

The Death-of-Tragedy Myth

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"After Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche," Lionel Abel wrote in 1963, "it should be possible to talk with some degree of clarity about tragedy. Yet that dramatic form, so famous and so honored, is continually rendered less clear by the discourse of critics, the chatter of journalists, and the plays of even skilled dramatists."¹ Abel's remarks mix a certain amount of truth with matter of a more dubious kind, and it is the second sentence, I suggest, that contains the surest element of truth. His remarks appeared during the thickest flurry of writing on tragedy that the world has ever known (roughly, the period from shortly after the end of the Second World War through the late 1960s), the results of which amply confirm his charge. The ratio between the quantity of writing on tragedy and the increase of obscurity about it is easy to explain: anyone who has seen or read even a few tragedies and then read even a small selection of the voluminous studies of the form has every reason to conclude that writing about tragedy is not unlike writing about religion or politics, with all the implications of over-reliance on "revealed" views, partiality to particular authorities, insufficient consideration of the subject matter, inattentiveness, ignorance, and self-revelation that my comparison is meant to suggest. The more dubious matter in Abel's remarks is the notion that we ought to have some degree of clarity about tragedy because of the contributions of three figures who, writing out of different cultural assumptions, having different axes to grind, and preferring different examples of the form, produced such different and nearly incompatible conceptions of tragedy. Indeed, Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche must be given some of the blame for the obscurity about which Abel complains. In the theory-of-tragedy industry, they are the patron saints and church fathers or, alternatively, the schismatics and heretics, the Edmund Burkes, Thomas Jeffersons, Karl Marxes, and/or John Birches.²

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Abel's remarks are additionally vulnerable because of their self-confident tone, implying that their speaker is himself of course free from any blame for the increasing obscurity. Despite this tone, Abel has much to answer for. The book containing his remarks constitutes his primary share in one of the major "contributions" of the flurry of the 1950s and 60s: the notion, subsequently often accepted as dogma, that at some point--usually assumed to be the close of Racine's career--tragedy suffered an unfortunate, but unequivocal, demise. I call this notion the "death-of-tragedy myth," and since tragedy is often associated in various ways with myth, I want to make it clear that I use "myth" in its popular sense as something that is believed by many while remaining essentially untrue, although more exact senses of "myth" also apply here--for instance, its capacity to pre-shape thinking about specific examples and aspects of reality that presumably fall within its area of reference. The writers most responsible for the formulation and dissemination of this myth are, in addition to Abel, Joseph Wood Krutch (whose version of it first appeared in 1929 but was reprinted during the flurry) and George Steiner, but numerous others have helped to spread the gospel, including several whose studies of tragedy do not explicitly assert the notion but implicitly support it by their definitions and their treatments of post-Racinian plays.³

This myth is well worth dispelling. It stands in the way of any reasonably objective study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century plays and novels, of properly understanding and evaluating writers like Ibsen, O'Neill, and Tennessee Williams (if one believes, as I do, that they wrote tragedies), and of even properly defining tragedy (if one believes, as I do, that the canon of tragedy has been extended during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the nature of tragedy modified in the process). It is not, however, an easy task to prove a negative (i.e., that the notion of the death of tragedy is not true). One might appeal to alternative authorities--those who write about post-Racinian literature as if the myth had never been formulated--but aside from demonstrating that other views are possible, this is not a very helpful procedure since the alternative authorities are for the most part much less impressive writers and therefore not all that authoritative. Or one might try to demonstrate the existence of genuine tragedy during the periods in question, but even if the demonstration were confined to one sure example it would require articulating a conception of tragedy that both fits the example and is itself authoritative, and, given the existing confusion about tragedy, any such demonstration would take an inordinate amount of space.⁴ Since neither of these procedures is practical, I have decided to try to show that the myth had no business ever existing, that the very methodologies, arguments, assumptions, inconsistencies, and motives of its formulators clearly show that it is not at all a reasonable observation derived from observed evidence but rather a fiction dreamt up by the observers. I shall support this assertion by examining in detail the discussions of the myth's three primary formulators, Krutch, Abel, and Steiner, taking them slightly out of chronological order so that I may treat

the issues concerning tragedy that they raise in a sequence that seems to me logically appropriate. From time to time, when it seems useful, I shall supplement this examination by glancing at the work of the lesser apostles listed in note 3.

I

Joseph Wood Krutch's contribution to the formulation of the myth is a chapter ("The Tragic Fallacy") from *The Modern Temper: A Study and a Confession*, which first appeared in 1929 and was reprinted with a new preface in 1956.⁵ Krutch claims that we still need tragedy but no longer produce it and are gradually losing the capacity to get even remotely in touch with the tragedies of the past, let alone to appreciate them. The "mechanistic, materialistic, and deterministic conclusions of science" (xiii) have deprived us of our "tragic faith" (96), our belief in "the glorious vision of human life" (79) out of which tragedy arose. By the nineteenth century, "God and Man and Nature had all somehow dwindled" and there had occurred an "enfeeblement of the human spirit," a "weakening of man's confidence in his ability to impose upon the phenomenon of life an interpretation acceptable to his desires" (81-2). Man had lost the capacity to believe in his own "greatness and importance," had come to see himself as merely "mean" and "petty." And it is precisely this, Krutch feels, that made tragedy impossible, since its "essential nature" consists in its being "a representation of actions *considered* as noble" (83-4). Hence the high rank of the traditional tragic hero:

the tendency to lay the scene of a tragedy at the court of a king is not the result of any arbitrary convention but of the fact that the tragic writers believed easily in greatness just as we believe easily in meanness. To Shakespeare, robes and crowns and jewels are the garments most appropriate to man because they are the fitting outward manifestation of his inward majesty, but to us they seem absurd because the man who bears them has, in our estimation, so pitifully shrunk. (91)

Hence also tragedy's concern with the cosmos:

the Tragic Fallacy [Krutch's variation on "pathetic fallacy"] depends ultimately upon the assumption which man so readily makes that something outside his own being, some 'spirit not himself'--be it God, Nature, or that still vaguer thing called a Moral Order--joins him in the emphasis which he places upon this or that and confirms him in his feeling that his passions and his opinions are important." (93)

And hence, finally, what Krutch perceives--he does not say so explicitly, but the implication is unequivocal--as the defining feature of tragedy: its affirmation. Modern serious plays, he writes, "produce in the reader a sense of depression," while tragedy generates "elation"; "the reading of *Oedipus* or *Lear*," when we of this "remoter and emotionally enfeebled age" have the "rare good fortune" to enter into their "spirit as completely as it is possible for us" to do so, gives us a "feeling of exultation" (81-2). The action of tragedy "is usually, if not always, calamitous," but it is so "because it is only in calamity that the human spirit has the opportunity to reveal itself triumphant over the outward universe which fails to conquer it" (84). "All works of art which deserve their name have a happy end," and tragedy fits this criterion by satisfying "the universally human desire to find in the world some justice, some meaning, or, at the very least, some recognizable order. Hence it is that every real tragedy, however tremendous it may be, is an affirmation of faith in life, a declaration that even if God is not in his Heaven, then at least Man is in his world" (85-6). Given his thorough belief that affirmation--of the human spirit and of the values it desires--is both the defining feature and the ultimate function of tragedy, it is not at all surprising to see Krutch making so extreme a statement as the following: "Though its [tragedy's] conclusion must be, by its premise, outwardly calamitous, though it must speak to those who know that the good man is cut off and that the fairest things are the first to perish, yet it must leave them, as *Othello* does, content that this is so. We must be and we are glad that Juliet dies and that *Lear* is turned out into the storm" (85).

The showpiece of Krutch's discussion is his comparison of *Hamlet* and a modern play, for which he chooses *Ghosts*, because, he says, it "was not only written by perhaps the most powerful as well as the most typical of modern writers but . . . is, in addition, the one of his works which seems most nearly to escape that triviality which cannot be entirely escaped by anyone who feels, as all contemporary minds do, that man is relatively trivial" (89). His ranking of *Ghosts* among Ibsen's works is, of course, highly debatable, and, given what he has already written about it in this chapter, one might conclude that the choice is the result of calculation rather than belief. *Ghosts*, Krutch has stated, exemplifies the "trivial miseries" of a too sophisticated age: "When its heroes (sad misnomer for the pitiful creatures who people contemporary fiction) are struck down it is not, like Oedipus, by the gods that they are struck but only, like Oswald Alving, by syphilis, for they know that the gods, even if they existed, would not trouble with them, and they cannot attribute to themselves in art an importance in which they do not believe." Thus *Ghosts* is typical of the modern era's "so-called tragedies," in which "mean misery piles on mean misery, petty misfortune follows petty misfortune, and despair becomes intolerable because it is no longer even significant or important" (88).

