

## Tragedy and Tragic Vision: A Darwinian Supplement to Thomas Van Laan

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"The last act is tragic, however happy all the rest of the play is; at the last a little earth is thrown upon our head, and that is the end forever."  
--Pascal, *Pensée* No. 210

"One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that is simply a mess."  
--Samuel Beckett

The debate over the death of tragedy has been a frustrating and sentimental affair, in Schiller's sense that we are outside looking nostalgically back at something that is apparently lost to us, something that was practiced and experienced "simply" by others who shared beliefs different from our own. The question is: what is supposed to be lost--the genre or the vision, or both? In "The Death-of-Tragedy Myth" (Spring 1991 *JDTC*), Thomas Van Laan suggests that these are inseparable things:

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. (29)

I am in general agreement with Van Laan (against the arguments of Krutch, Abel, Steiner, and others) that tragedy survives and that it does so, and will probably continue to do so, through all cultural change, but there are some implications in Van Laan's remark that call for a closer look, not as a critique of Van Laan but as another way of conceiving the problem.

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## I

Van Laan seems to be saying that tragedy and the tragic vision are two distinct things that have a symbiotic relationship to each other. One is not the other, but one is impossible without the other. But how are they different things? Do they have the relationship of, say, form to content, of product to process, representation to theme, poem to poet (or seer)? I assume he means that the tragic vision somehow depends upon tragic poems, plays and novels as its (more or less) material foundation. But there are testaments of tragic vision in philosophy that barely mention tragic works, either as products of the vision or as a necessary source of its appearance; even if this weren't the case, however, it is quite possible to develop a tragic theory of human experience without much, or any, reference to tragic literature. Surely, then, we must assume the possibility that there are people in the world who are what Murray Krieger would call "tragic visionaries" even though they have never read or seen or written a tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Improbable perhaps, but something to consider. Perhaps Van Laan's statement is better taken to mean that tragedy can exist only through and because of the tragic vision in the sense that it is the vision that determines the nature of the work. The visionary artist "sees" the world tragically and then imitates what he or she sees in a work we would call a tragedy. Still, this isn't right either because it suggests that all works that are legitimately called tragedies are necessarily informed by a tragic vision, or, taking visionary in Krieger's sense (and perhaps Van Laan is), that all tragedies have tragic visionaries as their protagonists. It is relatively easy to accept either of these notions in the cases of certain (but by no means all) tragic works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Racine, Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann; but they become questionable when applied to Kyd, Jonson, Corneille or Dryden who wrote tragedies that do not seem, on the whole, to inspire reference to a "tragic vision"; nor do they seem to have protagonists who could be called visionaries. Finally, to take the case nearest to us, *Death of a Salesman* seems in every respect a "true" tragedy, if only because its author deliberately set out to write one and has as much right to the term as the authors of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and *The London Merchant*. But something about the play suggests that Miller's "vision," not to mention Willy's, is far from what one might call tragic--at least in the sense that we say Sophocles or Shakespeare or Dostoevsky or Thomas Mann, in their foremost tragedies, see the world tragically. This has nothing whatever to do with the quality of *Salesman* as a play, but with the modesty of its conception of the origin and metaphysical depth of human catastrophe. Indeed, I wonder if any *deliberate* attempt to write tragedy, in modern or any other terms, can spring from a truly tragic vision. The very premeditation of such a project implies *some other* kind of orientation (social, aesthetic, reactionary), something, in

short, like Maxwell Anderson's attempt to bring verse back to tragedy because "it is inescapable that prose is the language of information and poetry the language of emotion."<sup>2</sup> Can one imagine Kafka saying, "It's time we wrote about angst" and sitting down to write *The Trial*?

This is not the issue I want to debate here. My feeling, however, is that tragic visionaries are not produced by social or aesthetic motives and that they occur more or less as the great comic, epic and religious visionaries occur--rarely and in single numbers. I think we are inevitably forced to disengage, or at least loosen, the bond between tragedy as a genre and tragic vision as a philosophical or a thematic standpoint. They do not *necessarily* occur together, though they are apt to be co-present and indistinguishable in many of the works that make up the canon of the world's great tragedies. All that we can say with some assurance is that there is something about the tragic form that invites the tragic vision, and something about the tragic vision that moves some of its visionaries, some of the time, to write tragedies (while others write music or paint, others do philosophy and still others simply carry on with what Unamuno called a tragic sense of life). But there is also something about the tragic form that invites the melodramatic "vision" (the strong organization of human energy into good/bad polarities), the Satanic, the didactic, the ethical, the sentimental and the pathetic, all of which *might* serve as a perspective from which to write a tragedy and yet have little to do with a fully tragic vision. For example, I might try my hand at comedy and the result, though recognizable *as* a comedy, may get a few laughs but be far from comic; and one of the deficiencies may be precisely that I have no comic vision but know only how to string a few jokes together. The same is true for certain writers of tragedy who knew only how to string a few deaths together. In the 1620s William Rowley wrote a play called *All's Lost by Lust* which contains so many gratuitous murders and suicides in the last act that it would be a hilarious satire of tragedy if put on the modern stage. To say that Rowley wrote a tragedy seems unavoidable; to claim that he was animated by the tragic vision is to make a visionary of every hack who has ever cashed in on the tragic form.

