

Chapter 1

A Theory in Ruins

In everyday language, the word 'tragedy' means something like 'very sad'. We speak of the tragic car crash of the young woman at the busy crossroads, just as the ancient Greeks used the same epithet for a drama about the slaying of a king at a similar place. Indeed, it may well turn out that 'very sad' is also about the best we can do when it comes to the more exalted realm of tragic art.

But surely tragedy involves more than this. Is it not a matter of fate and catastrophe, of calamitous reversals of fortunes, flawed, high-born heroes and vindictive gods, pollution and purgation, deplorable endings, cosmic order and its transgression, a suffering which chastens and transfigures? In any case, isn't this to mistake the tragic for the pathetic? Tragedy may be poignant, but it is supposed to have something fearful about it too, some horrific quality which shocks and stuns. It is traumatic as well as sorrowful. And doesn't the tragic differ from the pathetic in being cleansing, bracing, life-affirming? Susanne K. Langer speaks of the 'sad but non-tragic character of the French classical drama'¹ – non-tragic in her view because such drama deals in misfortune rather than destiny, lacks any rich realization of individual personality, and is rather too enamoured of the rational. Racine and Corneille, she suggests, write 'heroic comedies' rather than tragedies, which will no doubt come as a surprise to anyone who has sat through *Andromache* or *Polyeucte*. The French must have a strange sense of humour.

Tragedy, some will claim, is surely a *technical* term, whereas 'very sad' is plainly not. One can, in fact, use the word in both senses together, as in a sentence like 'What is really tragic about Beckett is that tragedy (heroic resistance, exultant self-affirmation, dignified endurance, the peace which comes from knowing that one's actions are predestined, and the like) is no longer possible'. And one can call something very sad – the peaceful, predictable death of an elderly person, for example – without feeling the need to dub it tragic. One can also be sad over nothing

in particular, in the manner of Freud's melancholia, but it is hard to be tragic over nothing in particular. 'Tragic' is a more transitive term than 'sad'. Moreover, 'tragic' is a strong word, like 'scum' or 'squalid', whereas 'sad' is embarrassingly feeble. Geoffrey Brereton notes that it is hard to come up with a synonym of 'tragic',² a truth stumbled on by a fellow-student of mine at Cambridge, who realized that a suitably withering utterance of the word 'Tragic!' could effortlessly trump almost any other comment, however witty, acerbic or impassioned. The problem is how not to rob the word of this peculiar charge while not being jealously exclusive about it either.

'Tragic' and 'very sad' are indeed different notions; but this is not because the former is technical while the latter is drawn from ordinary language. 'Sad but not tragic' is not the same kind of distinction as 'erratic but not psychotic', 'cocky but not megalomaniac' or 'flabby but not obese'. The long-standing spouse of the expired elderly person might well feel the event as tragic, even though it is neither shocking, fearful, catastrophic, decreed by destiny or the upshot of some hubristic transgression of divine law. 'Tragic' here means something like 'very very sad' for the spouse, and just sad or very sad for everyone else. R. P. Draper tells us that 'there is an immense difference between the educated and uneducated intuitions of the meaning (of tragedy)',³ but it does not follow, as he seems to imagine, that 'educated' intuitions are always the most reliable. One might still protest that tragedy involves more than just sorrow, and in a sense one would be right. But so does sorrow. Sorrow implies value. We do not usually grieve over the fading of a bruise, or feel the scattering of a raindrop to be a melancholic matter. These are not destructions of what we rate as especially valuable.

This is why there are difficulties with Paul Allen's definition of tragedy as 'a story with an unhappy ending that is memorably and upliftingly moving rather than simply sad'.⁴ We shall see later that not all tragedies in fact end unhappily; but it is also hard to know what 'simply sad' means. Can a work be sad but not moving? Perhaps 'upliftingly' moving makes the difference; but it is not clear that *Blasted*, *Endgame* or *A Farewell to Arms* are exactly that, which is no doubt why conservative commentators would refuse them the title of tragedy in the first place. But they would probably confer it on *Titus Andronicus*, *The Jew of Malta* or *Antonio's Revenge*, whose edifying effects are almost as questionable. And Aristotle says nothing of edification. For one kind of traditionalist, Auschwitz is not tragic because it lacks a note of affirmation. But how far is the invigorating quality of a good tragedy that of any successful work of art? And are we enthralled by the sadness, or despite it? Doesn't sadness in any case depend on a sense of human

value which tempers it, so that 'simple sadness' is a somewhat spurious entity?

The truth is that no definition of tragedy more elaborate than 'very sad' has ever worked. It would, to be sure, be false to conclude from this that works or events we call tragedies have nothing significant in common. Nominalism is not the only alternative to essentialism, whatever post-modern theory may consider. On the one hand, there are full-blooded essentialists such as Paul Ricoeur, who believes that 'it is by grasping the essence [of tragedy] in the Greek phenomenon that we can understand all other tragedy as analogous to Greek tragedy'.⁵ For Ricoeur, one assumes, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is best illuminated by the *Agamemnon*. On the other hand, there are nominalists such as Leo Ayles, who declares that there is no such thing as tragedy: 'There are only plays, some of which have always been called tragedies, some of which have usually been called tragedies'.⁶ But this, as with most nominalism, simply pushes the question back a stage: *why* have these plays always or usually been called tragedies? Why have some of them not been called pastoral or pantomime instead? Raymond Williams notes that 'tragedy is . . . not a single and permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions'.⁷ But though this is true enough, it fails to answer the question of why we use the same term of *Medea* and *Macbeth*, the murder of a teenager and a mining disaster.

In fact, tragedy would seem exemplary of Wittgenstein's 'family resemblances', constituted as it is by a *combinatoire* of overlapping features rather than by a set of invariant forms or contents. There is no need to languish in the grip of a binary opposition and suppose that because the members of a class lack a common essence, they have nothing in common at all. As early as 1908, the American scholar Ashley Thorndike warned his colleagues in his work *Tragedy* that no definition of tragedy was possible beyond the egregiously uninformative 'all plays presenting painful or destructive actions', but few seem to have taken his point. Aristotle's description of tragedy in the *Poetics* in fact makes little reference to destruction, death or calamity; indeed he speaks at one point of a 'tragedy of suffering', almost as though this might be just one species of the genre. The *Poetics* is well into its argument before it begins to use words like 'misfortune'. As an early instance of reception theory, the work defines tragedy rather through its effects, working back from these to what might structurally best achieve them. A wicked person passing from misery to prosperity, for example, cannot be tragic because the process cannot inspire either pity or fear. This leaves open the question of what one calls a work which is structured to arouse pity and fear but in fact doesn't. Is a comedy which fails to arouse the faintest flicker of amusement a poor comedy or not a comedy at all?