The comparison itself begins with a brief paragraph on *Hamlet*, emphasizing the protagonist's "good fortune to be called upon to take part in an action of cosmic importance" (89)--restoring the balance of the universe--and his

dying not in failure but in success: "in the process by which that readjustment is made a mighty mind has been given the opportunity, first to contemplate the magnificent scheme of which it is a part and then to demonstrate the greatness of its spirit by playing a role in the grand style which it called for. We do not need to despair in *such* a world if it has *such* creatures in it" (90). Then follows an even briefer paragraph on *Ghosts*:

Turn now to *Ghosts*--look upon this picture and upon that. A young man has inherited syphilis from his father. Struck by a to him mysterious malady he returns to his northern village, learns the hopeless truth about himself, and persuades his mother to poison him. The incidents prove, perhaps, that pastors should not endeavor to keep a husband and wife together unless they know what they are doing. But what a world is this in which a great writer can deduce nothing more than that from his greatest work and how are we to be purged or reconciled when we see it acted? Not only is the failure utter, but it is trivial and meaningless as well. (90)

Krutch has more to draw from his comparison in subsequent pages, but it is rather repetitious of his more general claims and can be passed over in silence.

The first thing that should be noticed about Krutch's discussion is that instead of trying to demonstrate his thesis through argument he relies on assertion, elegant, almost evangelistic, language, and, in addressing our present circumstances and the works produced in response to them, ridicule. The confirmation of his claims, in other words, depends entirely on the authority of their speaker, and as a result that authority becomes an issue worthy of attention. Fortunately, three years prior to the reprinting of *The Modern Temper* Krutch published another book discussing modernism and drama that casts some very interesting light on this issue: *"Modernism" in Modern Drama: A Definition and an Estimate*.⁶ This is a rather sloppy book: he gets wrong the details of the ending of *Rosmersholm* (16), he completely misunderstands *Hedda Gabler* and Ibsen's attitude toward his title character (18), he calls Strindberg (more than once) a Dane. Items like this suggest that similar features of "The Tragic Fallacy"--the misquotation of *The Tempest* ("Oh, rare new world. . .," 84), the overly casual reference (apparently to *The Master Builder*) that "Ibsen once made one of his characters say that he did not read much because he found reading 'irrelevant' . . ." (88), the cursory and slanted summaries of *Hamlet* and *Ghosts*--were not, as they might seem there, the marks of a "cool" and sophisticated belletrism but rather those of someone who has managed to "impose upon the phenomenon of [tragedy] an interpretation acceptable to his desires" and prefers spinning it out ever more elaborately to checking it against the sources from which, perhaps, it originally sprung. I say "perhaps" because a far more important feature of *"Modernism" in Modern*

Drama is its virtual recantation of the claims about tragedy that Krutch was to reprint, unchanged, three years later.

In "*Modernism*," after conceding to Strindberg a notion of "the essence of man's tragic dilemma" (25), he goes on to discuss *Ghosts* in entirely different --and far more accurate--terms than in "The Tragic Fallacy":

it has been wrongly said that the hero is Oswald Alving. . . . [!] Actually the real protagonist is not the helpless victim Oswald but his mother; the tragic guilt is, ultimately, not that of society but of the protagonist herself because she listened to Parson Manders in whom she did not really believe and because she submitted to the opinion of the community instead of following her own inward light which told her, from the beginning, that what she was doing was wrong. Before the play is over she asserts herself and earns the right to be called a heroine when she finally rejects the hypocritical morality preached by society and does what she herself believes to be right. It is too late to prevent the evils which her earlier wrongdoing had created. Therefore, as is often the case in tragedy, the hero achieves a triumphant clarification though he can no longer save either himself or the others. (40)

Later in the volume, Krutch states that both Eugene O'Neill and Maxwell Anderson, "men whose most serious effort has obviously been to write for moderns plays which have some of the essential characteristics of traditional tragedy," "could be most simply classified as writers of tragedy" (117). And he would gladly extend a similar classification to Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams but feels that it is still too early to judge (123-30).

These statements strongly indicate that in 1953 Krutch no longer believed the claims he formulated in 1929 and was to reprint, unchanged, in 1956--if he actually believed them in 1929: the O'Neill "tragedies" he most emphasizes are *The Hairy Ape* (produced and published in 1922) and *Desire Under the Elms* (produced and published in 1924), both of which Krutch knew long before he originally presented his views on the "modern temper" (he reviewed *Desire Under the Elms* enthusiastically for the *Nation* when it was produced, and in this review he refers knowledgeably to *The Hairy Ape* along with other O'Neill plays).⁷ As he discusses O'Neill and Anderson in "*Modernism*," Krutch seems suddenly to remember his argument from 1929, for he decides to call them "anti-modernists" (123), and he reverts to his earlier view of *Ghosts* in saying that O'Neill's "most nearly heroic figures have always been those who, like Yank in *The Hairy Ape* or Ephraim Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms*, belong to something larger than themselves which confers dignity and importance on them. They are not, like Oswald Alving, mean victims" (118). It is, however, too late to undo the damage that has been done to the claims of "The Tragic Fallacy."

Krutch's no longer fully believing these claims when they were offered to the world for a second time severely undermines the authority of their speaker, which, as I have said, is the only evidence in "The Tragic Fallacy" for the validity of the claims. But even without Krutch's recantation the original claims are sufficiently vulnerable in themselves because of the conception of tragedy on which they are based. Among writers on tragedy, Krutch is a "distortionist"--that is, one who focuses on a particular (supposed) quality of the form and balloons it into not just a *sine qua non* but, in essence, the whole. A "strict-constructionist," such as I. A. Richards, would reject the idea of the affirmation of tragedy out of hand.⁸ But this seems much *too* strict, and it is probably wiser to accept Louis L. Martz's claim that while "tragedy seems never to know what Wallace Stevens calls 'an affirmation free from doubt' . . . it always seems to contain at least the Ghost of an affirmation."⁹

For Krutch, what tragedy affirms is the "human spirit," our "faith in life," the "greatness of human nature"; his focus is on "Man." He is rather vague about the process, but if one thinks of virtually any protagonist of traditional tragedy it is not difficult to see represented somewhere in the course of his or her career--most often at the moment of recognition and/or in response to the catastrophe--something of what Krutch has in mind, although it is not necessarily the same "something" for each protagonist. The Oedipus of *Oedipus Tyrannus* not only endures the horror compelling him to blind himself, he also accepts responsibility for what he has done even though he had striven to avoid it. Antigone is willing to go to her death for what she believes in, while Creon comes fully to know both the error of his actions and their devastating consequences for him. Hamlet, despite the havoc he has experienced and helped to bring about, is thought worthy to have flights of angels sing him to his rest. Othello, however much he may resist full recognition in his final soliloquy, defines his suicide at least in part as a moral action appropriately responsive to his killing Desdemona. Macbeth, despite his evil, impresses us through the quality of his mind, and he to some extent resumes his original identity as a heroic warrior when confronted by Macduff, even though--or because--he knows that all is lost. Even Lear, protagonist of the most tragic of tragedies, not only endures his extraordinary suffering but also comes to a new and better understanding through it, although, to quote Krutch on Mrs. Alving, he does so too late to "save either himself or the others." And there may even be tragic protagonists who exert "defiance unto death in a hopeless battle against gods and fate."¹⁰

Nor is it just the greatness of its protagonist that tragedy may affirm. The destruction of Oedipus and Jocasta is also an affirmation of the oracles whose validity they both so vigorously, and so desperately, sought to deny, and this is in keeping with the tendency of tragedy, noted by many commentators, to suggest the existence of some sort of order outside the protagonist and of which the protagonist may be a victim, whether that order be fate, necessity, the will of the gods, a divinity that shapes our ends, a principle of justice or

morality, or merely the way things are--or, as Timothy Reiss would argue, the values of the community for which the tragedy is written.¹¹ Finally, as Murray Krieger points out, tragedy "can remain a force for affirmation through its formal powers alone," through "the disciplining and restricting demands upon aesthetic contemplation made by the rounded aesthetic whole."¹²