Of course one might say, "Yes, but isn't an assumption of 'vision' and 'high' seriousness implied in our use of the term tragedy? Don't we *know* a tragedy from a goat-song?" This seems to me the main problem: we have given tragedy an honorific status in confusing it so easily with vision; and that is why we cannot decide whether it is dead or alive: something *like* it is still around, but it doesn't come in the right shape. In my own view I. A. Richards is right in saying that tragedy, as a coalescence of vision and form, is one of the rarest things in literature<sup>3</sup>; at any rate, four-fifths of the plays that go under the name wouldn't make it to the quarter-finals of a contest in Tragic Vision. Only by drawing a distinction between practice and vision can we see that the

whole death-of-tragedy debate is based on a questionable premise that equates the tragic vision *with the form taken by past tragedies*. If, like George Steiner, you believe that Shakespeare and Racine are the last genuine tragic visionaries you will in all likelihood locate the characteristics of tragic structure and effect in some sort of a composite "form" based on everything up to your cut-off point.<sup>4</sup> If, like F. L. Lucas, you believe that tragic vision implies only a "serious and true" reading of life, then the form tragedy may take will be virtually open-ended and will include everything that is "serious and true," whatever you mean by that.<sup>5</sup> In any event, as long as vision and form are considered as aspects of the same 'thing' past models of tragic structure will always dictate one's conception of tragic vision itself, and vice versa--a kind of Procrustean bed whirling in a hermeneutic circle.

Another corollary to this problem is the high risk that any commentary so derived will equate the tragic hero and the tragic visionary, as if the protagonist were the direct extension of the artist's tragic vision, and when heroic and visionary protagonists fall out of the picture "high" tragedy becomes impossible. Among other things, such a conflation leads to judgments that ignore the cathartic influence of artistic formulation itself, irrespective of the vision of the protagonist; so we find such sentiments (eg. Krutch) as, "If Pirandello [or Beckett, or Kafka, or Chekhov] believes life is that bad, man that poor, why did he bother to write?" which ignore the possibility that the representation of suffering may, in certain hands at least, constitute a cathartic and artistic "revenge" on the condition itself. Thus there is an entire dimension in which the value of tragedy and the tragic vision, when they coalesce--or when the vision coalesces with something else--lies not in the "message" of the expression or the size of the tragic hero, or in some precarious balance between the ethical, the religious and the tragic, but in the power of the artist to evoke the tragic condition, however darkly perceived, as unflinchingly as possible. We hear a great deal about how "despair" has ruined tragedy, but that seems to me a variation of the old argument between the pot and the kettle. If the tragic vision was capable of dealing with the deaths of Lear and Cordelia it should have no trouble dealing with the more recent death of God and all the "despair" that followed that event. Why should we not extend to modern tragedy--or, again, certain instances of it--the same motive and cathartic power that we extend, say, to Grunewald's *Crucifixion* which paints Christ and the world in which he dies in gruesome detail? Is it our belief in Christ's heavenly transcendence that overpowers such dark realism? Or could it be Grunewald's own vision--which is to say, his insistence on looking so precisely, and darkly, on the event?

## II

It is clear that we need some sense of what the term tragic vision may mean. The problem, as always in these matters, is that so many people have attempted to define "the tragic" and I would like, if possible, to avoid privileging one view over another. Moreover, to derive a definition of tragic vision from past formulations amounts to spinning in the same hermeneutical circle I have just described. My (partial) solution to the difficulty is to look for a tendency, based on philosophical formulations, that might be helpful in differentiating tragic vision from, say, the religious, ethical or Satanic visions, which I take to be tragedy's nearest "visionary" neighbors and the grounds on which most of the intermingling takes place. Here I am making a subjective judgment already, but I am guided less by a thesis than by a curiosity about what a tragic vision would be if we were to determine it on a comparative visionary basis and without the influence of tragic practice. In other words, one can assume that plays, even those we regard as examples of the highest tragedy, are conditioned by, even generically contaminated by, a complex cultural motivation that springs from a number of imperatives. One doesn't write a play (or a novel) in order to demonstrate the tragic but to say something about the face of disaster in a *specifically* tragic world. To come back to religion, there is the religious vision and then there are Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist "faiths," all of which are concrete instances of a universal that differs in its "local" directives. The question, then, would be: what constitutes the universal of the tragic vision, before it gets put into tragic "works" written in and for specific societies? At the risk of being rather bland--or Procrustean--I will suggest two foundational propositions that, in one way or another, are not accommodated by any other vision. They are not my own formulations but persistently underlie conceptions of the tragic since Schelling, if not Pascal. They are also deducible from many plays; but that is another matter.

