Tragedy and the Lie

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Tragedy is based on a lie; this will be shown to be the positive side of Tragedy. After I have explained to you the nature of this lie and its former necessity I will then consider what it means to live without the means of facing the lie that the tragic art form formerly facilitated. The lies in our contemporary world are so terrifying that when identified they blind us not with insight but with our propensity to make "evil" banal.

Tragedy attracts us because it is bloody and tormenting; there is a strange human need to hear about murder, fire, plague, earthquakes, rape, massacre. This is a peculiarity of our dual nature to seek out the dark sides of our selves. Perhaps this somewhat negative indulgence is acceptable given that the protagonist will emerge dignified from its presence; that we can be heroes and heroines, that we can look at the most horrific of things and learn from them, become great in its presence— or so the old theories on tragedy once persuaded us.

The Art of Tragedy, as opposed to the fact of tragic occurrence, emerges with more force in some ages than others. One would think in the contemporary age when tragic events are rife and given technology's capacity to show its global occurrence, that this art form would dominate our world. After all this world is one of overwhelming poverty and widening inequalities; enforced migration allied with ambivalent political asylum, ethnic warfare, social devastation, natural pillage and environmental disasters of mammoth proportions and renewed military aggression.

The tragic nature of our world, although not unrelated to tragic art, does not dictate an emergence of the tragic art form. It is a particular moment in history that favors such emergence and it is clear that our age does not give rise to it. Tragic theatre has always been considered the highest form of art. Its power to dignify the life of man and woman in the face of the horrors of human existence might be one of the reasons it receives this accolade. Ovid Aristotle, John Milton, Racine, Hegel and Nietzsche, to mention a few, praise its wisdom, superiority and necessity. Although J.C. Maxwell decrees that Tragedy should be on a "separate footing from the other main literary forms" (Maxwell, 1968., 175-80), novelists as well as playwrights, throughout time, have sought to write it (Leech, 1970, p. 25) as if it possessed a certain quality that was essential for human survival. Shelley's warning of the equation between an absence of tragedy and a third-rate culture seems to have been anticipated or heeded, given the attempts by romantic and Victorian poets to rival Shakespeare. To struggle not only for the fact of one's own meaningful existence in time, but for the essence of men and women in all time, is to decree that life is worth living. The dramatized struggle for authenticity against evil is the content of Tragedy. Tragedy is at the opposite end to despair. As tragic heroes go to their death, their mortality connects us to a larger concept of immortality - a kind of continuum of ethical values in human societies. At least this has
been the reasoning of theorists of tragedy across time.

But what are these ethical values? What is the nature of the return to order we have with the Oedipus' discovery of his 'crimes', the death of Hamlet and Ahab at the end of their search for the truth, the pitiful insight of Lear on the Heath and that last moment before Anna Karenina fell to her summoned death beneath the train. In order to make sense of their deaths and why these deaths have been assigned 'tragic' meaning, a definition of tragedy is essential. At least I consider it valid to look at the way it was defined when the idea of definition had credence prior to attacks on 'essentialist' literature.

Examining the works of tragic theorists across time (whether Aristotle; Nietzsche Hegel; Bradley; Maxwell; Jaspers; Harris Krieger, Steiner; Eagleton; Williams; Miller and many others), I have attempted to wrest from their difference a minimum agreement about what Tragedy, as an art-form, is generally concerned with and what it should entail in its performance or text: I have elicited seven points of agreement:

1. Tragedy occurs against a background of incomprehension. The world is not to be understood in its entirety - mystery and evil stalk it;
2. the tragic protagonist, through suffering, becomes enlightened about human value - there is a valorization of existence. This suffering involves a catharsis, a kind of purging, leading to enlightenment that includes being oppressed but emotionally liberated by the spectacle of suffering;
3. the story involved is dealing with a serious issue (familial, moral world view, political);
4. it is representational, entailing an action;
5. the fate of the protagonist is seen to be a representation of the fate of human kind;
6. Tragedy ends by a return or to or a construction of a new value-related order;
7. Tragedy will always express the gulf between aspiration and fulfillment