The more laconic one's definition, the less chance it has of inadvertently passing over whole swathes of tragic experience. Schopenhauer claims that 'the presentation of a great misfortune is alone essential to [tragedy]',⁸ and such cautiousness is well justified. It is a pity, then, that he goes on to claim that resignation and renunciation are of the essence of the form, a case which forces him to downgrade the ancient Greeks and implausibly upgrade some more stoically minded moderns. Samuel Johnson, no doubt equally eager to sidestep a whole range of thorny issues, defines tragedy in his dictionary as 'a dramatic representation of serious actions', which for all its studied vagueness comes close, as we shall see in a moment, to how the medievals understood the matter. 'Serious', for all its apparent lack of exactness, is a key component of the whole conception, from Aristotle to Geoffrey Chaucer. The former makes what he calls *spoudaios* central to the whole business. Indeed, it is still central as late as Pierre Corneille's *Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique*, which describes tragedy as '*illustre, extraordinaire, sérieuse*'. Horace remarks in 'On the Art of Poetry' that 'tragedy scorns to babble trivialities'.⁹ For a long time, tragedy really means nothing much more than a drama of high seriousness concerning the misfortunes of the mighty. It makes no necessary allusion to fate, purgation, moral flaws, the gods, and the rest of the impedimenta which conservative critics tend to assume are indispensable to it. As F. L. Lucas puts it: tragedy for the ancients means serious drama, for the middle ages a story with an unhappy ending, and for moderns a drama with an unhappy ending.¹⁰ It is hard to get more imprecise than that.

John Orr claims that 'the essential tragic experience is that of irreparable human loss', though he rather tarnishes the impressive terseness of this by going on to develop a more elaborate theory of tragedy as alienation.¹¹ Richard Kuhns speaks with airy anachronism of the conflict between the private, sexual and psychological on the one hand, and the public, political and obligatory on the other, as being central to all tragedy, including the ancient Greeks.¹² It is not clear in what sense the sexual or psychological were 'private' for classical antiquity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for tragedy 'extreme distress or sorrow', though ironically it goes on to illustrate this definition with the sentence 'the shooting was a tragic accident', which for some classical tragic theory would be an oxymoron. Tragedies, on this traditional view, cannot be accidental.

The *OED* also gives 'pity or sorrow' for 'pathos', thus bringing it close to the common sense of tragedy. There are, however, grammatical differences between the two terms. For the informal meaning of 'pathetic', the *OED* offers 'his ball control was pathetic', which one could hardly

replace with 'his ball control was tragic' even in the lower ranks of the football league. We say that someone looked sad but not, without a slight sense of strain, that she looked tragic, since the former term tends to denote a response and the latter a condition. But Walter Kaufmann, in one of the most perceptive modern studies of tragedy, refuses to distinguish between the tragic and the merely pitiful, and doubts that the ancient Greeks or Shakespeare did either.¹³ He does, however, suggest that for the classical view suffering has to be 'philosophically' interesting to qualify as tragic, which would no doubt rule out such philosophically trivial matters as having your feet chopped off or your eyeballs gouged out.

For all these grim caveats, critics have persisted in their hunt for the Holy Grail of a faultless definition of the subject. Kenneth Burke's definition of tragedy in *A Grammar of Motives*, like Francis Fergusson's in his immensely influential *The Idea of a Theater*, involves an essential moment of tragic recognition or *anagnorisis*,¹⁴ but while this may be true of Oedipus, it holds only doubtfully for Othello and hardly at all for Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. In the case of Phaedra, no such recognition is needed because everything has been intolerably clear from the outset. David Hume, by contrast, believes that an individual 'is the more worthy of compassion the less sensible he is of his miserable condition', finding something peculiarly poignant about a wretchedness which seemed unaware of itself.¹⁵ Georg Simmel observes that 'in general we call a relationship tragic – in contrast to merely sad or extrinsically destructive – when the destructive forces directed against some being spring from the deepest levels of that very being'.¹⁶ We shall have occasion to revisit this insistence on the immanent, ironic or dialectical nature of the tragic, in contrast with the purely extrinsic or accidental; but it is worth remarking now that, like every other general formula in the field, it holds only for some tragedy and not for the rest. The downfall of Goethe's Faust, or Pentheus in Euripides's *The Bacchae*, may be sprung in just this way, but it is hard to argue a similar case about the death of Shakespeare's Cordelia or Tolstoy's Anna Karenina.

A. C. Bradley holds that a tragedy is 'any spiritual conflict involving spiritual waste',¹⁷ while in a brave but imprudent flourish, Oscar Mandel offers as an all-inclusive definition of the form a situation in which 'a protagonist who would command our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering'.¹⁸ This, for all its White House bureaucratise and

judicious sub-clausal hedging, falsely assumes with Simmel and others that tragedy is always immanent or ironic, staking too much on what the Greeks call *peripeteia*. It also throws in for good measure an emphasis on necessity which, as we shall see later, is equally unwarranted. Aristotle, for example, is for the most part silent on the question. Leo Aylen believes that tragedy is largely about death, while generously conceding that some tragedies are not. In an insight of positively Kantian intricacy, he informs us that in the face of death, 'Certain things become much less important, others much more'.¹⁹ For Geoffrey Brereton, 'a tragedy is a final and impressive disaster due to an unforeseen or unrealized failure involving people who command respect and sympathy'.²⁰ This suggests that we do not find tragic those for whom we have limited sympathies, a common but debatable proposition of tragic theory. It also implies rather oddly that some disasters are unimpressive.