I assume, first, that a tragic vision is an extreme "view" of human experience. And by extreme I mean having no further extensibility--if you will, an end-of-the-road conception. Here Northrop Frye's idea that "the basis of the tragic vision is being in time" might serve as a bottom line. Unfortunately, one might also say that the basis of the comic (or any other) vision is "being in time," since *being* and *time* are pretty much all we've got. But what we mean by the phrase--or what Frye means by it--is the "one-directional quality of life . . . [wherein] all experience vanishes, not simply into the past, but into nothingness, annihilation."<sup>6</sup> Or, as Camus's Caligula simply puts it, "Men die and they are not happy." The not-happiness may vary in intensity from David Reisman's "persistent low-keyed displeasure" to Munch's shriek, but it is not the consequence of a lack of comfort or security in the social world, something

somebody *does* to you or something that could be repaired if taxes were lowered or there were equal opportunity for all. It springs from an awareness that time and value cannot be called back and the belief that Being has no 'other' except Nothingness. I do not take this as a cynical, pessimistic or, in Murray Krieger's word, "demoniacal" postulate. But why so bleak? Because it is the only extremity to be weighed equally against its non-tragic antithesis: the possibility that there is a 'next' life or some form of redemption for this one. If this were not the case, what need for fictions or philosophy grounded in the confrontation with death and the conspicuous absence of redemption? Why the ongoing debate about whether *The Book of Job*, *The Eumenides*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, or *Faust* are guided by a tragic vision, on one hand, or by some sort of a philosophy of deliverance, on the other? In short, in the tragic view something tugs us toward the *terminal realization* that nothingness is the likeliest of two possible extremes in any dialectic on human destiny. Anything else could easily be contained within the religious, or some other redemptive vision and though such visions often participate in the tragic they avoid the extreme consequence of tragic understanding, which is, as Yogi Berra would say, that when it's over it's over.

As a corollary to this first point we should add immediately, via Max Scheler, the sense of an absolute indifference in the causal order toward the order of human value. Here George Steiner has it absolutely right: tragic catastrophe is irreparable, inexplicable, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with justice or injustice, either human or divine.<sup>7</sup> If there were a direct relationship between causality and human value, if there were a clear sense in which we all get "what we deserve" in a world with a dependable set of rules, there would be no need for tragedy and nothing in life to arouse a tragic vision. But this is far from the case. As Scheler puts it, "The simple fact that the sun shines on the good and bad alike makes tragedy possible."<sup>8</sup> And, we might add, inevitable as a vision and indispensable as an artistic form.

The second 'extreme' proposition of a tragic vision is that the visionary accepts this basic condition of our "thrownness" into an indifferent world without the least suppression, subterfuge, or whimpering. In the tragic view, as I. A. Richards puts this point (in a passage quoted by Van Laan):

The mind does not shy away from anything, it does not protect itself with any illusion [of heaven, hell, or God], it stands uncomforted, unintimidated, alone and self-reliant. . . . The essence of Tragedy is that it forces us to live for a moment without them. (246)

For the moment any of these various subterfuges appear, we leave the tragic vision and enter the religious, the mystical, the pathetic, the ethical, or some other sphere.

These seem to me the two fundamental and categorical characteristics that form the ground of a tragic vision. Beyond them, we may mention at least two auxiliary refinements that derive from this base and indeed take us closer to the actual practice and form of tragedy itself. First: human beings have a tendency, through desire or fear, through a kind of self-momentum (that tragedians eventually call hubris or hamartia) to create situations in which they inadvertently radicalize the destructive power of the causal series, thus distributing the "responsibility" for the tragic condition between individual and world. This sense of a causal balance is implicit even in Aristotle, and without it the tragic vision immediately becomes indistinguishable from the Satanic (whose main postulate is that the world is malevolent, as opposed to indifferent). In short, it is a tragic truth that we do, in part, author our own fates, and this is one of the factors that allows us to resist giving the name of tragedy to natural disasters, to casual or mass slaughter, or to most naturalistic plays and novels with social agendas. Second, as a consequence the tragic vision, like tragedy itself (usually), implies a certain factor of recognition, or awareness--if nothing else, an awareness that each "single and peculiar" life, despite the indifference of the causal order, has, after all, its own intellectual shape.

Many theorists who claim that tragedy is dead associate this recognition with the principle of "affirmation" and cite its absence from modern works as evidence for the death of tragedy; but like Van Laan I can find no quality of affirmation in the most profound tragedies--and no reason for assuming it should be part of a tragic philosophy. Concomitantly, I suggest that one of the main differences between classical and modern tragedy is that the latter is more often than not written from the standpoint of recognition (or, if you prefer, self-consciousness) rather than that of causality, and this may be one reason that its patron saint is Prince Hamlet. However, the principle of affirmation, as usually elaborated, seems to me another subterfuge for whistling ourselves through the graveyard.<sup>9</sup> This is not to equate affirmation with nobility in the tragic protagonist. Dying "well" (with honor, courage, dignity) is certainly admirable in life and a desired ingredient in the tragic hero; but it doesn't change the consequences of tragic fate itself. When Horatio speaks of flights of angels singing Hamlet to his rest we take it as a metaphor for Hamlet's value to him (and to us) rather than an expression of real possibility. Even if Shakespeare personally believed that angels exist, he kept the belief out of the play, and in this respect his vision was tragic rather than Christian. In any case, affirmation seems as poor a word for what arises in tragic catharsis, on the optimistic side, as Schopenhauer's resignation is on the pessimistic. Whatever else tragedy may teach us about our virtues and capacities, the perception it gives us, when it is the full embodiment of tragic vision, is apocalyptic, or the feeling, as Richards puts it so beautifully, that

everything is "right here and now in the nervous system"<sup>10</sup> and that becoming itself has ceased to be a matter of concern. For affirmation, then, we might substitute Shakespeare's "readiness" or "ripeness," words that catch the precise sense of the finality of our fall from the tree of experience.