These seven elements can be applied to my case studies - Oedipus, Hamlet, Lear, Ahab, Anna Karenina which I will access before viewing the contemporary scene which has not given rise to tragic art. These protagonists find themselves embroiled in a struggle against society, family, politics and their own preferred sense of destiny because each has been called upon to break with the lie that is their life: Oedipus must find that despite all attempts to escape the oracle that proclaims that he will kill his father and marry his mother that fate will force him to confront the lie of his innocent kingship. Indeed as we read the play the language of the text shows that he knows before he can heed the truth: 'And it is my solemn prayer/That the unknown murderer, and his accomplices,/ If such there be, may wear the brand of shame/ For their shameful act, unfriended, to their life's end./ Nor do I exempt myself from the imprecation:/If, with my knowledge, house or hearth of mine/Receive the guilty man, upon my head/Lie all the curses I have laid on others ( Sophocles, Act I, lines 43-50).

Hamlet is cursed, as he tells us, to put 'it right' and the play demonstrates the ways in which he hunts the truth down but is nevertheless empowered and tempted to live the lie considering every possible reason to post-pone the action that will avenge his father’s death. And thus when he discovers his father's murderer at prayer he decides that this is not the optimum moment to wreak his vengeance Ahab is righteous in his vengeance against the whale but as Starbuck tells him : Oh! Ahab", cried Starbuck, "it's not too late is it, even now, the third day, to desist. See! Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!"(Melville, p. 347), Lear’s journey towards understanding that love is not to be measured and nor made a commodity comes only when he loses she who loves him most.

Anna who has sought to break with inauthentic love can in the end only accept the 'lies' of her choices. Just prior her death she is well aware that despite her love of Vronsky that she and he are ‘drifting in different directions. And there is no altering that’. She notes: ‘He tells me I’m insanely jealous, but it's not true. I'm not jealous, but I’m unsatisfied’. This obsession with her aimless life coupled with her realization that
humankind was born to suffer and that life was filled with inventing means of deceiving oneself. Lead her to consider: ‘But when you see the truth, what are you to do?’ (Tolstoy, 1995, p. 693). Anna decides to escape from it; she ends her life but not before she has a moment of regret, a moment when she remembers the joys of living, a sublime moment of the consequence of escaping rather than changing the society that brought her to this place. The truth of life’s sorrows, deceptions and lies meets her memory of it ‘for an instant with all its bright past joys’ (p. 695). The blinding truth that uncovers for Anna at the moment of her death is not that life is filled with sorrow but that this has a flip-side that dictates its dimensions. Anna Karenina may be a tragedy about human wastage when people like Anna are trapped by meaningless social and moral conventions but it is also about the tragedy of the individual not having the courage to be their own person - to expect that one can be ‘authentic’ and happy without a price paid to a society dedicated to arbitrary ordinances of righteousness. The laws of society are lies, mere constructions – this is the insight that comes with Anna’s death and all discussions post her death play out the lies in ways demanded by convention. Tolstoy does not betray Anna, as has been argued often (see Gifford & Williams in Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, Norton Edition, 1995, p. 789); instead his biblical epigraph that greets the reader - ‘Vengeance is mine and I will repay’ gives us the rules by which religious, moral and social laws are constructed. Man it seems has little faith in his passions seeing them as the greatest danger to the lived sober life.

These lies uncovered are not merely the lies that have dictated the heroic status of the protagonists – they are the necessary lies that hold each of their societies together. Hamlet’s world is one of deceit and corruption apparent in almost all the play’s characters including his mother, his uncle and members of his court. Oedipus saves his homeland from plague and pestilence by solving the riddle – his heroics and superior knowledge were predicted as much as his murderous and incestuous behavior which would be executed innocently. The heroes and heroines, all innocent it seems, but only when the lie has not been revealed. Hamlet’s quest for both sanity and madness is meaningful only as long as the lie of his father’s death remains tenable; Hamlet’s ontology is made up of his proof of the lie, of his attempt to uncover it as much as it is to keep the truth at bay. The insistence towards truth is recognizable in the repetition which is equally revoked and invoked. Similarly Oedipus is confronted by repetition of his own means of becoming; he avoids in order to embrace- the level of denial is as strong as acceptance. Ahab knows intuitively that in ‘landing Moby Dick’ he must also be destroyed and Lear’s lie to himself that love can be commodified is the basis on which he negotiates his quest. There is collusion between the sustaining of the lie and the compulsion to repeat imminent exposure of it. The finite, I believe, is bound not by limits but by the human propensity to repeat, to return to the object of desire and the objects of desire for all these protagonists are concealed as they are drawn inevitably towards them.