It is by no means clear, however, what these apparent affirmations ultimately signify. Much ink has been spilled on other topics pertaining to tragedy, especially catharsis, but the relation between affirmation and tragedy, one of the most problematic of the possible topics, has not been adequately discussed. I have, for example, just identified three kinds of affirmation, and this raises the question whether they are really all aspects of a single quality. Furthermore, are any or all of them substantive as opposed to accidental criteria? The affirmation achieved through form would seem to be substantive, but tragedy's affirming the greatness of its protagonist may very well be a by-product of its needing, if it is to define fully the devastation it dramatizes, the kind of protagonist that can endure more than ordinary suffering, that has the capacity to grasp and express what is happening, and that has sufficient worth so that we are not tempted to see his or her experience in terms of some simplistic moral formula. Again, if the various kinds of affirmation are in fact all aspects of a single quality, do the affirmations dramatized by a particular tragedy add up to the affirmation with a capital A of Martz's remark and Krutch's whole discussion? Is, in other words, affirmation in this general sense actually a specific element--i.e., a fundamental, essential constituent--of tragedy? And if so, where, exactly, does it stand in the hierarchy of elements constituting the form? Finally, if affirmation is in fact a--or the--key element of tragedy, is what tragedy affirms, as Krutch supposes, the things that we want affirmed? I raise these questions for two reasons: to suggest my own feeling that affirmation is a limited and uncertainly significant aspect of tragedy, and to point out the kind of issues that are ignored by the affirmationists, who do not consider affirmation but celebrate it.

In fact, discussion of this topic usually seems doomed to produce the kind of inflated language typical of Krutch's account and to prompt the commentator to blow it up out of all proportion to any actual place it may have in the complex that is tragedy. This, then, is the basic problem with Krutch's claims, for when affirmation is made out to be the defining characteristic and the ultimate purpose of tragedy, what is being discussed is something quite different from tragedy, although it is often mistaken for it. This result is even more evident in the writings of other affirmationists. Robert Heilman, for example (see note 3), writes of how, in tragedy, "man salvages, from the ruins of the present, the essential human powers on which continuity depends" (160), but as he refines and illustrates this idea, as in the following sentence, it becomes cruder and cruder until its terms end up being purely moral:

. . . understanding is the natural completion or resolution of the division in which tragedy originates. The true object of understanding is what has been the object of misunderstanding--the motive or step that has caused or constituted the flaw or error, be it a misdeed with unforeseen consequences or a monstrous crime. (241)¹³

Dorothea Krook (see note 3), who so celebrates affirmation that she makes it one of her four "universal elements of tragedy" (8-9) and, as she constantly implies, by far the most important of the four, goes even further in her major account of it:

In the greatest tragedy, I suggest, what is in the end affirmed is something more than the dignity of man and the value of human life. We are made to feel that, through the affirmation of man and the life of man, there is at the same time being affirmed an order of values transcending the values of the human order. This order of values is not, or is not felt to be, a mere projection of the human mind; it is felt to have a real, objective existence--an existence independent of, other than, and antecedent to man and the life of man. At the same time, however, it has the closest bearing on the life of man, in particular on the conduct of men; therefore, it is properly described as moral--a *moral* order, in the most inclusive sense of the term. (14-15)

What she ultimately seems to mean is perhaps best exemplified by a passage from the conclusion of her discussion of Middleton's *Women Beware Women* as a successful tragedy in the "low-mimetic" mode: "The same simplicity [of language] makes the moral point of the whole tragic tale in Hippolito's memorable statement:

Lust and forgetfulness has been among us
And we are brought to nothing. (V.i.187-88)" (182).

Krutch does not explicitly take affirmation as far as this, but his fellow affirmationists show how close his view of tragedy comes to redefining it as morality play in fancy dress.

II

Lionel Abel's primary contribution to establishing the myth, *Metatheatre*, came out in 1963, and four years later he helped to further its hold by editing an anthology of writings about tragedy that includes both a substantial introduction and an additional piece by him.¹⁴ *Metatheatre* is less a book than a collection of essays (not all of which discuss tragedy or even "Metatheatre"),

and, apparently as a result, it offers a number of assertions about tragedy that are never really brought together in a single coherent conception. Some of these assertions are indicated in what follows, but I make no attempt to piece them all together into any unified conception, because, as will become clear, doing so is not necessary for my purposes.

The two most important essays for Abel's views on the fate of tragedy are "Genet and Metatheatre" (76-83) and "Tragedy--or Metatheatre" (107-13). Abel states, "I shall not say that tragedy is impossible, or, as George Steiner has suggested, dead"; he does not, however, know of any modern examples of it and is sure that its re-emergence would depend on conditions that are not now foreseeable (112). It has been impossible for most Western dramatists and for very clear reasons:

Why have most Western dramatists, bent on writing tragedy, been unable to do so successfully? Much of their difficulty can be summed up in a single word: self-consciousness. First, the self-consciousness of the dramatist himself, and then that of his protagonists. For consider: if Antigone were self-conscious enough to suspect her own motives in burying her brother Polynices, would her story be a tragic one? Now the Western playwright is unable to believe in the reality of a character who is lacking in self-consciousness. Lack of self-consciousness is as characteristic of Antigone, Oedipus, and Orestes, as self-consciousness is characteristic of Hamlet, that towering figure of Western metatheatre.

Another, insurmountable difficulty: one cannot create tragedy without accepting some implacable values as true. Now the Western imagination has, on the whole, been liberal and skeptical; it has tended to regard *all* implacable values as false. (77)

This explains why, according to Abel, no "real" tragedies have been produced since fifth-century-B.C. Athens except for Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (5) and a few plays by Racine. There are no tragedies by Schiller, although "*Mary Stuart*, which he called a tragedy, is almost convincing as one" (73). Ibsen tried to write tragedy but failed, because "the 'fatality' suggested in his dramas remains suggested, and does not convince us finally"--it is merely imposed on his characters--and because he tried to express ideas, while "in a true tragedy one is beyond thought" (109-10). O'Neill, Williams, and Miller, "all continuers and imitators of Ibsen," have fared no better (110-12).

There is, however, no cause for alarm, since Western self-consciousness has produced a new, appropriate, dramatic form to replace the one lost: the metaplay:

... the plays I am pointing at do have a common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By

this I mean that the persons appearing on stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. What dramatized them originally? Myth, legend, past literature, they themselves. They represent to the playwright the effect of dramatic imagination before he has begun to exercise his own; on the other hand, unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality. (60)

Metatheatre is distinguished not only by the self-consciousness of its characters but also by plays-within-the-play, characters behaving toward others as a dramatist might, the sense of life as a dream, and fantasy. The form is in effect invented by Shakespeare with *Hamlet*, and examples of it include many other of his plays, Calderon's *Life is a Dream*, Goethe's *Faust*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and most of the plays that Martin Esslin mislabeled as "Theatre of the Absurd." We should, Abel strongly suggests, "stop lamenting the 'death' of tragedy and value justly the dramatic form which Western civilization--and that civilization only--has been able to create and to refine" (113).

Abel's "Introductory Remarks" for *Moderns on Tragedy* and his own contribution to the anthology, "Is There a Tragic Sense of Life?" (175-87), do not discuss metatheatre, but they expand upon and sometimes add to his assertions about tragedy and offer some clarifications of his reasons for insisting that tragedy has been impossible for most post-Greek dramatists. One inconsistency between the two volumes is that in *Metatheatre* Abel finds Hegel to be wrong not only about *Antigone* but also about the "altogether incorrect--though original and interesting--theory of tragedy" that he derived from his interpretation of it (4) while in *Moderns on Tragedy* Abel finds that Hegel was correct after all and uses him centrally as a source and support for his own theory of tragedy (183ff.) But this inconsistency does not materially affect Abel's conception of tragedy or his claims about the incapacity of Western self-consciousness to produce it. A possibly more serious inconsistency occurs in one of the sentences expounding his theory when Abel refers to "the lesser masters of the art of tragedy," naming "Euripides, Webster, and Tourneur at their best" and "Shakespeare in his unsuccessful tragedies, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*" (181). But this may be a slip of the pen rather than the opening to a recantation in the manner of Krutch.