I do not expect every reader to find this description agreeable. But I know of no other way to differentiate tragedy as an aesthetic form and tragic vision as a philosophical outlook than to make an assertion along some such lines. I have tried to be at once as basic and radical as possible (in the sense of following implications to the end of the line) and my design was not to prepare a measuring instrument that will allow me to prefer some works over others according to how well they fulfill my criteria (though that is indeed possible). As I say, it is an extreme view of the tragic condition itself--the ground of its discontent, one might say--and not necessarily a view that all tragic visionaries follow to "the end of the line." We glimpse it briefly, however, in phrases like Lear's "unaccommodated man," Hamlet's "quintessence of dust," and the Greek refrain "Count no man happy. . . ." This is not to say that *King Lear* or *Hamlet* themselves are so unrelievedly dark, only that the "pure" tragic condition is that of a world in which we have no compensation, beyond the life lived, for the descent into the dust. Indeed, I think it is essential to get over the notion that tragedy is somehow privileged over other forms or that it has to be either present or absent. It is not so much a category to put things in (or exclude them from) as a noun that is always modified by at least one adjective, the adjective standing for the standpoint from which the visionary views the condition. There is even a sense in which one might say that we make art, in all its forms, in reaction to this condition. However, I do feel that such a scheme, even if you wish to alter particulars or change the emphasis, has certain advantages. For one thing, it gets us past the habit of identifying works as tragic only if they are *called* tragedies and follow recognizable (ie., traditional) tragic form. We are faced with a seeming paradox that is really no paradox at all: that a dramatist who possesses a tragic vision does not necessarily write tragedies in the formal sense of the term; and a dramatist who writes tragedies does not necessarily possess a tragic vision.

In some respects it is unfortunate that the word tragic must be used to describe "tragic" vision because it implies a derivation (in more than the etymological sense) rather than an affinity. The central quality of a tragic perspective, in its most extreme manifestation, is that it differs from the ethical, moral, religious and Satanic perspectives (in *their* "pure" or extreme assertions) in its dual relation to being and disaster. By this I mean simply that if ethical, moral or religious violations and assertions instigate a tragic situation (and they usually do), they have only secondarily, or "adjectivally," to do with the thematic that emerges from the experience (as one might speak

of Ibsen's *ethical* tragedy, Chekhov's *pathetic* tragedy, or Strindberg's *psychopathic* tragedy).<sup>11</sup> As the substantive perspective the tragic always leads beyond its social origin in empirical life to the confrontation with nothingness: otherwise one could explain *King Lear* as a play deploring filial abuse of the elderly and *Macbeth* as a moral injunction against manslaughter. If you find God during tragic disaster, or if God finds you, or if you die standing up for your rights or the rights of others, or some other construction of the superego (such as saving the community water supply), your fall isn't tragic--on that account anyway--but something closer to divine comedy or heroic or polemical drama. George Steiner defines tragedy as:

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.<sup>12</sup>

I am not sure how metaphorically Steiner intends this statement, but if the idea is that there must be an operative God or gods in tragedy--of a different order from, say, Lukacs's "spectator" God<sup>13</sup>--and that when there are none about tragedy becomes impossible, then it seems to me another of those sentimental claims that ties tragedy once again to the historical cycle: no gods, no tragedy.<sup>14</sup> In most cases the damage directly rendered by the gods in tragedies could as easily have been rendered by human beings. As for their being *indirectly* responsible, Shakespeare speaks interchangeably of the gods or of God or of Fortune or Providence and it isn't clear from the plays what role any of these things has in the tragedy. The damage is all done by people who have good or bad intentions, and the gods are usually brought in as a kind of hyperbole for maximizing the scope of disaster, rather like metaphysical swearing. And when daemonic power *is* clearly present--as in *Macbeth* or *Death in Venice*--we are not quite sure whether it isn't a metaphor for human daemonic power, or a way of confusing the distinction between the psychology of the protagonist and something infinite, or at least unlocatable, outside of him or her.

However, the moment gods appear on the stage, as in Euripides, the metaphysical air goes out of the balloon, and I take this as an indication that gods are more believable in tragedies when they stay at home and spectate or work through other mortals like priests. Visible or invisible, though, I can't see how god-power differs, in purely tragic terms, from the power unleashed, for example, by Mme Zachanassian in Duerrenmatt's *The Visit*, who is after all a very rich lady who knows human nature very well. There may be good reasons to argue that *The Visit* isn't a tragedy, or tragic, but the absence of God's shadow doesn't seem a convincing one. Anyway, it is simplistic to claim that modern "gods" are no longer divinities but diminished forces like money,

greed, jealousy, corporate business, and social phenomena of this sort, and therefore tragedy is not possible. For all practical (ie., destructive) purposes, the same forces are operating in Shakespeare's world, and if one simply drops all the references to the gods or Providence or Fortune the consequences would still be wholly believable in terms of human appetite. The point, anyway, isn't who or what causes the disaster, but that it is inevitable and answerless and god-power, as conceived by creative human playwrights, is designed to enhance both effects.

### III

In his final paragraph, Van Laan introduces what he calls a counter-myth as a way of freeing tragedy from the myth of its death so that it may "become available for reasonably objective study" (29). The proposal is offered tentatively as an extension of Murray Krieger's notion that modern tragic vision perceives the "Dionysian without the Apollonian" and it views life as "unalleviated, endlessly and unendurably dangerous, finally destructive and self-destructive--in short, the demoniacal."<sup>15</sup> Van Laan concludes:

It is but a small step to use [Krieger's] 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. (29)

This seems a doubtful claim, but it does clear the slate in a Draconian way. I would simply propose a *semi*-countermyth that would not require that we throw out history, like the baby in the adage, with the death-myth.