Tragedy rests on the unfolding dance of imminent exposure of repressed ‘truths’, the actual unfolding of the lie and the barely recognized moment of sublimity that accompanies what might be recognized as a blinding truth. Classical tragedy did well to blind its protagonist because Oedipus in his moment of self-recognition sees but is blinded and this literal event is meant to fuse with its metaphorical other. This moment in tragedy is referred to as Catharsis that which comes at the end of suffering and is accompanied by enlightenment. However the enlightenment has a short life, not only in Classical and Elizabethan tragedy but also in some nineteenth and twentieth century novels when anti-heroes voice tragic themes. Bartleby cries ‘Ah Humanity’ (Melville, 1990, p. 102) and Kurtz screams at his death ‘The Horror! The Horror’ (Conrad, 1995, p. 137); these ‘protagonists have a moment of truth and like their counterparts in earlier tragedies pay for it with their lives. It is the catharsis that gives tragedy its superior power and yet its cry is brief, sublime and unworliday, and almost blasphemous in its signal to return a society saved, to its lie, to its constructed moral universes where lies become the only means by which their heroes can claim reasons for authentic quests.

It is not by accident that the characters who herald tragic protagonist towards their...
moment of knowledge are the fools, the marginalized, the children and idiots in the texts. Lear’s fool has given answers, and Pip in Moby Dick has had his celestial thought that ‘to reason, is absurd and frantic; weal and woe,’ and understands that he is as indifferent ‘as his God’ (Melville, 1967, p. 347). The outsiders are carriers of ‘truth’ but forbidden the roles as transformers of the sublime moment. It will be these outsiders that will become the anti-heroes of modern fiction when tragedy is declared dead. Its death will be declared at different points in history but it is the modernist novel that seems to bring it to its final death throes and modern theatre will explore its absence by an obsessional interest in the absurd- in the failure of communication itself. It seems the modernist artist becomes obsessed with his/her own processes and less concerned with stories in which heroic characters act out a fight against injustice in a public setting.

What died in the tragic arts was the wish or the ability of the artist, for philosophical, historical or technical reasons, to represent man and woman in action. ‘A state of being’, whether those of created characters, or those relating to the literary and philosophical preoccupations of the author, replaced the representation of an action. What in fact died along with the disinterest in representing people acting towards a value oriented end was any understanding of the ‘lie’ or its counterpart ‘the truth’. We now live in the world where secular thought has interrupted old fictions and old ideologies. Freud long ago showed us that we were unknown to ourselves; Marx pointed to those dialectical forces of history that excluded beliefs in transcendent absolutes and Nietzsche and his existential disciples awakened a sense of the absurdity of living when fixities were laid to rest. Positivism of the nineteenth century that trusted in the power of knowledge had excluded the possibility of the tragic arts as it did not provide that enigmatic universe that the tragic art feeds upon; its optimism in progress made negligible the thought that art was a healing mechanism- Progress of the scientific, technological and rational kind promised to solve the ills of the world. The last century, however, and the one that now unfolds, are less persuaded by the promises of progress but, instead inspired by the knowledge that we cannot know, that truth is multi-dimensional and never absolute and semblance and reality, it seems, have become interchangeable.

Post-modernist thinkers, whether Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Lacan and Kristeva, chronicle the distrust of any hard-fast realities or moralities; their common shared view that language does not reflect ultimate truths but instead shapes them, that how we see is what we see places us in a world of uncertainties. Faith in linguistic measurement or annunciation is jettisoned and subjects concerned with morality; power, knowledge and love become arenas of mystery, debate and objects of de-construction rather than the subjects to be sought and defined.