In *The Case for Tragedy*, a riposte to the death-of-tragedy school, Mark Harris defines the form rather maladroïtly as 'the projection of personal and collective values which are potentially or actually put in jeopardy by the course of the dramatic action'.²¹ This tells us remarkably little, though the title of the book tells us rather more. It is revealing that critics like Harris should feel the need to claim, in defensive, mildly anxious tones, that tragedy can indeed still thrive in contemporary conditions, as though it would be an unquestionable loss if it could not. It might well prove a loss, but one cannot merely assume the fact. For some, this would be rather like insisting that it is indeed still possible to be cruel and rapacious in the modern era, despite the cynics who would demean the age by denying it. John Holloway tells us with laborious unhelpfulness that 'every tragedy or near-tragedy is a serious play, in which the characters, including the protagonist, are likely to speak earnestly about the world, or about how it works, or about how they would like it to do so'.²² It is not easy to see on this view how a tragedy differs from a congress on global warming. Walter Kerr offers us 'an investigation into the possibilities of human *freedom*' as his particular tragic essence, a view which may have rather more to do with American ideology and rather less with Büchner or Lorca than he suspects.²³ One threat to such freedom is the dogmatism which proposes it as the central *topos* of all tragedy. Tragedy, in Schlegelian fashion, allows us to pursue 'that longing for the infinite which is inherent in our being', and occurs 'when man uses his freedom without reservation'.²⁴ Its opposite begins to sound less like comedy than the Soviet Union.

Kerr is forced by his libertarian definition to dismiss as non-tragic works which do not affirm freedom, and where destruction is not part of an evolutionary process leading to new life. Since he can find precious

little of this in the modern period, he ends up denying the possibility of modern tragedy altogether. The modern epoch lacks finality and determinacy, both tragic prerequisites, and freedom has been undermined by both Darwinian and Freudian determinism. Gripped by a Western ideology of untrammelled liberty, along with a remorseless American upbeatness, Kerr sees tragedy as springing from 'a fiercely optimistic society', in need of 'arrogance', robustness and certainty.²⁵ Tragedy, in short, begins to sound a little like the US Marine corps. But tragic Man, self-confident, unquestioning and spontaneous, has now been subverted by various squalid determinisms; and in denying freedom, we have despatched tragedy along with it. Kerr is apparently in no doubt that tragedy is a thoroughly excellent thing, an injuriousness which must be endured if human progress is to thrive. The form, however, may be less extinct than playing possum: in a final rousing burst of New World hopefulness, Kerr suggests that the apparent demise of tragic art may itself be simply a stage in its evolution. We can thus look gleefully forward to more mayhem, misery and massacres on the stages of the future.

Dorothea Krook, who stands somewhere on the far right wing of tragic theory, holds that tragedy portrays an action of universal import involving a hero of some considerable stature who is flawed, who comes to grief on account of this deficiency, so that the play ends badly, and in doing so shows something of the power of the gods or destiny, while revealing human suffering to be part of a meaningful pattern.²⁶ Here, perhaps, is what we might call the popular conception of tragedy, if such a thing exists. Or if not exactly popular, then popular-academic. It is thus all the more unfortunate that, as we shall see, hardly a word of this definition holds generally true. It constrains Krook to conclude along with George Steiner that Ibsen, for example, does not write authentic tragedies, just as Mandel, absurdly, manoeuvres himself into denying tragic status to *Romeo and Juliet* and the plays of Webster and Tourneur.

I. A. Richards, who considers tragedy to be the greatest, rarest thing in literature, also believes that most Greek tragedy, and Elizabethan tragedy apart from Shakespeare, is 'pseudo-tragedy'.²⁷ Other critics rule out works in which the protagonist's downfall is accidental, or in which she deserves her doom, or in which she is merely a victim. It is rather like defining a vacuum cleaner in a way which unaccountably omits the Hoover. If one comes up with a supposedly universal definition of tragedy which turns out to cover only five or six plays, the simplest option is to proclaim that other so-called tragedies are bogus specimens of the genre. Samuel Johnson, on the other hand, doubted that what Shakespeare wrote was strictly tragedy, but thought the plays none the worse for that.

Another difficulty with defining tragedy is that, like 'nature' or 'culture', the term floats ambiguously between the descriptive and the normative. For most commentators, as we shall see in the next chapter, tragedy is not only a matter of value but, strangely, the supreme mode of it. But the word can also just mean a lot of blood, death and destruction, regardless of its moral connotations and without involving much complex interiority. In early modern times it could simply be a synonym of death or ruin, as in Thomas Kyd's 'I'll there begin their endless tragedy' (*The Spanish Tragedy*, Act 4, sc. 5). In this sense of the word, you can tell whether something is tragic just by looking at it, as you can tell whether a parrot is dead by prodding it. Even with the sound turned all the way down, one would know in this sense of the term that a television play was a tragedy. If the body-count, as at the close of *The Spanish Tragedy*, hovers around nine, exactly a third of the play's total cast, then the spectacle is as indubitably tragic as one with an enormous number of belly laughs is incontrovertibly comic. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, a play which seems quite non-tragic in outlook and sensibility, qualifies as a tragedy because of its bloodiness, even though the first part is not tragic at all and was written with no sense that it would have a sequel. Something of the same goes for Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, with its concluding havoc, or Marston's morbid, brutal and sadistic *Antonio's Revenge*. Aristotle thought epic could be tragic; but though it trades in death and destruction, it doesn't use them as the occasion for a reflection on justice, fate and suffering in general, in the manner of a Sophocles. It is thus tragic in the descriptive rather than normative sense.

Or think of the splendid extravaganzas of Seneca – *Thyestes*, *Medea*, *Phaedra* and the rest – with their bombast and carnage, their vision of the world as vile, bloody and chaotic and of men and women as betraying a bottomless capacity for cruelty. In this theatre of the grotesque, action takes precedence over meaning, rather as it does when comedy tilts over into farce. It is what Northrop Frye dubs 'low mimetic tragedy'.²⁸ For this vein of art, tragedy can just mean something sombre and sorrowful; it need not satisfy such normative demands as that the suffering be largely unmerited, preordained, non-contingently caused, inflicted on a pre-eminent figure, partly his or her responsibility, revelatory of divine order, exultantly life-affirming, conducive to dignity and self-knowledge and so on. Someone who clung to the normative sense of the word could always exclaim 'I don't regard *that* as tragic!' no matter how much blood was being spilt and torment inflicted. From the normative standpoint, only certain kinds of death, strife, suffering and destruction, treated in certain ways, qualify for the accolade of tragedy. Tragedy here is more a matter of response than of occurrence. And it is true that almost nobody views

destruction as inherently negative, that only the blander sort of liberal regards conflict as intrinsically undesirable, and that most people do not consider death to be *ipso facto* calamitous. For Aristotle and most other critics, the death of a villain would not be tragic, whereas for a certain strain of existentialist philosophy death is tragic as such, regardless of its cause, mode, subject or effect. All the same, 'normative' or 'moral' tragedy often betrays a certain sensationalist subtext, an aura of violence or exoticism, of sweetly heightened sensations and covert erotic pleasures, which links it reluctantly to its melodramatic sibling. As with most high-toned phenomena, it conceals some rather less reputable roots.