A definite problem with Abel's reading of the history of World Drama is that too much of it is left completely out of the account. Only a few plays between the Greeks and the twentieth century seem worthy to be graced with the appellation "metatheatre," and it is unclear, as a result, what we are to make of the rest. Ibsen's later plays, for example, are denied the status of

tragedy, and yet they are not metatheatre either, for, according to Abel, he abandoned the form after *Peer Gynt*. So what are they? And what is Ibsen? --not to mention the dramatists who followed his lead. Are they simply irrelevancies in the two-stage history of drama Abel defines? I am also troubled by a categorization that lumps together *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Tempest*, however similar they may be in Abel's sense, without paying any attention to the important differences distinguishing them, differences that have always been perceived as differences in genre. But I shall let these objections pass, since it is Abel's conception of tragedy that I am really after.

In her review of *Metatheatre*, Susan Sontag is highly laudatory, claiming that Abel's argument is, "in the main, absolutely right." She does, however, take strong exception to an assertion of his that some of the other writers on tragedy would also disagree with: that "one cannot create tragedy without accepting some implacable values as true." After stating that "Abel considerably oversimplifies, and I think indeed misrepresents, the vision of the world which is necessary for the writing of tragedies," she adds:

If the fate of Oedipus was represented and experienced as tragic, it is not because he, or his audience, believed in "implacable values," but precisely because a crisis had overtaken those values. It is not the implacability of "values" which is demonstrated by tragedy, but the implacability of the world. The story of Oedipus is tragic insofar as it exhibits the brute opaqueness of the world, the collision of subjective intention with objective fate. After all, in the deepest sense, Oedipus is innocent; he is wronged by the gods, as he himself says in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Tragedy is a vision of nihilism, a heroic or ennobling vision of nihilism.¹⁵

This is, in my opinion, in spite of some of its details a generally incisive conception of tragedy and therefore a devastating indictment of Abel's conception and of the argument issuing from it. But the point at issue is one of the most active battlefields in the politico-religious wars constituted by writers on tragedy, and the unconditional surrender of implacable values cannot be brought about here. Fortunately, Abel's formulation of the myth can be easily dispelled without it.

The basic problem with his conception of tragedy is that he is a "narrow-definitionist"--as was Aristotle, as was Hegel, as have been so many of those seeking to define the form. That is to say, Abel derives his conception from far too small--and temporally- and geographically-limited--a base. For him, tragedy and Greek tragedy are essentially one and the same; as he remarks in the anthology, "'tragedy' remains a Greek word in no matter what language we speak" (15). *Metatheatre* would prompt one to assume that tragedy is to be defined in such a way as to encompass every Greek play that has been called a tragedy, for Abel not only finds a place in his scheme for *Oedipus at*

Colonus--whereas many, including Steiner and other strict-constructionists, would exclude it from the canon--but even uses it to represent the second (and apparently more important) of "the two essential movements of tragedy" (2). And yet, in his "Introductory Remarks" for the anthology, Abel disenfranchises Euripides, "the first of the Greek playwrights . . . who tried to write tragedy without being able to situate in a cosmic frame [any such frame having been destroyed by the Sophists] the catastrophes with which he wanted to move the public to pity and fear" (19). And the base may be even narrower than the exclusion of Euripides indicates, for the only plays by Aeschylus and Sophocles that Abel discusses in any detail, in either book, are the *Oresteia*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*; he mentions no other plays by Aeschylus, and of Sophocles' other tragedies he mentions only *Electra*. Abel is appalled, moreover, by the suggestion that tragedy might be an evolving form rather than one eternally fixed before the advent of Euripides. He includes in the anthology an excerpt from H. D. F. Kitto's book on Greek tragedy, but he attacks Kitto's view "that Euripides wrote tragedy, though of a different kind from Sophocles, as Sophocles . . . wrote a different kind of tragedy from Aeschylus": "To carry Kitto's reasoning further, we would have to say that Shakespeare wrote a fourth kind of tragedy . . . and Racine a fifth. And after all these qualifications of tragedy, we would be even less clear as to what tragedy is" (20).

A passion for clarity can, of course, easily lead to over-simplification and distortion, especially if one employs vague terms like "kind" rather than more exact terms of classification such as "species" and "subspecies." Setting aside possible presuppositions like the one above about the Sophists and another I shall have occasion to mention later, I imagine Abel developing his conception of tragedy from an examination, in the order in which they appeared, of the major surviving Greek plays bearing that label and finalizing his conception as soon as he ran into any threatened lack of clarity posed by characteristics, as in the plays of Euripides, different from those he had already met. The danger in such a process is the likelihood of stopping before acquiring the ability to distinguish between accidental characteristics and substantive ones, as if, having seen only four or five trees, one were to conclude that deciduousness was a substantive characteristic of being a tree.

The major stumbling-block for the scenario put forth in *Metatheatre* is *King Lear*. Abel is clearly aware of this, and so he goes at this play with undisguised ferocity. In one of his odder pronouncements on tragedy, he defines the tragic protagonist, at least in the second of "the essential movements of tragedy," as someone who is or has become "divine, a daemon"--that is, "someone made invulnerable to suffering by tragedy" (2, 10). One of the reasons *Macbeth* qualifies as tragedy is that its protagonist is such a daemon, while *Lear* is disqualified through "Shakespeare's signal failure to make King Lear daemonic" (8):

Shakespeare does make Lear speak marvelously--in a philosophic sense about order and anarchy, justice and injustice, lechery and virtue--but Lear's daemonic philosophizings do not suffice to make the man a daemon. [. . .] Lear, crowned with flowers, is utterly weak and defenseless. He cannot protect Cordelia. She is killed and he dies unable to avenge her. The movement of the play carries him to ultimate weakness, and there is no corresponding movement lifting him toward absolute strength. (9)

He also objects to *Lear* on the grounds that "Very probably there must be something ideal about the structure of the world in which tragedy is possible":

If the worst were the strongest, or, to use Claudel's term, the "surest," tragedy would be inconceivable. One cannot feel the power of loss when there is nothing significant to lose. Thus it is that Greek taste, which was most assured on this matter, excluded villains from the tragic universe. Shakespeare's taste was not as good, and in trying to make of *Lear* a tragedy he admitted Edmund, Goneril, and Regan into the action, giving them the most dynamic roles, too. Perhaps this is why he was unable to make Lear daemonic, as the play required. (10-11)

Finally, he objects to *Lear* as a play "in which the death of each significant and appealing character disgusts us with life and with the play, too":

We cannot accept or be exalted by the deaths of Gloucester, Cordelia, or Lear himself. There is no destiny in any of these deaths, for in a true vision of destiny, the contradiction implied by the two views [which Abel has found expressed in the play] that (1) the gods are wanton in their treatment of us, and (2) the gods are just in their treatment of us, would be transcended. The deaths of Lear and Gloucester seem to follow from the proposition that the gods are just. The death of Cordelia--which Samuel Johnson found so objectionable, and which prompted him to suggest that Shakespeare was never at his best but always somewhat labored when it came to writing tragedy--seems to follow from the proposition that we are to the gods like flies to wanton boys. So that the deaths in *King Lear* follow from conflicting principles. The work is simply not unified. And this is one reason it tends to be ineffective on the stage. (28-29)

Notice the references to Johnson and to the old chestnut about the play's lack of stage-worthiness, through which Abel seeks to mount external support for his ramshackle argument (it's a wonder he overlooked Tolstoy). Notice as well

the wholly inadequate reading of *King Lear*, whose characters offer not just two but several conflicting views of its--in keeping with tragedy--mysterious and wholly impenetrable cosmos.

For me, as for numerous others, *King Lear* is the tragedy of tragedies, and any conception of tragedy that disqualifies it must be seen as wholly inadequate either for evaluating a single play or for formulating an argument about the form's demise. Nonetheless, in the final analysis Abel's exclusion of *King Lear* is merely illustrative, not definitive. The extreme--the crippling--narrowness of applicability of his conception of tragedy would still exist even if he had managed to find a way to include this play. It might also be argued that Abel has selected not just too narrow a base from which to derive a conception of tragedy but the wrong narrow base. Brereton (see note 3) has managed to develop a quite viable, if incomplete, conception of tragedy through examining, essentially, just four plays (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Phèdre*), and he has been able to do so because these four are representative of an important reality, for which other selections might also have served. The extant Greek tragedies, even with Euripides excluded, are much too diverse, both in form and otherwise, to allow for the framing of a very systematic conception of tragedy, particularly so systematic a one as Abel seems to desire. The dramatists of the Christian era, however--partly because of the influence of Aristotle (and through him of *Oedipus Tyrannus*), and partly because of Christianity's particular version of moral responsibility for one's actions--have developed, with some input from theorists, a "modern" canon of tragedy in which the various individual examples have much more in common than do the surviving Greek plays. It is, by the way, this canon--which reaches back to include *Oedipus Tyrannus* and other Greek plays resembling it--that is usually under consideration when writers are defining "tragedy."