Public performance offered by Tragedy in which a protagonist sought answers in an intolerable socio-political situation appear no longer. Alain Badiou when representing the twentieth Century discusses the extent to which ‘representations and discourse must be read as masks of a real that they both denote and conceal’( Badiou, 2007, p. 49). Badiou is referring to ideologies which he believes stage figures of representations that mask the primordial violence of social relations. The energy of the real ‘presents itself as mask’(p. 51). It becomes impossible to know the difference between semblance and the real though there is some agreement that the masks, fictions and montages are the means by which the ‘real’ operates. As Lacan has demonstrated, our language is our unconscious expressed, however arbitrary that expression might be; the ego is ‘an imaginary construct’, and its rendering of ‘deeper truths’, which are inaccessible as they are unconscious, involves misrecognition. As subjects we are ‘nothing’ until something activates the void to action. It is in the action that lies may be recovered. I will return to this later in this paper.

In my discussion of the lie I wish to move between two main theoretical positions on Tragedy. For the moment we will accept that there is no turning back. We therefore have two possibilities with reference to thinkers that have seen the whole picture . On
one hand we have the Nietzschean view that Tragedy at its best was a healing mechanism to replace meaning and solace that religion had offered. The arts can heal by providing a veil of illusion in the way that religion once did. So basically Nietzsche acknowledges that we cannot live with the truth – only create art and that the best form of art is that which gives us a moment of cathartic insight.

Then there is the view of contemporary theorist Terry Eagleton. The latter comes primarily from a political perspective the former from an aesthetic one. Politics and Art have never really fused despite all their attempts to do so. ‘On one hand, art is a process, internal to art, which has to do with rupture - with the passion for the real understood as the dawn of being, invented through the activations of forms; on the other, politics is an external process, which concerns, the position of art and artists vis-à-vis effective and organized politics, revolutionary politics in particular. Art and politics, despite attempts at modern fusion, came to understand that artistic creation and obedience to a creed are not always in the same space or moment. Nevertheless each perspective wanted to believe in new beginnings to change what had become obsolete, to heal and to make new. Each at different times in history attempted to utilize the mantra of the other given the common interest in new beginnings.

Terry Eagleton argues that this world with a structure that is increasingly governed by greed of transnational corporations is one which has to be broken in order to be repaired (Eagleton, 2004, p. 295-6). He does not, however, see much hope for Tragedy emerging from a post-modernist world dedicated to the discourses of pluralism and pragmatism. Implied in his argument is that there is a need for tragedy to emerge as an art form once more, and further more, that such an art-form would be a positive, radical force. It would identify a new scapegoat as the ‘whole sweated, uprooted populations’ who, like Oedipus, after his enlightenment, are thrust out of the city. However, as Eagleton points out, the modern day scapegoat (uprooted populations) ‘is essential to the workings of the very polis which shuts it out’(p. 296). Eagleton’s interest in the scapegoat (pharmakos) as being an integral element of Classical tragedy is telling; and somewhat surprising. Coming from a politically left perspective his view that ‘polluted kings and ancient fertility cults might speak more relevantly to the politics of our times ... [and] are a good deal more relevant than politics of most present-day left historians’ at first surprises. Nevertheless this view aligns itself with his political belief in some kind of revolution. Eagleton, it seems, sees the need for contemporary tragedy that will express and contribute to transfiguring a world that ‘needs to be broken in order to be repaired’.

If one is attracted to Nietzsche’s analysis of tragedy, the art of tragedy promises a veil between us and the stark reality of the human condition. It is to replace the healing qualities hitherto reserved for religion though with different promises of resurrection. Nietzsche of course only believed this happened in ancient times before the Apollonian and Dionysian aesthetic forces working in unity was subverted by Socratic thought; Nietzsche writes:

If we look about us today, with eyes refreshed and fortified by the spectacle of the Greeks, we shall see how the insatiable zest for knowledge, prefigured in Socrates, has been transformed into tragic resignation and the need for art; while, to be sure, on a lower level the same zest appears as hostile to all art and especially to the truly tragic, Dionysian art, as I have tried to show paradigmatically in the subversion of Aeschylean art by Socratism