Even so, there is one significant contrast between 'descriptive' and 'normative' tragedy. The former type of art tends to be sombre, gloomy, even at times nihilistic, and this, for its more normative counterpart, is exactly what tragedy cannot allow. It is a curious irony that for much traditional tragic theory, wretchedness and despondency threaten to subvert tragedy rather than enhance it. The more cheerless the drama, the less tragic its status. This is because tragedy must embody value; but it is odd, even so, that an art form which portrays human anguish and affliction should have been so often brandished as a weapon to combat a typically 'modern' pessimism and passivity. Tragedy for a great many commentators is all about cheering us up.

A further problem of definition springs from the fact that 'tragedy' can have a triple meaning. Like comedy, it can refer at once to works of art, real-life events and world-views or structures of feeling. You can be comic without being optimistic, or comic but not funny, like Dante's best-known work. As far as the art/life distinction goes, we do, after all, inherit the concept of tragedy from a social order which made less of a hard-and-fast distinction between the poetic and the historical than we do, and had no conception of the autonomously aesthetic. Indeed, it was a civilization which once based a territorial claim on a verse from the *Iliad*. The modern age, by contrast, distinguishes more sharply between art and life, as well as between artefacts and ways of seeing. We would not generally speak of a poem as a tragedy, despite the writings of Milton, Mandelstam and Akhmatova, though we might speak of one as embodying a tragic world-view. For some death-of-tragedy theorists, we are now 'post-tragic' exactly because we are post-ideological, bereft of all synoptic vision. Tragic art, on this theory, presupposes a tragic vision – a bleak view of the world, an absolute faith for which you are prepared to die, or at least a dominant ideology to be heroically resisted. Like almost every other general view of tragedy, this one identifies the entire mode with one kind of action, and then proceeds to write off whatever fails to conform to it.

For obituarists of tragedy like George Steiner, only tragic world-views can finally sustain legitimately tragic works of art.²⁹ If the modern epoch has witnessed the death of tragedy, it is among other things because its two dominant *Weltanschauungen*, Marxism and Christianity, are judged by Steiner (mistakenly, as we shall see) to be inhospitable to tragic insight. Raymond Williams, in contrast, sees the twentieth century as under the sway of three essentially tragic ideologies: Marxism, Freudianism and existentialism.³⁰ Art and world-views, however, do not sit so neatly together as Steiner imagines. Aeschylus's general vision, unlike perhaps that of his two great colleagues, would not seem to be particularly tragic, to say nothing of the sentimental optimism which underlies the staggeringly popular tragic dramas of Voltaire, or the finest theatre-pieces of a Dryden. Scott, Edgeworth and George Eliot all bear witness to specific tragedies, while being for the most part progressivist in their general outlook. Scott, chronicler of the tragic downfall of Scottish clan society, is also a zealot of moderation, the *via media* and a more civilized future.

For Murray Krieger, by contrast, the problem is the reverse: we lack a tragic art because there is too much of a tragic outlook abroad, not too little. The role of tragic art in our time is to contain and defuse an otherwise perilously overweening tragic vision. A 'demoniac' world-view, existing in churlish defiance of all rational, ethical and civic order, currently lacks a tragic art which might discipline and absorb it. The taming of tragedy, the recuperation of the Dionysian by the Apollonian, the holding of the tragic and the civic in precarious tension, has become less feasible in our anarchic times, and this is a potent source of political anxiety.³¹ If social disaffection is to be managed, so Krieger's case implies, it must be sublimated; but since such disaffection also undermines the civic forms of such sublimation, tragedy is unable to repair tragedy, and we remain caught in a vicious circle.

There is also the question of whether tragedy is always an *event*. The word has resonances of cataclysm and disaster, and one dictionary definition speaks of a 'great and sudden misfortune'; Geoffrey Brereton thinks that it has to involve 'unexpected and striking circumstances', which would rule out a great many deaths.³² But it may also describe a more chronic, less ostentatious sort of condition than Brereton supposes. Tragedy as a matter of being knocked abruptly sideways evidently lends itself to effective theatre; indeed, such theatre enters interestingly into the very description of the mode, in the shape of sudden reversals, ironic backfirings, condensed, crisis-ridden action, a stringent economy of passion and the like. But there are steady-state as well as big-bang tragedies, in the form of the sheer dreary persistence of certain hopeless, obscure conditions, like a dull bruise in the flesh. One thinks of the

exacting Kantian duty which impels the heroine of James's *Portrait of a Lady* to return to her profoundly unlovable husband, or the desolate vistas of time stretching before the jilted Catherine Sloper at the end of *Washington Square*.

These less eye-catching, spectacular brands of tragedy, which George Eliot considered at least as excruciating as the more manifest forms of torment, are perhaps more appropriate to the novel than to the stage. But there is also, say, the love-lorn pathos of the raddled, alcoholic Blanche DuBois at the end of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or Lavinia Mannon at the close of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, whose problem is precisely that they will linger futilely on. If all of these examples are of women, it is doubtless because for them tragedy is typically less heroic crisis than inveterate condition, a blighted existence rather than a bungled action. There are those, in other words, for whom, as Walter Benjamin soberly reminds us, history constitutes one long emergency, for whom the exceptional (high tragedy) is the quotidian norm. As early as Euripides, so Adrian Poole comments, 'crisis is permanent'.³³ Emile Zola writes in *Nana* of 'the tragic climaxes of everyday life', and such extremities may be less tolerable precisely because they are routinely predictable, rather than abrupt, incalculable irruptions from some other world.

Alasdair MacIntyre once compared the wranglings of the modern age over moral questions to someone seeking forlornly to decipher fragments of writing inherited from some previous epoch and now almost wholly devoid of context.³⁴ Much the same can be said of the various laborious medieval attempts to reconstruct the idea of tragedy, given the absence at the time of Aristotle's *Poetics*.³⁵ Most medieval authors considered tragedy to be an obsolete genre, just as death-of-tragedy ideologues do today, and very few regarded themselves as making an addition to it. There was considerable, sometimes comic, confusion over what tragedy was all about. There were times when all the medieval era seemed to know was that it was an especially serious form – Ovid remarks in his *Tristia* that it surpasses every other form of writing in its solemnity – along with the fact that it concerned the misfortunes of the high and mighty. Theophrastus had defined tragedy as representing the fortunes of heroes, and this high-life emphasis is a constant factor in medieval accounts, often more important than notions of fate, downfall, transgression, innocence, irreparable injury and the like.