Once we are rid of the notion that tragic vision depends on the tragic form as its host--that is, once we cease associating the tragic with what amounts to an historically derived model (the mythic "median" hero, hubris, hamartia, reversal and recognition, and above all, death itself as a consequence of 'all of the above')--we have no cause to say that tragic spirit is dead or dying or less valuable or less cathartic than that of earlier tragedy. For one thing, there is a good possibility that what "purists" may admire in Aeschylus or Sophocles or Shakespeare, and find deficient in modern works, has less to do with tragic vision, per se, than with a variety of other factors such as aesthetic pleasure and the always tempting notion that the grass is always greener elsewhere. For example, you might prefer Shakespearean poetry to modern household prose, or Greek monumentality to living-room realism, but account for the preference by claiming that one was more tragic than the other (when what you really mean is that one is more sublime). Again, tragedy tends to be the magic word for "high seriousness."

The main idea I want to advance, however, is that art undergoes its own "biological" evolution as a matter of historical course, and that to pronounce a part of it dead or moribund is rather like claiming that Natural Selection is killing off a species that is only undergoing an adaptation for its own good. It is really a matter of seeing the adaptation in terms of what Darwin referred to as the law of the Conditions of Existence which, he maintained, was a "higher law" than that of Unity of Type. The latter law refers to "that fundamental agreement in structure we see in organic beings of the same class"; the former refers to the adaptation of "the varying parts of each being to its organic and inorganic conditions of life; or [to] *having [been] adapted . . . during past periods of time.*"<sup>16</sup> If we can think at all in biological terms about species of art, it is surely safe to claim that tragedy has always been an evolving form, as Hegel's comparison of Greek and "modern" tragedy will serve to illustrate. Not being a Naturalist, however, Hegel was unable to see wherein such modern "parts" as the emphasis on the subjectivity of the hero, ethical relativity, or the rise of guilt as a causal factor may have been advantageous tragic responses to "conditions of life" in the renaissance. Suffice to say that the "falling off" between *Antigone* and *Hamlet* must have been as radical for Hegel as the falling off between Shakespeare and Pirandello was for Joseph Wood Krutch and the "tragedy is dead" group.<sup>17</sup> And it seems to me that this evolution should be seen in its full implications as just that--an evolutionary continuity as opposed to a series of deaths and births.

To apply Darwin's law, symptomatically, to modern tragedy: what modern "conditions of existence" seem to have required, as a probable consequence of the Naturalistic and Expressionist revolutions, was a new "radical of presentation," in Frye's term,<sup>18</sup> that did not call for a flawed or excessively committed hero exposed to his or her enemies and driven to the point of death (which is also the point of recognition). This, we might assume, had become an outmoded "form," suitable only for expressing aspects of "being in time" that had since been modified by modern life or, more likely, were no longer able to produce energetic "variations"; and where art departs from biology is in the persistent *social* demand for new variations that will prevent the disappearance of its types into the "unity" of overfamiliarization, or what Brecht called inconspicuousness.<sup>19</sup> Thus Darwin was right in using the law of the Conditions of Existence to refute "the belief that organic beings have been created beautiful for the delight of man" (p. 251); but Samuel Johnson was equally right in saying that the drama's laws the drama's patrons give; and we might infer that a degree of restlessness must have been setting in among artists and audiences at the century's turn with regard to how intrepidly the dramatic form was consuming the *same kinds* of human experience.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most notable sloughing off of "parts" was that death--the oldest and most venerable fixture of tragedy--came gradually to be regarded

as supererogatory to tragic vision, since the subject was now the *condition* that emanates in death rather than the progress toward it through a series of contingent and peripetous events.<sup>21</sup> (Thus Shaw could argue that *Hedda Gabler* would have been more tragic had Hedda lived on.) How, in short, was it possible to deal with the matter of "how it is" if one's available model is designed to demonstrate mutability, or "how things come about"? A related shift (that might have pleased Hegel) involved the decline of guilt, as Durrenmatt put it, as "a personal achievement [or] a religious act" on the part of the protagonist.<sup>22</sup> When it was relevant at all, guilt was either collective (the "guilty society") or, as in the case of Kafka, an inescapable part of the private condition. There are many other variations, of course; I concentrate on death and guilt (including its variant hubris) because they are the forces between which traditional tragedy works itself out.

Such profound shifts, however, should be regarded less as an alteration in vision than as a means of permitting the vision's gravitation to new aspects of experience that had been disclosed by (among other things) the evolutionary advance of art itself. I am not suggesting that the tragic vision remained unaltered in this evolution, only that it remained, by definition, a *terminal* view of existence and what constitutes a terminal preoccupation is bound to vary with each era and to be intimately bound in the progress and capacity of art to render it without iterating itself to death. Natural Selection, Darwin said:

acts exclusively by the preservation and accumulation of variations, which are beneficial under the organic and inorganic conditions to which each creature is exposed at all periods of life. (151)

Or, to put the same idea in the language of modern chaos theory: art and language are

engaged in a feedback loop in which articulating an idea changes the context, and changing the context affects the way the idea is understood, which in its turn leads to another idea, so that text and context *evolve* together in a constantly modulating interaction [Emphasis mine].<sup>23</sup>

Thus you can't tell a tragic vision by a check-list of known characteristics; we must assume, rather, that it is always adaptable to the changing human scene. It is itself, one might say, a shape-shifter, like Proteus in the ancient world or the cybernetic robot in the postmodern. But it has one constant preoccupation: the extremity of the human situation.