Nietzsche's philosophy post *The Birth of Tragedy* sought to, in the absence of the tragic art endemic to the fictive worlds of Aeschylus and Sophocles, dissuade his readers against the validity of all axioms of truth, whether moral or scientific. He recognized ‘the ‘pretentious lie of civilization’, the mediocrity of a world dictated by ‘the herd’ and the need of people to find within themselves the means of moving ‘beyond good and evil’. His recognition that civilizations were slaves to antiquated ideas of
cause and effect or indeed any scientific principle sanctified during the Enlightenment was one that is accepted in the contemporary world by those who reject principles of supposed ‘truth’ arrived at by logic, rationalization or empirical measurement. What then is possible in the contemporary age that seeks change through the medium of art?

It may be the case that we get the kind of tragic art we deserve and in this present world its’ absence is either the result of choices made or choices we did not have the courage to make. This implies of course that art does reflect and transform that which is enacted in ‘real’ life and its powers to transfigure are endemic within the people that exist, struggle and wish to make a report of some kind.

Both Eagleton and Nietzsche rely and relied on a lie - on the power and inevitability of the lie: Nietzsche argues that Tragedy is powerful and necessary because it successfully veils truth indeed he believed that the ultimate truth of our meaningless death must be veiled if we are to remain seekers of renewed, better worlds. Eagleton argues that the redemptive power of tragedy cannot happen now, not until this world is broken and put together again in a revolutionary act. Would this new tragedy be the representation of the excluded, promoted to role of tragic protagonist, exhibiting in their struggle the revelation of corruption and the lie that sustains it. The problem here is that the marginalized, the victims of our contemporary worlds, are not like the tragic protagonists of the past actually living a lie. They already know the condition of their lives and the lies that determine it. In our globalized , commodified world it is impossible to identify the hero or heroine or the values that might sustain a struggle to ‘set it right’. Instead we have post-dramatic representations whereby the stage does not proffer forth a heroic protagonist but instead conversational exchanges; soliloquies, ‘plain speak’ views representing the diversity of views. Interrogations are often utilized on the stage when attempts are made to dramatize the horror of political refugees no longer given political asylum or the divide between groups in the wake of terrorist attacks. But what values are possible? From where can judgment be made? Whereas Porfiry was able to break Raskolnikov in Crime & Punishment by carefully generated psychological rhetoric what does one ask someone who may, for example, have just broken his victims knee for political ends and who unlike Raskolnikov does not harbour any guilt over his actions? Or of world leaders who are sanctimonious about fighting terrorism with no evident guilt felt towards the power base, on both sides of the divide, that leads to such gruesome acts. Nietzsche’s perspectivism and the pluralities of views that dominate our current world dictate awareness that one exists in an environment in which reason, albeit defined by sociological surveys and the measuring stick of the economic rationalist, rules. One may not accept the ‘truth’ or an inherent value of this measurement but an acceptance of a plurality of beliefs existing side by side entails competitive fictions vying for implementation. In the absence of a set of moral guidelines that can be shared across peoples, we have the fierceness of ideology and might. When ‘the real’ is unidentifiable, Badiou proclaims, we submit to the fetish of figures There is no way to identify a lie when subservient to figures and empirical measurement. There is no-one to cry out that the emperor has no clothes.

This paper is about the ‘lie’ in Tragedy. It is the lie that a protagonist will recognize and break-down in order to decry it, in order to momentarily cleanse the society held together by this lie. In the wake of this cleansing there will be constructions of new lies or fictions that will best serve that community or at least suit those in a positions of power. Nevertheless there has been a purging and a spiritual renewal. In times of ancient tragedy, in some Shakespearean plays and some novels from the nineteenth and twentieth century that deal with tragic themes, we access the lie that the protagonist was able to disclose , albeit for a brief moment before he or she either died or was exiled as the price of uncovering it.