The grammarian Placidus writes around the turn of the sixth century of tragedy as 'a genre of poetry in which poets describe the grievous fall of kings and unheard of crimes, or the affairs of the gods, in high-sounding words'.³⁶ 'High-sounding' could make tragedy sound akin to

bombast, and this appears to have been one widespread meaning of the term. Thomas Aquinas seems to use it in this sense. This partly pejorative meaning survives at least as late as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, in which Wilhelm speaks of tragedy as 'representing high social station and nobility of character by a certain stiffness and affectation'.³⁷ Aquinas also appears to have thought that tragedy meant 'speech about war', whereas comedy was speech about civic affairs. Averroes, by contrast, seems to think the word synonymous with 'praise' – the praise of suffering virtue. That he was also a commentator on Aristotle's *Poetics* suggests a certain tragicomic failure of communication between antiquity and its aftermath, as though Marx had imagined that by 'dialectic' Hegel had meant a regional form of speech.

Dante seems to have thought tragedy neither invariably dramatic nor especially concerned with sorrow and disaster. Instead, he too defined it in terms of its high seriousness – of noble verse forms, elevated construction, excellent vocabulary and profundity of substance. The *Aeneid* he considered a tragic work of art, even though it contains more triumph than catastrophe and shifts from the latter to the former rather than (as Aristotle prescribes) vice versa. 'Horrific crimes of the great' would be a summary slogan of much medieval usage, rather as it would be of much of the tabloid press today. Tragedy was really a kind of exposé of ruling-class corruption, for the ideological purpose of rendering the lives of high-living villains abominable to the populace; and its stress, unlike that of Aristotle, falls accordingly on deserved rather than unmerited disgrace. 'Imposing persons, great fears, and disastrous endings' is the nutshell definition of the Roman commentator Donatus.³⁸ This tradition survives as late as George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesie* (1589), for which tragic art deals in the lust, infamy and licentiousness of the powerful, who are punished for their sins for the moral edification of the audience. It teaches the mutability of fortune, and God's assured vengeance on wicked lives. There is no question here of an iron fate, of Aristotle's tolerably virtuous hero, of a pitiful identification with him, of the good suffering excessively, or of the moral dubiousness of the higher powers. Tragedy dealt in sorrowful matters and great iniquities, and among the Romans sometimes took the form of a danced or pantomimed performance, in which both Nero and St Augustine are said to have taken part.

In the sixth century an apparently eccentric meaning of the word 'tragedy' springs up with Boethius, who uses it in the context of Christ's Incarnation to denote a kind of fall or come-down. He speaks of Christ's assuming flesh as 'a tremendous tragedy', no doubt in the Pauline sense of a *kenosis* or self-emptying rather than any sort of disaster. Boethius's quaint use of the word is true to the classical theological view that the

Incarnation involves a loss or self-estrangement on God's part as well as a fullness of presence. Hegel will later see Spirit's process of self-objectification in much the same tragic light. Perhaps such maverick uses of the word resulted in part from what was now its near-indecipherability. The medievals knew that the word 'tragedy' derived from 'goat', and that (since Horace says so) a goat was the prize for which ancient tragedians competed. It is not clear whether they were aware that there is no word for tragedy in any language other than ancient Greek, all other uses being adopted from this; and it does not seem to have occurred to them that, as Gerald Else suggests, the word 'tragedian' might originally have been a joke at the expense of the dramatists, meaning 'goat-bard'.³⁹ Some of them speculated with bizarre implausibility that the prize in question was a goat because of the filth of the artistic subject-matter, while others believed that a goat was actually sacrificed to the tragic poets, or that the word came from goatskin footwear which the actors wore in recital. A fourteenth-century commentator, Francesco da Buti, ingeniously speculated that the goat was a symbol of tragedy because it looks princely from the front, with its imposing horns and beard, but has a filthy, naked rear-end. We shall see later, in investigating the ambivalence of the tragic scapegoat, that this idea is not quite as fanciful as it sounds.

Medieval scholars were heirs to a tradition that tragedy evolved from prosperity to adversity, an emphasis which can be found in Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*. But this lineage said nothing *à la* Aristotle about the moral status of the tragic protagonist, as indeed Chaucer does not. John of Garland distils the received medieval wisdom around 1220 with his comment that tragedy is written in a grave style, sets forth shameful and criminal deeds, and begins in joy but ends in tears. But tragedy in medieval society could occasionally mean a complaint or song of lamentation (as in 'the tragedy of his miseries'), and this game of Chinese whispers from ancients to medievals reaches its surreal consummation with the fourteenth-century English scholar John Arderne, who calls the Bible a tragedy, probably meaning no more than a serious sort of book. In a final grotesque twist of misprision, Arderne recommends the scriptures and other so-called tragedies as a source of humorous tales.

In the twelfth century, Otto of Freising employs the term 'tragedy' of an account of real-life disaster, probably one of the earliest such uses, remarking of the report in question that it was 'written miserably and excellently in the manner of a tragedy'.⁴⁰ This conjunction of misery and excellence says much about a familiar paradox of the form, rather as one might commend a horror movie by stressing how disgusting it is. Otto's comment, however, implies that the real-life usage is derivative from the

artistic. William of Malmesbury also gives the word a real-life meaning in an account of the shipwreck and death of William the Conqueror's son, though perhaps with the theatrical sense of the term also in mind. Thomas Kyd, as we have seen, uses the word in *The Spanish Tragedy* to mean actual ruin, though the play draws several times on the artistic sense of the term as well. Indeed, Kyd's drama merges real-life and theatrical tragedy in its very structure, as Hieronimo uses a stage play to pursue his actual revenge, all of which is in turn given a choric framing. 'Tragedy', then, would appear to evolve in a three-step process from describing a play or piece of writing to denoting an account of historical adversity, and from there to designating historical adversities themselves. In the best Wildean fashion, tragedy begins as art, which life then imitates. And the earlier real-life uses of the word still retain a resonance of its origins in stage or story, which can later drop out altogether. The word thus progresses from art, to life with an echo of art, to life.