The most wholesale mutation of dramatic tragedy in the modern period is obviously its so-called "merger" with tragicomedy--or, as many would have it, tragicomedy is what "replaced" tragedy on its demise: the King is dead, long live his jester! Unfortunately, the assumption usually follows that tragic vision was itself lost in the process and that what emerged was an alloy that thematically supercharged the comic and emotionally diluted the tragic, weighing in equal scale delight and dole, as Claudius might say. In any event, a new way of looking at existence. This undoubtedly produced a new strain of drama, in many (if not most) cases, but that does not prove the point. I could cite many examples of tragicomic form that remained tragicomic in vision, or at least non-tragic, but such a list could only parade my own opinions and provoke argument on what I consider an irrelevant ground. So I will illustrate the point by citing what I take to be the central instance of dramatic tragic vision in the post-Ibsen to postmodern era.

I refer to Samuel Beckett, and most especially (for me) the Beckett of plays like *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Not I* and *Rockaby*, the trilogy, and in a more discursive way the critical work, *Proust*. I choose Beckett primarily because he is the quintessential case of modern extremity and the theatre has not yet caught up with him. What Beckett has managed is nothing less than a dissolution of the dialogic form of drama; in his work it is no longer possible to make clear distinctions between the lyric, the dramatic and the narrative voices. That is not an achievement in itself, but it is what gave Beckett access to the deepest privacy of mental experience, nuances of thought that were not possible in the Shakespearean soliloquy but may, for all that, have been going on in Shakespeare's own mind. In any case, it is not a matter of arguing that Beckett's plays are tragedies. But to call his a tragicomic vision because he is a "stoic comedian" or has called one of his own plays a tragicomedy is, I think, a confusion of form and vision.<sup>24</sup> It would be hard to find anybody, including Shakespeare, who has stared with greater equanimity into the abyss than Beckett has. Unlike any other modern dramatist, he went for "the thing itself," in Lear's dreadful term, rather than one of its social or psychopathic derivatives and that is why his is the most radical vision of the postmodern era. It is also why it seems the darkest. In Beckett the protagonist is no longer defined by deeds or by social status (high, low--any!) but by what may be called the act of being conscious. His people are post-experiential, all *anagnorisis*--wide-eyed awareness bumping up against its Other, against the "not I," as the Unnamable puts it. No reversal is necessary because reversal is strictly a function of social experience, or of the deed coming "full circle." No death because death is the point of deliverance from both the social and the tragic life. More relevantly death is the point where the pen stops, and the problem is to "say" oneself in words "as long as there are any." Life in society

was somebody else's responsibility: Beckett's topic was the tragedy of *vagitus*, or (as he might have put it) of *is-ness*.<sup>25</sup>

On the occasion of Beckett's death *The Los Angeles Times* (December 27, 1989) spoke of how his "bleak poetic and darkly comedic works etched the pessimism of the human condition" (1). Beckett died, the article went on, of "respiratory failure," a phrase that got my instant attention. I had not known about this and, like everyone else no doubt, I was stunned to think what that must have entailed, in simple sentient terms alone, and to realize that Beckett (whose mortality some of us had doubts about anyway) had finally met the thing he had been anatomizing in "words" all his life, respiratory failure being only another word for what he called the Time cancer. At any rate, I think Beckett would have appreciated the expression, *respiratory failure*, even as applied to his own case. It is one of those scientific phrases he liked so much because they carried both a precision of meaning and an unintentional lilt of poetry--surgical words, you might call them, that cut without clotting the wound with sentiment. You can imagine Krapp hearing the phrase, *respiratory failure*, on one of his tapes, dividing it into syllables, and "revelling" in the sound.

And that is really the point of my anecdote: it is this revelling in the sound of words or finding a surreptitious beauty in the names of ugly things, or in mundane and obsessive habits (like the mathematics of stone-sucking), that rescues his vision from "the pessimism of the human condition" and gives new proof to Eric Bentley's claim that "All art is a challenge to despair,"<sup>26</sup> as opposed to an indulgence in it. For Beckett words were blocks of timelessness, a means of making something out of the symptoms of the Time cancer that was slightly extratemporal, slightly more immune to the cancer than life itself, something, above all, that didn't belong to it but to consciousness itself. So if you put your own "fibrous degeneration" or your respiratory failure into plays (as he did) it was being put to some use; you haven't *beaten* the Time cancer, but you have, in our reporter's word, "etched" your understanding on it, as on the urn that will eventually contain your own ashes.

