked for dissection is very nearly transparent.

This is what I object to in tragic explications or productions of Chekov. His characters are so obsessed with becoming the fine spirits that they have dwelling within them that their active selves are about as interesting as plastic wrap. If I saw one of those three sisters--any one of them--perform a deed--any deed--with gusto and courage--in other words, if I saw any attempt to see any of them invest herself in her actions, I'd grant the play tragic status out of hand. But that's exactly what I don't see. By definition, Olga and Masha and Irina are afloat on the delicate vapors of their inbred superiority; by definition, no work or mate could please them; immanent being is excluded from participation in actual existence: what ghost would want to possess these bodies? What suspense is there in such an enterprise, when no one, for a moment, is even tempted to believe in the possibility of acting, to believe that action is anything but inconsequential? Masha, for instance, is a Hedda Gabler who couldn't bring herself to suicide, in other words, a failed Hedda who can hardly be expected to exert the same tragic power in her post-curtain life that Hedda did in her last-act suicide. Irina is really *Glass Menagerie's* Laura, save that her limp appears to be metaphysical and save that she has not even got the courage and hope and presence to *fail* in love with Chekov's equivalent of a vulgar businessman. Laura's immanence is at least able to sense the virtue of living in the real world, sentimental as the outcome is. Irina's not in love with Tuzenbach, and her trauma is more practical than existential: she has lost a chance to live differently, not a chance to be in love, and what she learns from having one avenue blocked is not to forgo the journey but to try a different route--and tragedy requires that we discover there are no alternate routes.

But Chekov gives us intersections rather than decisions, and Olga is a sort of patrolman trying to unsnarl the traffic jam that everyone seems stuck in; she can't; she simply shouts directions--"To Moscow! To Moscow!"--that no one even tries to follow. In tragedy, trying is everything; Hamlet or Oedipus, without their first faith in history and discovery and proof and survival, without having tried to substantiate

the very personalities they ultimately reject, would not be tragic--and *The Three Sisters* isn't tragic either. The play is, as it ends, perfectly gruesome; how could an audience not carry the image of these fragile creatures, bravely banding together to undertake the bleakest of all possible lives, out of the theater with it? But certainly, the audience's response is panic, not exhilaration: we have seen characters wrung out and hung up to dry, not characters liberated from those bonds of choice and act and memory that tragedy has, at its best, the power to break. Tragedy is an antidote to such impingement; a play that only holds a magnifying glass up to it seems to me to be capable of any tone--comic, satiric, romantic, melodramatic--except tragic.

For point-blank aim at misery, though, Chekov can't touch Beckett, and *Endgame* is so completely devoted to immanence that it supersedes the nontragedy of *Three Sisters* and becomes profoundly anti-tragedy. There is no action, no intercourse, no history in *Endgame*; history has already ended, change is impossible, and long before Act One, the characters in the play have thought and shrunk themselves into symbols. Those symbols are, like the analogous immanences in *Hedda Gabler* and *Miss Julie*, indications of transcendent and essential character, but they aren't themselves immanences, though Beckett seems to pretend they are. Immanence needs the opposition of evidence; what *might be* done is unmeasured until what *is* done can serve as a yardstick for it: an audience sees a tragic hero's ghost as it would see a shadow formed behind a figure by a light flickering in front of it. Without the illumination--defining actions--upon the body--the manifest personality--there is no shadow of a ghost. Hamm and Clov and Nagg and Nell have all been fished up out of a stream of consciousness and are obscure enough in their apocalyptic significance to serve as tragic characters, but by preventing action, and failing to dramatize manifestation, Beckett prevents tragedy. No one has the power left to begin the tragic allegory by investing in an act that may temporarily seem, to both figure and audience, expressive of character; without tentative action, a struggle undertaken in expectation of success, character cannot be revealed as counter to it; without this revelation, a tragic figure doesn't have the opportunity to face itself, judge the foreignness and triviality of its manifestations and, in disgust with self, abandon or kill it. Self-disgust and self-despair are not interchangeable for an audience; the first is elevating, the second, demeaning. And cruel. And ultimately uninteresting.

This is not to say that Beckett's perception of human relations, conditions, miseries is wrong or limited or unacceptable to right-minded people: the image of *Endgame*, the stalemated self, the stripped-down board and stage and world, the physical decay veiled by a rag of memory, the grim spinning about in a devastated world, the

reduction of life to stuffed toys is not only legitimate but classical: Hamlet played out an endgame of his own. But there's a difference in seeing myself as Hamlet and seeing myself as Hamm. Hamlet trips over his own king--and Hamm sits staring at an empty board after all the pieces are gone; we've seen him neither defend nor sacrifice the crown. As an audience for his play, my objection to Beckett is simply that he has only shown me half the allegory that I've come to see. *My life seems perpetually urging me to move another piece; I live in horror that I've fallen into a trap I haven't even imagined yet; I'm going to be obliged to spend most of my life defending against an opponent I can't see; I'm being seduced, daily, into an obsession with strategy, style and success. What I need from tragedy is a diminution of that obsession; I need to see a shrewd lead, subtle complications, and a courageous resignation. I need to be convinced that the playing is somehow inconsequential. This I can be convinced of only when I'm shown the action of the game: a diagram of the positions will not serve. Beckett, because he gives me only figures who have already evaporated past action, who are beyond personality (is Hamm Beckett, Hamlet, survivor, God, or all of them?), who are aspiring only to immanence, gives me a play that simply doesn't function as a tragedy.*

Two selves are required for tragedy; if I'm disappointed in *Endgame*, I'm also disappointed in my own plot; it, too, is a struggle with only one contestant. My little Hispanic boy is, in fact, potentially a comedian; the story, where I left it, is a saga of the beneficence and consequence of action. The incident, in fact, balances an angel on the head of a pin: the boy's whole startling virtue has made an immanent nature manifest. That's why, as hearer of the story, I'm moved to actions, to a belief in my own agency. I'm tricked into believing that whatever it is that moves me, that I feel as a private source of knowledge and power--my consciousness--could shift the world by taking part in its actions and relations and history: my ghost begins to believe that it ought to possess its flesh and action, become *persona* and history, objectified and influential and perceived. I will be incarnated, related; I will proceed. But real tragedy, good tragedy, weans its audience away from precisely those impulses, saves me from the trauma of discovering that that child will become, perhaps already has become, other things, a villain, a murderer, a liar, a fool. So I've got to find another partner for this cheery *persona* to wrestle with, a ghost that convinces him that his easy victory was bound to be confounded. I need to add some complication like this: the father does not want to see his son. In which case, the child's manifested honor is a kind of existential lie, and his filial affection, so nicely poised upon the stage, is pointless. The suffering and renunciation are irrelevant, inconsequential; the effort's made for

nothing. At which point the child leaves his home, such as it was, abandoning the world where his best attempts are vain. That, I guess, is the final definition of a tragedy: a play that proves possession was such a bad business all along that there's no shame or blame in failing to accomplish it.

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Notes

1. Georg Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974) 162: "Tragedy is the becoming-real of the concrete, essential nature of man. . . . The deepest longing of human existence is the metaphysical root of tragedy: the longing of man for selfhood, the longing to transform the narrow peak of his existence into a wide plain with the path of his life winding across it, and his meaning into a daily reality."

2. Max Scheler, "On the Tragic," trans. by Bernard Stambler, *Cross Currents*, IV (1954) 184.

3. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (1905; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1974) 20.