For most people today, tragedy means an actual occurrence, not a work of art. Indeed, some of those who nowadays use the word of actual events are probably unaware that it has an artistic sense at all; so that whereas some conservative critics claim that it is unintelligible to speak of real life as tragic, some of their fellow citizens who freely use the word of famines and drug overdoses might be puzzled to hear it used of a film or novel. Even so, when the *OED* speaks of tragedy as 'an unhappy or fatal event or series of events in real life; a dreadful calamity or disaster', it is careful to note that this is a merely *figurative* employment of the word, dating from no earlier than the sixteenth century. So real-life tragedy is a metaphorical derivation from the actual artistic thing, a view which converts an historical development into an ontological priority. For a host of exponents of tragic theory, there can be no more shameful naivety than confusing tragedy in art with tragedy in life, despite Freud's teaching that the most tumultuous crisis of our early lives is scripted by an ancient tragic drama. Indeed, for a good many critics, there can be no real-life tragedy at all. This is one major reason why 'tragedy' cannot mean 'very sad', since the former is an aesthetic term and the latter an everyday one. 'In real life there are no tragedies', declares W. McNeile Dixon, who as a cloistered academic might perhaps have been speaking for himself.⁴¹

But he certainly speaks for a whole raft of commentators. Even the radical Franco Moretti denies that the tragic exists in historical life, and reserves the term 'tragedy' only for representations of that existence.⁴² One reason for this restriction of the term is plain enough. If tragic art for conservative theorists is a supremely affirmative affair, and if this is not wholly on account of its artistic form, then they can avoid the embarrassment of having to extol real-life cataclysms as equally positive by the

barefaced but simple device of refusing to define them as tragic at all. It is not that one is being hard-hearted, so the argument goes; it is just that tragedy is a technical affair, quite different from run-of-the-mill calamity. Those who dissent from this proposition are then regarded as mildly obtuse, like someone who accuses a surgeon of sadism for extracting a diseased lung. All-out nuclear warfare would not be tragic, but a certain way of representing it in art might well be. Behind this apparently lunatic notion, which only the remarkably well-educated could conceivably have hatched, lie a series of false assumptions: that real life is shapeless, and art alone is orderly; that only in art can the value released by destruction be revealed; that real-life suffering is passive, ugly and undignified, whereas affliction in art has an heroic splendour of resistance; that art has a gratifying inevitability lacking in life.

In his *Experiments in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis writes in witheringly patriotic style of the 'uninterestingness of (real-life) grief', an 'uncouth mixture of agony and littleness' which is bereft of 'grandeur or finality' and strikes one merely as 'dull and depressing'.⁴³ Lewis's writings on the premature death of his wife do not seem to view the event as dull and uninteresting, though other people's real lives are perhaps more uncouth than one's own. A. C. Bradley agrees with Lewis's case: 'A tale, for example, of a man slowly worn to death by disease, poverty, little cares, sordid vices, petty persecutions, however piteous or dreadful it might be, would not be tragic in the Shakespearian sense'.⁴⁴ Lewis and Bradley have the enthusiastic support of Ulrich Simon, who gravely informs us that 'disablement, genetic malformation, crippling diseases, may torment the victims and destroy their families, but they are not tragic'.⁴⁵ No doubt this judgement would come as a blessed relief to the diseased and disabled, as one cross less for them to bear. It seems an odd note to strike in a work about Christianity. Simon proceeds to list other palpably non-tragic events such as floods, earthquakes which wipe out whole communities, genocide or the battle of the Somme. The Holocaust was not tragic, but rather the death of tragedy. Tragedy must be more than mere victimage; it must involve a courageous resistance to one's fate, of the kind we witness in the great tragic works of art.

There was, of course, heroic resistance to Nazism on the part of some Jews. And plenty of people battle bravely against floods, disease, disablement, genocide and the like. Along with many other commentators on tragedy, Simon makes the curious assumption that such resistance flourishes only in art; that without it there is no revelation of value; and that without such value there is no tragedy. Tragedy is held to be about the response to an event, not just the event itself; but this surely cannot mark the difference between art and life, since the distinction is as hard

to draw in the one case as in the other. The argument, anyway, seems to be that Heinrich von Kleist's drama *Penthesilea* is tragic, while the fact that Kleist blew his brains out at the age of thirty-four in a suicide pact with a cancer victim is not. (Ever resourceful in planning for his future, Kleist had previously joined the French army in the hope of being killed during Napoleon's projected invasion of England.) The discrepancy between art and life here begins to assume grotesque proportions, as though someone were to claim that a three-hour monologue delivered in a nasal monotone would be tedious in real life but enchanting on stage.

As Raymond Williams sardonically observes, in a book devoted to refuting this fallacy: 'War, revolution, poverty, hunger; men reduced to objects and killed from lists; persecution and torture; the many kinds of contemporary martyrdom; however close and insistent the facts, we are not to be moved, in a context of tragedy. Tragedy, we know, is about something else.'⁴⁶ Williams rightly recognizes that the quarrel is not really about kinds of suffering; it is about traditional tragic theory's mandarin disdain for modernity and the common life. It is not 'real life', but a certain post-classical, post-aristocratic species of it, which is the true target of the Bradleys, Lewises and Steiners. What is at stake is the war against modern vulgarity, of which the nobility of tragic art is the anti-thesis. As Geoffrey Brereton puts the point: 'The death of a great man in an air-crash qualifies for tragedy unequivocally; if he is killed in a sports-car, the tragic quality becomes more dubious; if by falling off a bicycle, the whole conception is endangered.'⁴⁷ Perhaps this takes the metaphor of the tragic fall a little too literally.

The theory of tragedy is full of such absurdities. Few artistic forms have inspired such extraordinarily pious waffle. H. A. Mason writes that 'the Hero becomes a candidate for Tragedy only when we are struck by some analogy between his relation to the whole world of his play and the relation of the Soul of Man to all that it is surrounded by in the Universe'.⁴⁸ It is hard to see how this is true of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. John S. Smart holds that tragedy raises fundamental questions about our place in the cosmic order, which is hardly the case with *Rosmersholm*.⁴⁹ In *Tragedy Is Not Enough*, a by no means imperceptive study, Karl Jaspers writes that 'Tragedy shows man as he is transformed at the edge of doom. Like Cassandra, the tragic hero comprehends the tragic atmosphere. Through his questions he relates himself to destiny. In struggle he becomes aware of that power for which he stands, that power which is not yet everything. He experiences his guilt and puts questions to it. He asks for the nature of truth and in full consciousness acts out the meaning of victory and of defeat.'⁵⁰ It may well be that poor translation has a hand in this

chain of flat-footed platitudes, but it is, even so, depressingly typical of a certain vein of commentary on the subject. Maud Bodkin, who does not even have the excuse of being in translation, informs us that 'Hamlet, though he dies, is immortal, because he is the representative and creature of the immortal life of the race'.⁵¹ Tragedy, another critic instructs us, has 'the power to suggest something illimitable, to place life against a background of eternity, and to make the reader feel the presence of problems which he cannot solve'.⁵² It is indeed uplifting to feel that one's problems are insoluble, not least for those of a masochistic turn of mind.