III

George Steiner's formulation of the myth, *The Death of Tragedy*,¹⁶ appeared in 1961, two years before *Metatheatre*. I have saved it for last, because it is this book that usually comes to mind as most fully exemplifying and establishing the idea that tragedy is no longer possible, and because one of the major features of the book reduces its primary claims to the status of fiction.

Steiner's primary argument begins with his title and with the following assertion: "From antiquity until the age of Shakespeare and Racine, such accomplishment [that of producing tragedy] seemed within the reach of talent. Since then the tragic drama is blurred or still. What follows is an attempt to determine why this should be" (10). This "attempt" consists primarily of Steiner's tracing--far more thoroughly than Krutch or Abel--the causes for the demise of tragedy. These are numerous and of several kinds: socio-political,

intellectual, imaginative. The most important of them would seem to be the complex consisting of a general "falling away of the imaginative" (121); the relationship between romanticism and revolution, with its upheaval of past hierarchies of all kinds, in art as well as society; Rousseau's successful inculcation of the idea that "the quality of being could be radically altered and improved by changes in education and in the social and material circumstances of existence" (123); the "radical critique of the notion of guilt" and the "redemptive mythology" (127) of Rousseau and romanticism generally; and "the triumph of rationalism and secular metaphysics" (193), which destroyed the notion that "mortal actions are encompassed by forces which transcend man" (193), called into question "stable and manifest" "hierarchies of worldly power" like those prevailing in "Athens, in Shakespeare's England, and at Versailles" (194), and eliminated the pre-nineteenth-century "controlling habits of the western mind," which had been "symbolic and allegoric" (196). This argument concludes, at the end of the book, with the assertion that "tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie" (353).

In formulating his conception of tragedy, Steiner avoids the kinds of vulnerability I have attributed to Krutch and Abel. He works from a much broader base than Abel would allow, including Euripides and a number of post-classical dramatists through Racine, and he even accepts an evolutionary view of tragedy--at least up to a point. The conception of tragedy that he derives from his chosen base is in many ways sound and convincing. He is no distortionist, like Krutch; he gives little attention, for example, to affirmation, and when he does address it his account is very cautious (9-10). Steiner is, in fact, pretty much a strict-constructionist, who is troubled about admitting the *Eumenides* and *Oedipus at Colonus* to the canon of tragedy (7-8), and who at one point quotes Richards' extreme statement of this position with approval (129). In stating that tragedy "requires the intolerable burden of God's presence" (353), Steiner would seem to be vulnerable to the same charge that Sontag brought against Abel, but in general *The Death of Tragedy* presents a view of tragedy that is constantly, and sensitively, attentive to its dramatization not of "implacable values" but of ultimate mystery, of its awareness, for example, "that the forces which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the governance of reason or justice," and that there is "an ironic abyss" "between knowledge and action" (6-7).¹⁷

What does make Steiner vulnerable is his being a "pre-judger."¹⁸ Instead of examining post-Racinian plays claimed to be tragedies and finding them deficient or defective in specific respects, he blocks off any possible unprejudiced view of them by first focusing on the context in which they were written in order to show how certain monumental changes in social life and in thought made tragedy no longer possible, thus thrusting the burden of proof upon the plays themselves. Indeed, the decision to see these changes as

crucial, to see, for example, the "triumph of rationalism and secular metaphysics" as marking a "point of no return" (193), also necessarily affects his view of what preceded the changes, particularly any conception of tragedy that might be used as a standard for judging individual plays. For him, whatever characterized *tragedies* prior to "the point of no return" is intrinsic to *tragedy*, a necessary feature of the form, so that what others might see as conventions become for him "natural." He argues, for example, that "the natural setting of tragedy is the palace gate, the public square, or the court chamber" because of the stable and manifest hierarchies of worldly power in Athens, Shakespeare's England, and Versailles (194). He also tries to show, though without using the word, that verse is the natural medium of tragedy (238-48).¹⁹

Similarly, if there is a "point of no return" with everything prior to it being pretty much the same, then everything after it must also be pretty much the same, at least to the extent that it must remain unlike what came before. This is why, apparently, Steiner insists (most of the time) that the changes in social life and thought that he delineates were uniform, universal, and irreversible, as opposed to their being, as is more likely the case, challenged in various ways by various thinkers and artists, literary and otherwise (Steiner's discussion of Büchner--to which I shall return--beautifully illustrates this alternative scenario). But Steiner goes even further by characterizing all that follows "the point of no return" as not only different from what preceded it but also as itself homogeneous. Having demonstrated (fairly convincingly) that Romanticism was untragic, he then adds, "In large measure, we are romantics still." He may be correct, but his evidence for this claim consists only of a certain kind of pop culture: "The evasion of tragedy is a constant practice in our own contemporary theatre and films. In defiance of fact and logic, endings must be happy. Villains reform, and crime does not pay. That great dawn into which Hollywood lovers and heroes walk, hand in hand, at the close of the story, first came up on the horizon of romanticism" (135-36). This is not unlike denying tragedy to Shakespeare's era because of the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher.

Furthermore, Steiner delineates the changes not all at once but only as he needs them; after using some of the less significant of them (110ff.) to dispose of the fairly easy target of high romantic drama, he brings out the heavy guns of forces transcending man, stable hierarchies, and symbolic and allegoric controlling habits of the Western mind (193ff.) before confronting post-romantic drama, a far more formidable opponent; and, with Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov looming on the horizon, he returns to his arsenal for the necessity of verse (238-48), conducting his discussion in such a way as to shoot down in advance a notion like "poetry of the theater" should anyone have the temerity to wield it. Nor is Steiner very concerned with consistency: we are told, for example, that twentieth-century attempts to restore verse drama are without merit since Ibsen and Chekhov showed such attempts to be

unnecessary (304), whereas earlier we had heard that the use of prose by these dramatists is one reason their plays cannot be regarded as tragedies.

Steiner is also vulnerable because of another--most astounding--feature of his book. It is generally assumed that *The Death of Tragedy* is unequivocal in its insistence that tragedy died out after Racine,²⁰ but this view of the book is far from true. Steiner, unlike Krutch, did not need a different book in order to contradict himself. Interwoven and competing for prominence with the explicit argument corresponding to its title, *The Death of Tragedy* also contains a more implicit counter-argument, which consists primarily of Steiner's awarding the status of genuine tragedy to numerous works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unequivocal examples are Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (159), Schiller's *Maria Stuart* (181), and Büchner's *Woyzeck* (270-77). In addition, Steiner also makes several pronouncements that suggest other genuine tragedies might be found as well. The "final arrogance" of the protagonist of Byron's *Manfred* has in it "a grim justice, and it gives to the close of *Manfred* an element of real tragedy" (132). Along with *Maria Stuart*, Schiller's *Don Carlos* and *Wallensteins Tod* also "belong to the world of tragedy. True, romanticism was anti-tragic; but the romantic age is also that of Beethoven" (185). Büchner, "the first who brought to bear on the lowest order of men the solemnity and compassion of tragedy" "has had successors: Tolstoy, Gorky, Synge, and Brecht" (275). "*Tristan und Isolde* is nearer to complete tragedy than anything else produced during the slack of drama which separates Goethe from Ibsen. And nearly as much may be asserted of two other operas of the late nineteenth century, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and Verdi's *Otello*." "In the twentieth century, opera has further strengthened its claim to the tragic succession" through "the coherence and eloquence of tragic emotion which we find in the operas of Janacek and Alban Berg," and "it is not a play but an opera that now holds out the most distinct promise of a future for tragedy," Schoenberg's *Moses und Aaron* (289). Claudel's *Le Soulier de Satin* is "one of the few plays in modern literature that comes near to being great tragedy" (335). *Mother Courage* looks a lot like tragedy because in "the duel between artist and dialectician" fought in this play Brecht "allows the artist a narrow but constant margin of victory; incomplete, perhaps, because of the redemptive politics which surround it, but real and consuming nevertheless" (349). And Beckett may yet produce tragedy, although it is too early to tell, and besides he is not writing plays but "antidrama" (349-50). There is, moreover, throughout Steiner's book the troubling presence of Ibsen, who, at several points, comes in and out of focus as a possible producer of genuine tragedy, although Steiner will never allow himself to make a final, unequivocal judgment on whether Ibsen is in or out.