Unfortunately, the grimness of Beckett's subject tends to obscure the lucidity and wit with which he examines this enduring Condition of Existence. Many people wish he had been more cheerful about life and I think we tend to flaunt his political activism in the war as a kind of assurance that, despite everything, he was for "good causes." That apart, however, I can't personally see how anyone could read the last ten pages of *The Unnamable* or witness Billie Whitelaw in *Rockaby* or *Not I* and claim that tragedy was dead "in our time," that this experience was less compassionate and terrifying--less cathartic--than the death of Lear. It is one thing to write depressingly about depressing things, as the naturalists did, quite another to look at them without

consolation, though with a little wink, and try to see what they add up to ("Not count!" as Rooney says, "One of the few satisfactions in life!"). It is what Beckett called "getting it right" and this has always been the mission of the tragic visionary--getting right things that come up in the evolution of a species that is incapable of leaving any extremity unexamined, and worrying about the form only to the extent that it is the most advantageous one to suit the experience. If there is any merit in Van Laan's premise that certain "potentialities" of tragedy are only now being "born," it seems to me that the Beckett "variation" is, at least temporarily, the most extreme. The problem, of course, is whether this particular variation can survive, in any adapted form, the death of Beckett himself. Even if not, its appearance should be cause enough to review our conception of the tragic and how it continually adapts itself to the conditions of experience.

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## Notes

1. For Krieger, the tragic visionary seems to be the protagonist, not the author. For example: if an author "becomes one with his tragic visionary, he so cuts himself off from man's communal need that, in surrendering to moral chaos, he surrenders also the only possibility left him to impose aesthetic form" (*The Tragic Vision*, [New York: Holt, 1960] 19). I am using the term throughout as referring to the tragic author or philosopher of the tragic vision.

2. Maxwell Anderson, *Off Broadway: Essays about the Theater* (New York: William Sloane, 1947) 50.

3. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925) 246.

4. For example: "Man [must be] ennobled by the vengeful spite or injustice of the gods. It does not make him innocent but it hallows him as if he had passed through flame. Hence there is in the final moments of great tragedy, whether Greek or Shakespearean or neoclassic, a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit. . . . From antiquity until the age of Shakespeare and Racine, such accomplishment seemed within the reach of talent. Since then the tragic voice in drama is blurred or still" (*The Death of Tragedy* [New York: Knopf, 1968]) 10.

5. F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's POETICS* (New York: Collier, 1962) 66.

6. *Fools of Time* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1967) 3.

7. *The Death of Tragedy* 8.

8. Max Scheler, "On the Tragic," trans. Bernard Stambler, *Crosscurrents* 4, 2 (Winter 1954) 184.

9. If we are referring to affirmation in the sense used by Hans-Georg Gadamer I have little trouble with the term: "The spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has an exemplary significance. The tragic emotion is not a response to the tragic course of events as such or to the justice of the fate that overtakes the hero, but to the metaphysical order of being that is true for all. To see that 'this is how it is' is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he lives. The tragic affirmation is an insight which the

spectator has by virtue of the continuity of significance in which he places himself" (*Truth and Method* [New York: Crossroad, 1985] 117).

The use of the term I find cloying is the one claiming that the hero is somehow morally bigger than his or her fate by standing up to it "nobly," and that Fate (if it were possible to personify it) would go skulking off stage in shame. In sum: tragedy does not *contain* an affirmation, it *is* an affirmation in the sense that it is an insight into the "metaphysical order of being that is true for all." But what else is art itself but such an affirmation?

10. *Principles of Literary Criticism* 246.

11. I am not suggesting that Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg should automatically be classified as tragic visionaries. The question would be: at what point does the adjective (ethical, pathetic, psychopathic) overbalance or offset the tragic substantive and become the substantive itself, with respect to thematic emphasis? The answer will always depend on one's interpretation. Chekhov's is perhaps the most debatable case. David Magarshack finds Chekhov's plays positive and forward-looking in their endings (*Chekhov The Dramatist* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1960] 262-3). F. L. Lucas, on the other hand, finds "no more really tragic ending in all drama" than the ending of *Three Sisters* (*Tragedy: Serious drama in relation to Aristotle's Poetics* 66.). Finally, in a devastating essay titled "Creation from the Void" Leon Shestov argues that Chekhov is "a sorcerer . . . , an adept in the black art [with a] singular infatuation for death, decay and hopelessness" that would seem to place Chekhov securely in the category of the Satanic. (*Chekhov and Other Essays* [Ann Arbor, Michigan: U of Michigan P, 1966] 23.).

As for Ibsen, he is the only one of the three who seems comfortable in what we may loosely call the Aristotelian tragic form. But it is possible to argue that ethical concerns sometimes get the upper hand in Ibsen and obscure the tragic implications (*Pillars of Society, A Doll House, Enemy of the People*), or that death itself, when it occurs, seems a statement made about a world that is potentially curable, or tragic only because people "do such things," as Brack says, and not because existence itself is tragic. Finally, much the same might be said about Strindberg's sexual vendetta.

I offer these quibbles, however, not to determine who's in and who's out but as illustrations of combinatory possibilities. In practice, the tragic vision necessarily accommodates itself to "terrestrial" concerns, often to the point of losing the "terminal" edge I have tried to describe here. This is not ground for saying that one dramatist is inferior to another because less tragic, but only that dramatists have different agendas, thanks to which we have an infinite variety of forms and visions. For example, Pirandello, to offer a somewhat different case in point, sees the world as irrevocably tragic in condition (doomed to the communal lie, reciprocal deceit, the falsity of language itself, etc.), but chooses to write humorous plays in which the protagonist (a distant relative of Prince Hamlet) is aggressively out to prove it to everybody, including the audience. What, then, are we to call Pirandello--a polemical tragical-comedian or a comical-tragical-polemicist? It is all a matter (as I will suggest below) of artistic imagination operating according to what Darwin would call the principle of Divergence of Character which is the means by which species proliferate the variety of forms in response to conditions in their environment.