The discrepancy between tragedy as art and tragedy as life is an ironic one. For most pieces of tragic art behave exactly as though tragedy were indeed a matter of actual experience, rather than some purely aesthetic phenomenon. As with any art or piece of language, there is that immanent in them which points beyond them. The deconstruction of art and life is known as art. While tragic theory insists for the most part upon one version of tragedy, tragic practice tends to illustrate another; and this incongruity, which runs back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, is deep-seated and persistent enough to suggest that it constitutes a cultural problem or intellectual contradiction in its own right. Raymond Williams wryly observes that some modern theory of tragedy perversely denies that actual tragedy is possible 'after almost a century of important and continuous and insistent tragic art',⁵³ while Roland Galle remarks on the Owl-of-Minerva-like irony by which philosophical speculation on tragedy in the nineteenth century, in the heyday of Hegel, Schelling, Schlegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, flourishes at a point when the form itself seems to be temporarily exhausted.⁵⁴ Those who can, create; those who can't, philosophize.

Indeed, one might claim that philosophy here is a continuation of tragedy by other means. The two ideas are even linked in popular consciousness, tragedy signifying the unavoidable and philosophy signifying fatalism ('she was surprisingly philosophical about losing her husband to a lap dancer'). Just as artistic modernism was later to migrate into avant-garde cultural theory, so from Hegel to Nietzsche tragedy is displaced into theoretical speculation. It now becomes a cultural signifier, a theodicy, a majestic Idea, a fertile source of ultimate value or form of counter-Enlightenment, an artistic resolution of philosophical dualities, rather than in the first place a matter of ordeal and affliction. An age of revolution, which the visionary youth of the era feel belongs to them in particular, has little time for such dispiriting realities; and since tragedy therefore becomes less and less possible on stage, it is free as a concept to take up home in reflections on the Dionysian or the Absolute, in the

necessity of sacrifice, the conflict between Nature and culture or the self-estrangement of Spirit, where it becomes the sign of a vitalism or humanism which has little enough to do with human misfortune.

That tragic art and tragic theory should be so dissonant should come as no surprise. The antithesis between them, according to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, runs back as far as Socrates. For Nietzsche, it was philosophy, with its vainglorious universalist claims, which spelt the ruin of the local, unreflective pieties and rituals by which the roots of ancient tragic art were nourished. For Walter Benjamin, it is the serene, unshowy death of Socrates, a distinctly non-sublime parody of a tragic death, which marks the death of tragedy as such.⁵⁵ For Nietzsche, myth and tragedy have been liquidated by an unholy alliance of rationalism (Euripides and Socrates), psychological realism, naturalism, everyday life, dialectics, historical optimism, ethics and rational inquiry. The death of tragedy was the first great victory of this contemptible enlightenment, and Nietzsche's mission will be to proclaim the death of this death. From this early *Aufklärung* onwards, so Nietzsche considers, a slave mentality lethal to tragic art is brought gradually to birth. Socrates's belief that the world should be intelligible – what Nietzsche scornfully calls his 'instinct-dissolving influence' – strikes at the root of the Dionysian mysteries. It is no wonder that Socrates himself is said to have shunned the public performance of tragedy. Knowledge in the long aftermath of tragic theatre is no longer mythical or mystical but coupled to the grovelling English values of virtue and morality, happiness and self-transparency. As we witness the detestable emergence of 'theoretical man', the exultant aesthetic spectator yields ground to the joyless academic eunuch, with his pathetic illusion that thought can penetrate and even correct Being. For Nietzsche, however, the world is essentially unreadable, and 'tragic knowledge', which needs art to render tolerable its appalling insights, involves a grasp of the world's meaninglessness. It also involves a sense of the limits of knowledge, frontiers to which Kant and Schopenhauer have recalled us in philosophy; but from this scepticism may spring a rebirth of tragic culture, in which myth will once more flourish and wisdom will come to oust science. It is little wonder, then, that tragedy and philosophy should be at daggers drawn, given that the former signifies an irreducible mystery or opacity in human affairs which is impenetrable to anything as lowly as cognition. Tragedy, in this sense of the term, is counter-Enlightenment.⁵⁶

One of the most sophisticated recent studies of the topic, Michelle Gellrich's deconstructive *Tragedy and Theory*, regards this discrepancy between practice and philosophy as a kind of de Manian resistance to theory on the part of the embattled artefacts themselves. 'Tragic plays',

she comments, 'rather than bearing out the salient principles of traditional dramatic theory, resist them and withstand the modes of understanding that they make possible'.⁵⁷ Gellrich reads the philosophy of tragedy as seeking to repress and exclude the conflicts which tragic practice reveals, neutralizing its moral outrage, defusing its tendencies to social dissolution, and resisting its more adversarial aspects.⁵⁸ This overlooks the fact that some theory of tragedy (Schopenhauer, say) is considerably more dissident than some practice of it (Claudel, for example); but Gellrich is right to see much tragic theory as being, in a fairly rigorous sense of the word, ideology, defusing the disruptiveness of its subject-matter with its anodyne appeals to virtue, rationality and social harmony. The theory of tragedy, with its bland moral didacticism, plays Apollo, as it were, to the Dionysus of the practice. *Poesis* for Aristotle, Gellrich argues, involves rendering meaningful the random or accidental – so that the very artistry of plot betrays what Gellrich, in her mildly conspiratorial post-structuralist way, perceives as a kind of repressive making-intelligible of the subversive and unpredictable. By virtue of the art form itself, a certain deceptive necessity is introduced into the world, while history itself remains bound to randomness and contingency. Gellrich would thus position tragic art in the Aristotelian schema somewhere between science and history, miming the necessity of the former but without its mathematical rigour. Much the same place, poised ambiguously between science and ideology, will be assigned to art by Louis Althusser some centuries later.⁵⁹