Overall, this is a very impressive list of sure things and near things, especially if it is borne in mind how rare tragedy has always been; as Steiner quite correctly states, "In the long view . . . it is the existence of a living body of tragic drama, not the absence of it, that calls for particular note" (107).

Steiner does try to minimize the force of his list of exceptions with such odd employments of language as "*Maria Stuart* . . . is, with *Boris Godunov*, the one instance in which romanticism rose fully to the occasion of tragedy" (181), but the book's counter-argument will not go away. Near the end it even becomes explicit in the second item of what Steiner calls "the threefold possibility of our theme: that tragedy is, indeed, dead; that it carries on in its essential tradition despite changes in technical form; or, lastly, that tragic drama might come back to life" (351). He does not mean here that there are three possible views (one of which he favors and has consistently argued for) but rather that in the final analysis (and despite any further statements to the contrary in the few remaining pages of the book) he is unwilling to come out unequivocally for any one of the three.

The impressive counter-argument of *The Death of Tragedy* is quite sufficient, it seems to me, to deprive the more explicit argument's formulation of the myth of its validity by indicating that its author was only tentatively committed to it. But there is also possible an even more damning scenario for Steiner's book. It is difficult to understand why anyone would write a book like the one I have described. In speculating on this, and in taking into consideration the odd, loose structure of the book (for example, such lengthy and apparently extraneous passages as the consideration of why French neoclassical tragedy cannot "travel" and the extended analyses of plays by Corneille and Racine which seem to have little or nothing to do with either of the arguments), I am led to conclude--somewhat reluctantly--that the book began as a (selective) survey of the "serious" drama of Europe from Corneille and Racine to the coming of Ibsen but was then--perhaps as Steiner realized that some sort of argument would make his work more impressive--somewhat desultorily turned into a far-from-systematic study of tragedy, the death of tragedy, and the causes of that death. To the extent that my speculation is true, it makes Steiner's formulation of the myth even more suspect, makes it not merely the fiction the book's counter-argument reduces it to, but a fiction that even its author may not have genuinely believed.

One thing, in any event, is unequivocal about the counter-argument of *The Death of Tragedy*: its existence makes the book often assumed to have most thoroughly demonstrated the impossibility of tragedy since Racine come very close to actually demonstrating the view that I would like to see replace the myth--that tragedy survived the changes delineated by Steiner, although because of them it had to undergo transformations, just as it had to change between the Greeks and Shakespeare and at other times as well.

IV

The myth is also seriously undermined by a feature common to the work of all of its purveyors, the difficulty they have in getting around the major stumbling-block for their notion (even, to some extent, for Abel, who has his

own personal one in *King Lear*): the world's greatest dramatist since Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen. A typical method of trying to eliminate this stumbling-block is to work from ignorance--or feigned ignorance--often, like Krutch, by selecting *Ghosts* as Ibsen's most significant play in terms of tragedy. Most of those who select *Ghosts*, moreover--and this may be their reason for doing so--approach it from the standpoint of the never true and now thoroughly discredited notion that Ibsen was essentially a writer of problem plays: *Ghosts* cannot be tragic, so runs the paradigm, because it is based on what Ibsen takes to be a fundamental truth--that society destroys happiness by imposing outworn ideals on us--and the purpose of the play is to free us from this destructive influence.²¹ Another typical method is to employ sarcasm, and similar forms of loading the dice, in order to belittle Ibsen, to reduce him, as it were, from a stumbling-block to a sort of stile. In addition to what he writes about *Ghosts* in "The Tragic Fallacy," Krutch remarks that Ibsen "turned to village politics" in order to find "something small enough for him to be able to believe" (89). Heilman discusses Ibsen's plays more thoroughly and systematically than Krutch, but he nonetheless also adopts this method, as when, to take but one example, he concludes a comparison of Milton's Samson and Ibsen's Rosmer (unfavorable to the latter) with "Whereas Samson's burden was the knowledge that he had violated the will of God, Rosmer knows only that he is weak; and whereas Samson in bringing death upon himself is recovering the power to act by God's will, Rosmer is acting by his own will and, in the main, 'getting away from it all'" (253).

The master of this method is Dorothea Krook. Her examination of Ibsen is the most thorough and systematic I have seen from the purveyors of the myth, and she strives to demonstrate that her judgment of him as essentially untragic is based on the failure of his "modern" plays, with the single exception of *A Doll House* (a "good" rather than "great" tragedy, 35), to conform to her definition of tragedy. At every point in her demonstration, however, she helps herself along by drawing on the characteristic devices of the method I am describing, often coming up with new ones of her own. Although she accepts *A Doll House* as tragedy because of its affirmation of "freedom" (90-93), she begins her discussion of it with a long account of "the unpromising conditions in which Ibsen attempts to achieve tragedy." These include "the dreary, depressing commonplaceness, ordinariness, lack of distinction of Ibsen's social material as a whole," "the domestic setting, which is rendered . . . with a realism so ferocious as to leave one grasping under the massed weight of its triviality," Ibsen's language with "the banality of its colorless, graceless style," and, for *A Doll House* itself, both Nora ("What . . . can one *do* for the ends of tragedy with a little child-wife who eats macaroons, plays childish games in the nursery, and forges signatures without knowing the law about these things? How can such an absurd creature be the vessel of an experience which is genuinely tragic?") and "the limiting 'period' aspect of the play--the emancipation-of-women theme, which for many people today is hopelessly dated, and

for some people at any time would seem to offer tragic possibilities of at best a rather banal kind." Krook has even more belittling things to say of Hedda Gabler and Solness and of Ibsen himself, who "in his blindness [i.e., his "pessimism," which is as "inimical to tragedy" as optimism] remains, tragically, as incapable of writing tragedy as any romantic lady novelist in hers" (116). But she reaches her extreme in her final comment on Ibsen's heroes and heroines as a whole: "I hope I may now be allowed to say that I find them all not only unsympathetic but positively repellent. I do not like any of them: either Nora the little child-wife, or the wearisome tragedy-queens (Hedda Gabler, Rebecca West), and dislike most of all Ibsen's bourgeois Tamburlaine, Solness the master builder" (238).

Those, like Abel, Steiner, and Brereton, who treat Ibsen with more respect run into various kinds of difficulties that they cannot finally resolve. Abel rejects Ibsen as a writer of tragedy on the ground that he tried to express ideas while "in a true tragedy one is beyond thought," but then he immediately adds, "Actually, Ibsen, supposedly an intellectual playwright, was strikingly lacking in ideas" (110), and he subsequently remarks that O'Neill, Williams, and Miller "were attracted to Ibsen's form because it suggests the possibility of a serious play without the dramatist's having any need to think--except dramatically" (110). Ibsen's troubling of *The Death of Tragedy* is particularly in evidence in the book's most sustained discussion of him (289-98), which begins by acknowledging his importance: "With Ibsen the history of drama begins anew. This alone makes of him the most important playwright after Shakespeare and Racine" (290). Steiner dismisses the first four of the "modern" plays, including *Ghosts*, as "tracts" (291), but finds that "in *The Wild Duck*, drama returns to a use of effective myth and symbolic action which had disappeared from the theatre since the late plays of Shakespeare" and that thereafter "Ibsen succeeded in doing what every major playwright had attempted after the end of the seventeenth century and what even Goethe and Wagner had not wholly accomplished: he created a new mythology and the theatrical conventions with which to express it" (292). Steiner then devotes three fine pages to defining this new mythology and particularly the images and symbols Ibsen evolved for embodying it (292-95), and the reader is ready to believe that through his achievement Ibsen has somehow managed to make up for "the decline of the organic world view and of its attendant context of mythological, symbolic, and ritual reference" (292). At first Steiner seems to agree, for he writes of *The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken*, "It is in these four plays--and they are among the summits of drama--that Ibsen comes nearest tragedy." But, he adds, "it is tragedy of a peculiar, limited order," for these plays "are fables of the dead, set in a cold purgatory," in which Ibsen, starting "where earlier tragedies end," produces plots that "are epilogues to previous disaster" (296), and, moreover, "even in these late works, there is a purpose which goes beyond tragedy": "There is a way out, even if it leads up to the glaciers. There is no such way

for Agamemnon or Hamlet or Phèdre. In the gloom of the late Ibsen the core of militant hope is intact" (297). Finally, as Steiner moves on to Strindberg and Chekhov, he mentions Ibsen's falling "outside the scope of classic or Shakespearean tragedy"--but this is not exactly the point at issue, even for Steiner.