12. *The Death of Tragedy* 353.

13. "[God] is a spectator and no more; his words and gestures never mingle with the words and gestures of the players. His eyes rest upon them: that is all" (*Soul and Form* 152).

14. As an argument to the contrary, I think, offhand, of Buchner's tragedy, *Danton's Death*, mentioned only briefly by Steiner as a youthful experimental play that "renews the possibilities of political drama" (271). To my mind, it is a strange political play that calls into question the motive of politics itself and views history as an accidental and godless rampage of human appetite as uncontrollable as the volcano to which it is likened. Perhaps for these reasons Steiner would not call it a tragedy, though in connection with *Woyzeck* he does speak of Buchner's "radical extension of the compass of tragedy" (272).

I trust it is clear that I am not throwing religion itself out of the tragic experience or vision. I would agree with H. A. Mason's statement that "the world's greatest tragedies are soaked in religion" but that "[i]n entering tragedy, religion loses its absolute rights, and submits to the laws of poetry" (*The Tragic Plane* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985] 192.), precisely my argument here respecting the ethical, the Satanic and other such perspectives.

15. Murray Krieger, *The Tragic Vision: Variations on a Theme in Literary Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960) 10.

16. *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (New York: Appleton, 1897), Chapter 6 260-261. My emphasis. I trust I am avoiding the application of the evolutionary metaphor in the senses discussed by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in their critique of Ferdinand Brunetiere and John Addington Symonds in the nineteenth century. Brunetiere, for example, taught that literary genres strive toward a perfection and on achieving it wither and die. Wellek and Warren argue, quite rightly, that "the evolution of literature is different from that of biology, and that it has nothing to do with the idea of a uniform progress towards *one* eternal model." On the contrary, "the historical process will produce ever new forms of value, hitherto unknown and unpredictable. . . . The series of developments will be constructed in reference to a scheme of values or norms, but these values themselves emerge only from the contemplation of this process" (*Theory of Literature* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956] 257.).

17. An interesting social parallel to my Darwinian argument is offered by Eva Figs in *Tragedy and Social Evolution* (London: John Calder, 1976). Tracing tragedy (or tragic-tending drama) from the Australian aborigine tribes, Figs arrives at a position that resembles Van Laan's in some respects: "Perhaps we have reached a stage of evolution where we must accept, once and for all, that there is no reason for suffering, that pain and misery is [sic] arbitrary and not a punishment for wrong-doing. Perhaps we have left the world of the nursery and finally grown up" (163).

18. *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 249ff.

19. A useful perspective on this aspect of artistic evolution is found in Rudolf Arnheim's *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1971) which deals with two "fundamental processes" that contribute to entropy in a system: the *catabolic* process which "grind[s] things to pieces . . . by removing constraints and thus enlarging the range of tension reduction, which increases entropy by simplifying the order of a system" (28); and the *anabolic* process which "contributes . . . the structural theme of a pattern, and this theme creates orderly form through interaction with the tendency to tension reduction" (31). It is the anabolic principle that "establishes 'what a thing is about,' be it a crystal or a solar system, a society or a machine, a statement of thoughts or a work of art" (49). I am suggesting, then, that even in the sphere of public reception, the progress of artistic form (and theme) is governed by an "anabolic" response to the continual threat of "catabolic" tension reduction, a simpler word for which might be *boredom*. The survival of the species, in short, depends upon the right degree and rate of differentiation and variation.

20. I am of course not inferring that old forms ever die out, as we see in present-day continuations of "pyramidal structure" and the well-made play. The species of drama, like organic species, seem to undergo "divergence of character" whereby, to continue my Darwinian theme, "the more diversified the descendants [of a modification] become, the better will be their chance of success in the battle for life" (161). Stephen Kern has chronicled the turn-of-the-century revolutionary scene in *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983).

21. This was already implicit, however briefly, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is the archetypal grandfather of modern tragedy. This point was most recently brought home to me in the staging of the duel as a farcical game in Mel Gibson's film version of the play.

22. Friedrich Durrenmatt, "Problems of the Theatre," *Plays and Essays*, ed. Volkmar Sander (New York: Continuum, 1982) 255. See also, Georg Lukacs, "The Sociology of Modern Drama," *Tulane Drama Review* 9, No. 4 (Summer 1965) 147-170, which treats this theme in detail.

23. N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990) 128.

24. I am not the first person to make this claim. See, especially, Normand Berlin, "The Tragic Pleasure of *Waiting for Godot*," in *Beckett at 80 / Beckett in Context*, edited Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 46-63. For example: "But when a dramatist writes a play that does not provide any screen for his audience to protect itself from a perception of itself, when a dramatist brings us as close to that abyss, when a play elicits the kind of emotions one feels when experiencing traditional tragedies, then Beckett's own balanced classification [that *Godot* is a tragicomedy] should be questioned—not an unreasonable thing to do because Beckett seems to want us to question everything" (56). Berlin takes issue throughout with the notion of a "tragicomic" vision.

25. The term *vagitus* is found in Beckett's *Breath*, a play about "respiratory failure."

26. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York: 1964) 353.