Radical French theory, though this time in a Foucaultian rather than Derridean vein, also informs Timothy Reiss's erudite, adventurous *Tragedy and Truth*. Tragedy for Reiss inaugurates a new order of discourse by marking the limits of an existent regime of knowledge, articulating the absent significations at its heart. It shows up what is necessary for a certain social or legal order to exist, and thus, in sketching its outer horizon of meaning, the points where it trembles into silence and non-signification, acts as a kind of transcendental phenomenon. If this makes the form sound subversive, doing to discourse something of what for Pierre Macherey literature does to ideology,⁶⁰ the subversion proves short-lived. For the function of the tragic is also to reduce this elusive silence to regulated knowledge, so that tragedy becomes 'the art of overcoming unmeaning'.⁶¹ Like Gellrich, Reiss harbours a post-structuralist suspicion of systematized articulate knowledge, which in typically indiscriminate fashion he sees as oppressive. It does not seem to occur to either exponent of this abstractly formalist judgement that some kinds of ordered knowledge can be emancipatory, just as some forms of non-meaning can be violent and repressive.

Just as Gellrich risks falling into too sharp an opposition between tragic art (disruptive, hence to be commended) and tragic theory (regulatory, hence to be resisted), so Reiss contrasts the tragic as the absence, excess or impossibility of meaning with a tragic knowledge which tames and naturalizes this perilously destabilizing force, reducing it to a stable order of reference, representation and rationality. Tragedy acts out the chaos at the core of a socio-discursive order, but also recuperates for knowledge the 'inexpressible' which eludes that order. Our response to it, then, is 'at once the fear of a lack of all order and the pleasure at seeing such lack overcome',⁶² a rather more dialectical formulation than Gellrich's which nonetheless casts in new conceptual garb a fairly traditional sort of paradox. Indeed, both critics recycle the Apollonian/Dionysian opposition into the idiom of post-structuralism, and predictably come down emphatically in favour of the latter. The ancient Greeks, by contrast, knew enough to fear and loathe the Dionysian as well as to venerate it. But Reiss, at least, complicates Gellrich's too-stark antithesis by seeing both order and disorder, reason and the inexpressible, in tragic art itself, as a form which 'brings about rationality by showing what can be termed the irrational within that rationality'.⁶³ By combining a Machereyan notion of art as highlighting the limits of intelligibility with a rather more Foucaultian emphasis on regulation and containment, Reiss seeks to show tragedy as both ideological and counter-ideological, as 'enclosing' the inexpressible but also 'performing' it.

The idea of the inexpressible, of a meaning which slips through the net of signification as a mere trace of madness and chaos, is simply the reverse of a notion of meaning as rationalized and regulated. Such pessimism needs such mysticism as its necessary complement. The only alternative to conceptual tyranny is conceptual indeterminacy, and for Reiss tragedy see-saws perpetually between the two. It is a suggestive case, but one which entails some curious consequences. For one thing, it lands up embarrassingly cheek-by-jowl with the right-wing death-of-tragedy thesis. For Nietzsche, as for such latter-day custodians of the classical tradition as George Steiner, tragedy has died because fate, the gods, heroism, mythology and a proper appreciation of the darkness of human hearts have ruinously yielded in our own time to chance, contingency, democracy, rationality, religious disenchantment and a callow progressivism. Reiss does not of course subscribe to this right-wing syndrome; but like his mentor Michel Foucault, he is enough of a Nietzschean to be allergic to ideas of rationality and social progress, as well as to court a certain philosophical pessimism. For him, modern tragedy has become 'analytical', defusing the inexpressible in a form of discourse which supports social order. This is not, to be sure, quite why Steiner, Krieger and their

confrères regard tragedy as having exhaled its last breath with the death of Racine; but it is not light-years removed from it either.

Reiss's case carries another conservative corollary. His aversion to representation as insidiously stabilizing (an oddly universalizing doctrine for a post-structuralist) means that he cannot look with much enthusiasm on the idea of tragedy as a real-life phenomenon. For one thing, the very concept of 'real life' is bound to appear epistemologically naive to a post-structuralist. So whereas some conservative critics plump for art rather than life, Reiss opts for discourse rather than experience. For another thing, since real-life reference is one way in which the fluidities of discourse are oppressively disciplined, tragedy should not be concerned with much other than itself. Once again, the most provocatively avant-garde theory comes full circle to rejoin the most doggedly traditionalist.

For both Gellrich and Reiss, tragic theory and tragic practice are locked in a contradictory relationship, like warring marriage partners who need one another but are constantly at loggerheads. But it may also be that tragedy and its theory have been so out of kilter simply because they have different preoccupations. The philosophy of art always comes furnished with its own agenda, rather than obediently reflecting its object; and this has been strikingly true in the case of tragedy. It is with the onset of the modern epoch that the idea of tragedy begins to outgrow its humble incarnations in this or that closet drama or stage performance to become a full-blown philosophy in its own right. If tragedy matters to modernity, it is as much as a theodicy,⁶⁴ a metaphysical humanism, a critique of Enlightenment, a displaced form of religion or a political nostalgia as it is a question of the slaying at the crossroads, the stench of the Furies or the monster rising from the sea. Tragedy, as Raymond Williams remarks, often 'attracts the fundamental beliefs and tensions of a period, and tragic theory is interesting mainly in this sense, that through it the shape and set of a particular culture is often deeply realized'.⁶⁵ What is at stake, as Williams shrewdly points out, is the culture from which the theory itself springs, at least as much as the culture which gave birth to the tragic art itself.

The traditionalist conception of tragedy turns on a number of distinctions – between fate and chance, free will and destiny, inner flaw and outer circumstance, the noble and the ignoble, blindness and insight, historical and universal, the alterable and the inevitable, the truly tragic and the merely piteous, heroic defiance and ignominious inertia – which for the most part no longer have much force for us. Some conservative critics have thus decided that tragedy is no longer possible, while some radicals have concluded that it is no longer desirable. Both camps agree that tragedy really *does* hinge on these dichotomies; it is just that the

former regrets their passing while the latter rejoices in it. Otherwise, left and right are at one in their understanding of tragedy; it is just that the left rejects it while the right endorses it. But this need not be the only meaning of tragedy, and the left should not airily ditch the notion as antiquated and elitist. For there are other understandings of it, not least of those aspects of tragedy which seem most alien and obsolete, which as we shall see are surprisingly close to contemporary radical concerns.