During the enlightenment period and the resultant ‘Age of Certainty’, tragedy was not a popular art form, perhaps because the optimistic attitude towards science as a means of liberating the world from ignorance and pain precluded an aesthetic construction
whereby a protagonist fights for a truth in a world thought to be ultimately explicable. It will prove itself an illusion as predicted by Nietzsche in The Birth of Tragedy: ‘…we find a type of deep-seated illusion guided by the thread of causation, first manifested in Socrates; the illusion that thought, guided by the thread of causation, might plumb the furthest abysses of being and even correct it’ (Nietzsche, 1956, p. 93). Always there was this need to make existence intelligible and thereby justified. The irony is perhaps that science has become more adept at showing us not only how unintelligible the world is but the extent to which humankind in its zest for progress and its optimism in the implementation of all that science has provided has succeeded in destroying the world that it sought unsuccessfully to master.

The modernist period brought new fictions to the stage and to prose. Protagonists, more victims and anti-heroes than truth seekers, wallowed in their loss of the sacred; the dramatists, artists and writers felt compensated by their ability to ‘make it new’ with their creation of forms. The de-sanctified modern world proffered forth the alienated individuals seeking meaning in a world which had lost both its religious certainties as well as its scientific ones. Artists were more interested in writing allegorical stories that mirrored the processes of artistic creation itself than writing the story of people in search of answers in a ‘real’ world of action and beliefs.

We see our trauma without shame; we as post-modernists collapse the old lying stories and focus on the disposessed with a reckoning of gender, race and class. As we stumble over the rights of all, the truths of many, we pretend in our reflexivity that we honour all beliefs, all creeds, all kinds and in our acceptance of all we cannot see/shield ourselves from the lies. We have only a void. And when we hear the accusative cries of evil between competing powers systems we know that we are ill-equipped because this evil has become rationalized, sanitized and made banal. Writers have long forsaken representing the states of being of alienated characters. There is a sense that some form of action needs to be heeded and represented again. However the human propensity to return again and again to the object of desire so that it might be revealed has been blockaded. I agree with Badiou that only ‘the event’ matters. It is the event that gives access to our lies and a means towards bringing about their revelation. We must embrace the void of ourselves as subjects and by responding to an ‘event’ via action bring ourselves into being. Action not reflexivity is the means of hunting down the lie.

I return to my original statement that evil has become banal. It’s a shocking idea this oppression by banality and it connects to one of the earlier ‘definitions’ of tragedy that Tragedy ‘occurs against a background of incomprehension. The world is not to be understood in its entirety - mystery and evil stalk it’. Earlier tragedies entailed protagonists who named the evil and then sought to dispel it to an audience who shared a common value system that would accept that naming. In our contemporary world it is not difficult to acknowledge that ‘evil’ stalks human kind whether it is manifested in political atrocities; forced migrations; terrorism; exploitation of the dispossessed; the poor and the marginalized. However in our contemporary globalized world of plurality and pragmatism ‘evil’ is not named beyond the imperatives of competing political power systems. A globalized audience accepts at best a plurality of values which allows merely an identification of ‘evil’ attributable to a competing political power rather than as endemic to the human condition.

Oliver Bennett's study Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline makes a particularly salient point when he suggests that perhaps the ideological and the moral cannot be separated (Bennett, 2001, p. 54); certainly there is an unlikelihood of tragic art re-appearing in a world which does not have any morally shared ground. The art of tragedy emerges in cultures that recognize their own frailties, their own propensity for error, their own perversities and cruelties towards fellow human beings. Tragedy occurs when a society recognizes that laws of the land must be continually renewed because their ordinance will endorse ‘evil’ and corruption unless they are able to be scrutinized and over-hauled. If evil belongs always to the ‘other’, it becomes abstract, obtuse and
banal.

This paper has identified the changing forms that the tragic art has undergone across time; it has argued that its absence in the past occurred during periods when, for example, the illusion of science made it seem unnecessary. Contemporary society has no such illusion to explain its absence. If indeed Tragedy provides the means by which men and women are enlightened about the lies that underpin their societies, it would appear that its healing powers are desirable. It is my contention however that as long as 'evil' is seen as banal, art will be unable to access the spiritual aspect of humankind that seeks its own renewal. It will be undeserving of the healing powers of tragic art that come with the courage to know the lies that form the infrastructure of national and global societies.

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