

## Preface for the reader

*It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.*<sup>1</sup>

Tragedy, both as genre and as consciousness, presupposes a metaphysics. Comedy has not attracted the same philosophical attention (from Aristotle to Eagleton) because comedy is essentially of the empirical world: the material world is the banana peel, man as machine, rising above his station only to be slapped down by the limitations that objecthood, fate and coincidence place in front of him. We don't require a metaphysical rationalization for comedy. It reminds us of our earthbound condition and reconciles us to its whimsical ironies. There is, even in the greatest comedic achievements such as *Twelfth Night* or *The Producers*, a warning to know our place and portion: taking on a pretense of sexual otherness is a hindrance to happy matrimony; the conman is caught upon his own cleverness, in courting failure achieving unwanted success. But those are lessons for this world, not something beyond it.

This is not to say that tragedy requires a system of philosophy any more than comedy does, but in trying to explain the attraction of tragedy—the witnessing of almost unendurable earthly suffering—appeals to reconciliation, levelling lampoon or necessary amusement will not do. The necessity for tragedy will not be found in the same world as comedy, but somewhere beyond, behind. We have few treatises on comedy or the philosophy of com-

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 1.

edy, but of tragedy these are legion. And many, interestingly, are not the product of dramatists but of philosophers. Neither Aristotle, Hegel, Nietzsche, Steiner, Kaufmann nor Eagleton, to name only six who have written at considerable length on the form, is a playwright himself. But all are in one way or another philosophers who found in the tragic consciousness an avenue to metaphysics.

Any radical reconsideration of tragedy may begin even from the expression of a single thought, as complex as that thought might be: *The World as Will and Representation*, its author said, was spun from a single thought; Rudolf Malter has said that it might be posed as: "The world is the self-knowledge of the will."<sup>2</sup> There is in this thought the indissoluble kernel of the tragic consciousness itself. The will can come to our own knowledge as subjects only through that very special object, our own bodies; it is this object that we know most intimately, from inside out, as it were, though we as objects can't readily "know." But we can experience, we can sense, the will operating through the body: it can be recognized though we cannot define it in empirical terms. The evidence of this will, as it were, can be seen in our own experience as well as everywhere else in history and the world: and it is a smoking gun.

The nature of this will, in the tragic consideration, is beyond moral valuations such as optimism and pessimism; these two terms are useless indicators and forecasts of an unknown and unknowable future, which may be welcomed or feared, and they do not speak to the present; in any event, they reek of determinism; and it is the present condition of humanity which is under tragedy's

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Christopher Janaway, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 4.

examination. If we live anywhere in time, it is not in the future, but the morphing present, under the shadow of the past. Comedy (like some progressive politics) attempts to slip from this shadow into a sunny meadow, but is this possible, or is this mere illusion as well? The first great tragic work, the *Oresteia*, suggests that with the establishment of earthly justice we live in sunny brilliance and have broken with our bloody pasts. But even the *Oresteia* does not convince, and in any event, the *Libation Bearers* may have been a bone tossed to the elders of Athens in hopes of the annual prize rather than an honest reconciliation.

In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner argues that the genre of classic tragedy in its ancient and Elizabethan forms became untenable in the Enlightenment that followed the 1660 restoration of Charles II, but it took less than three centuries for that Enlightenment to begin devouring itself. Or to finish: the will through its male and female human agents turned against the world in a subatomic form at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in an administrative form in the camps of Germany and Russia; but certainly, in terms of physical and social science, this was a science determined by Enlightenment values. If one wanted proof of Enlightenment's failure, what more proof could one ask for? Surely this should be enough. (Which renders any talk of "futures" additionally absurd; how many futures were eradicated in Europe and Asia in the years between 1939 and 1945; and as a species we are complicitous in this eradication, for it wasn't Nazis or Manhattan Project scientists in whom the guilt inheres but in the human animal himself, in all of us. How we would like to forget this and blame it on some nation-state, ideologue or quasi-abstract malicious outsider.) This was the judgment, in any case, of Adorno and others of the Critical Theory school. In the wake of the

catastrophes of the First World War and those that followed, tragedy was routed, however. The search for justice had for some time been a lodestone of tragic practice; but justice could not be found (nor would it be found, the task was impossible), and so tragedy still awaited new expression for the 20th century. One would have thought that the dark promises of self-knowledge experienced in *Oedipus* and *King Lear* had been fulfilled: that the tragic consciousness would re-emerge with a vengeance.