Brereton discusses at some length *Peer Gynt* and several of the plays from *Ghosts* to *The Master Builder* (192-211) in a treatment that is often searching but finally mitigated by peculiarities of his basic argument and by various forms of the "ignorance" I have mentioned above. He never finds any of the plays fully qualifying as tragedy, but he then asks, somewhat surprisingly, "Why should there be any hesitation in describing Ibsen as a tragic dramatist and his plays as tragedies of the only type which could authentically express the spirit of his time?" And his answer seems unequivocal: "The present writer accepts them as such--some of them--and subscribes to the view that any general account of tragic drama must include Ibsen alongside the major names from Aeschylus onwards" (211). Immediately, however, he begins introducing qualifications to this answer: "the difficulty of entirely squaring Ibsen's plays with any definition of the tragic, including that put forward in this book" (because of "the ambiguity of the climactic event in certain plays"), and the rejection by Ibsen and his characters of "the notion of an external authority, and with it that of any general law or sanction" (212). The second qualification is a particularly troubling one, for it seems to imply that tragedy requires as one of its elements something that Brereton has explicitly excluded as not necessary--as he has reminded us as recently as the preceding page: "Is this [Ibsen's] a tragic exploration? If one insists that tragedy should transcend nature, presumably it is not. But that condition, as we have pointed out, is not indispensable." Brereton then goes on, without any clear transition, to suggest that Ibsen is to blame for some of the worst abuses of subsequent drama, and there is no conceivable explanation for this, unless--adopting a method of Krutch, Heilman, and Krook--he is trying to undermine the reader's respect and admiration for Ibsen. It is as if Brereton does not really want to admit Ibsen to the canon, and has done so simply because he can find no final and convincing basis on which to reject him. Brereton's failure to contain Ibsen in some kind of coherent view has much the same effect as the similar failures of Abel and Steiner and the adoption by Krutch, Heilman, and Krook of the methods I have described above. All of them are unwittingly betraying that there is something seriously defective in both their conceptions of tragedy and their scenarios for the history of drama.

V

Given the ease with which the myth collapses under examination, one has to wonder why it was ever formulated. The motives of its purveyors are no doubt various. One has to assume, despite the contradictions I have exposed,

their having at least some belief in the validity of their claims. And, of course, these claims are not entirely unrelated to the reality they address. Drama did change in certain important ways after Racine. Tragedy had always been rare, even in the best of times, but never before had it been so threatened with being jostled completely out of sight as it was by the proliferation of lifeless imitations of the Greeks and of Shakespeare and his fellows that began in the eighteenth century and continued into the twentieth (although the twentieth-century continuation was to some extent disguised by being heralded as a "revival"), and I suspect that all but Krutch were somehow inspired by the brouhaha erupting in 1949 in response to the premiere of *Death of a Salesman*. As, moreover, the living drama began to break with tradition and to evolve countless new variations in form and style, it became more and more difficult to perceive any line of tragic succession, or, indeed, even to continue to think in terms of the traditional divisions. It is also true that the changes in society and/or sensibility that Abel, Krutch, and particularly Steiner make so much of have some basis in fact, although if changes of this sort are to be taken as unequivocal proof that tragedy is doomed then Krutch and Steiner must yield to Abel because of the important change he sees separating Shakespeare from the Greeks. As I shall suggest shortly, however, changes of this sort might more accurately be seen as occasioning a resurgence of tragedy rather than necessitating its demise.

One can also discern in the purveyors of the myth personal motives that suggest they are making more of the genuine evidence than it justifies. Abel, of course, is anxious to let the world know about his discovery, metatheatre, and Steiner, as I have suggested, perhaps found himself in search of a thesis. But, I suspect, of the personal motives Krutch's are probably the most important since, ultimately, they pertain to all the purveyors of the myth. Sontag begins her review of *Metatheatre* by stating,

Modern discussions of the possibility of tragedy are not exercises in literary analysis; they are exercises in cultural diagnostics, more or less disguised. [. . .] The burial of a literary form is a moral act, a high achievement of the modern morality of honesty. For, as an act of self-definition, it is also a self-entombment. Such burials are customarily accompanied by all the displays of mourning; for we mourn ourselves, when we name the lost potential of sensibility and attitude which the defunct form incarnated. (132-33)

This statement does not go far enough. "The Tragic Fallacy," like *The Modern Temper* as a whole, clearly reveals that Krutch--who eventually retired to a desert to cultivate his garden--hated the modern world and yearned, nostalgically, for a lost ideal that no doubt never existed in a form corresponding to his desire. Steiner is much less gloomy, but it is not at all difficult to see something quite similar in his analysis. And although Sontag exempts Abel,

with his cheery acceptance of metatheatre as a reasonable substitute, from her generalization, he, too, betrays at least a trace of the Krutchean motivation in remarks like those about the Sophists' destruction of any possible "cosmic frame" and the superiority of Greek taste to Shakespeare's.

A final possible personal motive is, I believe, implicit in the affirmationist conception of tragedy held by Krutch and others, for this conception allows its adherents to admire tragedy while protecting themselves from any disturbing aspects it may exhibit; what Michelle Gellrich (see note 2) has written about Hegel's dialectical version of tragedy is equally true, with appropriate modifications, of the affirmationists (who, incidentally, probably derive from Hegel): "To submit conflict to the pattern of a philosophically grounded system, that is, to the controls of reason, however reason may be conceived, is to tame its subversive vigor and master its violence within containing frameworks whose legitimacy the plays themselves have already called into question" (xiii). It is easy to see how this motive may also apply to those purveyors of the myth who do not subscribe to affirmation as tragedy's primary purpose. What better way is there to "tame" tragedy than to bury it safely in the distant past?²²

VI

The proper antidote to the myth is to study the plays and novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not in order to discover how they justify a preconceived idea but to see in what ways some of them may be said to continue the tradition of tragedy even as they modify it to bring it into line with the new context or contexts in relation to which they provide the "pleasure proper to tragedy." But perhaps, as Reiss argues (see note 2) "continue" is not the appropriate word. For Reiss, tragedy is most accurately defined in terms not of its form and subject matter but of its function as discourse, a function he traces briefly for the Greeks and extensively for the Renaissance and neoclassical era. Tragedy, according to Reiss, makes discourse possible for each new "sociocultural domain [of] a given time and place" by grasping and enclosing "a certain 'absence of significance' . . . that renders impossible, before such particular ordering, the meaningfulness of any such a discourse" (2-3). Tragedy is not, therefore, a "homogeneous literary discourse" but "simply a series of theatrical attempts to invent and grasp what a succession of different periods experienced as the inexpressible" (282). Reiss himself supports the myth, for although he tentatively sees in our own time the emerging of conditions that would make tragedy possible--and necessary--once again (300), he denies anything similar for the nineteenth century--at least after Schiller--and, through his consideration of *Ghosts* (see note 21), rejects Ibsen as a writer of tragedy. If, however, I correctly understand Reiss's analysis of the conditions prevailing at the inception of a new "sociocultural domain," it seems to me that the nineteenth century, made bereft of a coherent system of beliefs

and values--of a governing metaphysic--by the changes touched on or enumerated by writers like Krutch and Steiner, unequivocally qualifies as a "moment of 'discursive despair,'" "a time of crisis when . . . systems of action have again lost their meaningfulness" (300), thus necessitating "a profound reorganization of the political and social order" (282)--as, that is, a time and place demanding tragedy. So I gladly modify the sentence opening this paragraph to have it urge studying writers like Ibsen in order to see how they may be said to have revived tragedy after a period of its extended moribundity.

I take this line of thought a step further by having one last go at the myth. To counteract it once and for all, I propose a counter-myth, so that the two may contend with one another in some kind of mythic space while tragedy itself emerges free from the fray to become available for reasonably objective study. Murray Krieger (see note 12) regards the "cathartic principle" as "evidence of the need in tragedy to have dissonance exploded, leaving only the serenity of harmony behind." For him, therefore, traditional tragedy itself ultimately suppresses "the fearsome chaotic necessities of the tragic vision" (132), making that form incompatible with "the self-conscious modernism that has dominated the last century and a half of our psychological history; the modernism that is characterized by fragmentation rather than by the ever-united synthesis which Hegel tried valiantly, if vainly, to impose upon it as its salvation" (134). Self-conscious modernism, indeed, results in a "modern tragic vision" that perceives the "Dionysian without the Appolonian," that perceives life as "unalleviated, endlessly and unendurably dangerous, finally destructive and self-destructive--in short, demoniacal" (137-38), and it is this "modern tragic vision" that Krieger explores in his book. Tragedy, I presume, cannot exist without the tragic vision, and I also presume that the tragic vision can exist only through and because of tragedy. Looked at from this point of view, Krieger's analysis, drawing on the same data as the purveyors of the death-of-tragedy myth, comes close to turning their myth on its head. It is but a small step to use his analysis to conclude that traditional tragedy always fell short of the potentialities of tragedy and that instead of dying out with the advent of the modern era tragedy was not actually born until then.

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Notes

1. *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, A Dramabook, 1963) vii.
2. The dogmatic quality of discussions of tragedy has always been in evidence and continues to be so. The flurry has abated considerably since the 1960s, but writing about tragedy has not ceased and probably never will; the 1980s have seen the intitial development of what might be termed a sort of "born-again" view of tragedy, as post-structuralist theorists seek to free it from virtually all that has been hitherto written about it. See, for example, Timothy J. Reiss, *Tragedy and Truth: Studies in the Development of a Renaissance and Neoclassical*

Discourse (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982), Stephen Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), and Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988). Adrian Poole, in *Tragedy: Shakespeare and the Greek Example* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), does not employ poststructuralist methods, but he achieves similar results by ignoring what has been written about tragedy as he analyzes a number of particular tragedies.

3. I am thinking especially of Robert Bechtold Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1968), Dorothea Krook, *Elements of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969), and, to some extent, Geoffrey Brereton, *Principles of Tragedy: A Rational Examination of the Tragic Concept in Life and Literature* (Coral Gables: U of Miami P, 1968). Even Northrop Frye, who explicitly acknowledges the existence of "low mimetic" as well as "high mimetic" tragedy (*Anatomy of Criticism* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957] 38), helps further the cause, apparently inadvertently, in his extended discussion of "The Mythos of Autumn: Tragedy," which, with one or two exceptions, mentions only high mimetic examples of the form (206-23). One of the odder items in the dissemination of the myth is Louis I. Bredvold's "The Modern Temper and Tragic Drama" (*The Quarterly Review*, LXI.18 [May 21, 1955]: 207-13), which ostensibly begins as an attack on Krutch but soon turns out to be a complete endorsement of Krutch's major premise while seemingly modifying one or two of his specific articulations of it.

4. Jeffrey N. Cox's *In the Shadows of Romance: Romantic Tragic Drama in Germany, England, and France* (Athens: Ohio State UP, 1987) exemplifies this procedure, for his generally excellent study is, as he notes, at least in part an attempt to answer Steiner by demonstrating that romantic dramatists indeed wrote "tragic dramas--that is, plays still in touch with a tragic sense of life that occupy the same place within the vision of romanticism that traditional tragedy held within earlier cultures" (xii).

5. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929; reprinted with a new Preface by Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., A Harvest Book, 1956. I quote from the reprint; "The Tragic Fallacy" appears on 79-97.

6. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1953.

7. See Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1973) 158-59.

8. So I interpret his central statement on tragedy:

It is essential to recognise that in the full tragic experience there is no suppression. The mind does not shy away from anything, it does not protect itself with any illusion, it stands uncomforted, unintimidated, alone and self-reliant. The test of its success is whether it can face what is before it and respond to it without any of the innumerable subterfuges by which it ordinarily dodges the full development of experience. Suppressions and sublimations alike are devices by which we endeavour to avoid issues which might bewilder us. The essence of Tragedy is that it forces us to live for a moment without them. When we succeed we find, as usual, that there is no difficulty; the difficulty came from the suppressions and sublimations. The joy which is so strangely at the heart of the experience is not an indication that 'all's right with the world' or that "somewhere, somehow, there is Justice"; it is an indication that all is right here and now in the nervous system.

From *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, n.d.) 246.

9. "The Saint as Tragic Hero: *Saint Joan and Murder in the Cathedral*," in *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*, ed. Cleanth Brooks (New Haven: Yale UP, 1955) 152.

10. Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. K. W. Deutsch (Boston: Beacon, 1952); the passage from which I quote is reprinted in *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 14.

11. See especially Chapter 1 of the work cited in note 2.

12. "Tragedy and the Tragic Vision," from *The Tragic Vision* (New York: Holt, 1960), reprinted in *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism* 132-33.

13. See also Heilman's discussions of Shakespeare's Richard II (180), Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman (233), and Ibsen's Rosmer as contrasted with Milton's Samson (253).

14. *Moderns on Tragedy: An Anthology of Modern and Relevant Opinions on the Substance and Meaning of Tragedy* (Greenwich, CT.: Fawcett, 1967).

15. "The Death of Tragedy," reprinted in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, 1966) 134, 136.

16. New York: Knopf, 1961.

17. Cox (see note 4) finds Steiner's view of tragedy to be inconsistent because on the one hand he "argues that in tragedy, from the Greeks to Racine, 'mortal actions are encompassed by forces which transcend man'" and thus sees tragedy as "revealing a divine realm," while on the other hand he rejects the notion of Christian tragedy and argues that the romantics were unsuited for tragedy because of their acceptance of "a Rousseauist, secular 'redemptive mythology'" (3-4). I do not, however, see any essential conflict in Steiner's overall view of tragedy between the notion that "mortal actions are encompassed by forces which transcend man" and the idea of ultimate mystery, while, of course, any redemptive mythology would be incompatible with the latter.

18. Krutch, given his employment of a similar argument, is also a pre-judger, though in discussing him I found it more useful to focus on the distortionist character of his formulation.

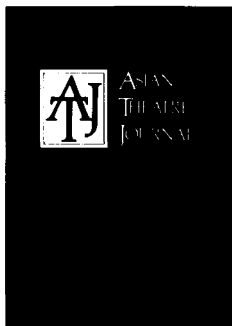
19. Cox objects to Steiner's analysis on the ground that "his definition of the tragic is normative": "Like most students of tragedy, he establishes a set of criteria and rejects as non-tragic any work that does not meet it. Such a normative definition tends to condemn change in a genre" (xi). This is, of course, true of Krutch and Abel as well—and of all those who, explicitly or otherwise, fix a point after which tragedy died. It is a given for the formulators of the myth and one of the reasons I seek to dispel it.

20. Cf. *Metatheatre* 112 (although Abel uses the word "suggests") and Charles I. Glicksberg, *The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Dell, 1970 [originally published by Southern Illinois UP in 1963]): "George Steiner, in *The Death of Tragedy*, insists eloquently that tragedy is dead. He even denies the possibility of the restoration of tragic drama" (xii).

21. This misleading interpretation—and use—of *Ghosts* still occurs from time to time; as late as 1980, it is adopted by Reiss (see note 2), although his version of it (299) is far more sophisticated than what one usually finds—for example, in Elder Olson's *Tragedy and the Theory of Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1961) 47. Sometimes an even less likely candidate than *Ghosts* is chosen: Heilman, determined to show Ibsen's "eagerness to make points" in his first four "modern" plays, ignores *Ghosts* to focus on *An Enemy of the People* (42), and Krook finds that of all Ibsen's works only *A Doll House* qualifies as tragedy.

22. Unsurprisingly, none of the purveyors of the myth that I have discussed or glanced at show signs of a fairly common motive for proclaiming—or calling for—the death of tragedy, that which stems from a Marxist point of view. The Marxist, such as Augusto Boal in his lengthy analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics* in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride [New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985]), tends to see tragedy as a political tool, an "oppressive system" through which the dominant ideology seeks to purge by intimidation "all antisocial elements . . . including the revolutionary, transforming impetus" (46-7). The Marxist is eager to explain tragedy—and thus deprive it of its impact—in some such manner as this, and would be inclined to celebrate any news of its demise, because tragedy is uncompromising in its insistence that there are some inevitabilities in human experience that are not remediable through social and political action.

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