The single thought, however, continued to live, and it lived most in theatre, because theatre, the unique speaking, bodied self-knowledge of the will, was its most appropriate arena. In the work of Artaud and Grotowski, tunnels were dug under the Disneyland of mass culture in the wake of World War II. In their work the tragic consciousness continued to inhere, and it partook not of rationalist Enlightenment values but of values of the spirit: and they were necessarily tragic, with almost nothing of the comic in the work. (There are no "funny bits" in Antonin Artaud's *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*.) Here, too, the tragic rediscovered its radical roots in the body; it took some time for dramatists to begin seeking a literary, lyrical text appropriate for the stage.

But they have begun, some years later, to do so. Completing the circle, some dramatists have begun to create a philosophical theatre once again, a theatre that is rooted in the metaphysics of tragedy.

Some notes here in the spirit of Adorno: evidence of the necessity for tragedy in the twenty-first century. And perhaps the irrelevance and blindness of unthinking comedy.

## Preface for the author

*The performance of this drama, whose scope of time by earthly measure would comprise about ten evenings, is intended for a theater on Mars. Theatergoers in this world would not be able to endure it. For it is blood of their blood, and its contents are from those unreal, inconceivable years, those years that no waking consciousness can apprehend, that are inaccessible to any memory and preserved only in a gory dream, those years in which operetta figures enacted the tragedy of mankind.<sup>3</sup>*

*A dream of a theatre.* Collectively, the entries here are not a manifesto nor a theory. It is neither an academic treatise (for it lacks the apparatus that would make it useful as such) nor a textbook. It is presented here largely as it occurred to me over the seven years of its composition, winding here and there: a single thought as it emerged in the thinking. And in the body that produced that thought. I have honed and sharpened, but otherwise have left it unstructured, for it tends to no real end.

What destruction is sought is a destruction of received consciousness, not a bomb thrown into a building or a classroom, and the feelings expressed are far too self-contradictory to constitute a theory that can be of any practical use to anyone, least of all its author. They describe a theatre that does not exist, that may never exist except as an imaginative possibility in the mind of the dreamer.

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Kraus, *The Last Days of Mankind*. Translated by Alexander Gode and Sue Ellen Wright; abridged and edited by Frederick Ungar. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1974, p. 3.

If there is any urban locus here, it is a curious one. The philosophy and work under consideration are not fictive, but they are fragmented, the individuals responsible distant from each other in both space and time. Perhaps their work is best considered as the dim candle lights that shone through the windows of monasteries, perceived from a distance in the night, and as in the Middle Ages examples of a work and toil that goes on in the dark. And they do manage to leave their mark on the night, as the ascetics of the Middle Ages left their mark on history through their manuscripts and translations, coming down to us from another era, even another world. Seen from above, these dim lights are just visible here and there, loose constellations on a dark continent beneath. Perhaps these ascetics work ignorant of each other, but during the day they may conduct travels and pilgrimages, and return with a new knowledge and a faith that, in their work, they are not alone in the world, however dark the night, however great the intervening physical distance. They are community in thought, if impossible in body.

At the same time, they leap across genre. Like the pre-Socratic philosophers, whose work took the form of fragment, aphorism and poem, one can't say that a single text is drama, this poetry, this philosophy. The lyrical beauty that courses through the pre-Socratics is the same as the beauty that courses through Beckett and Celan. So, too, it would be wrong to limit this ascetic hallucination to writers alone. Actresses and actors, designers, directors may constitute additional points in these constellations.

They also constitute the quotidian fragments of which a dream of the theatre can be built. For it is a fever-dream within the skull (like the black-box theatre itself), fed like any dream by

shards of the non-dreaming experience. From these dreams are constructed cathedrals, stone by experiential stone. These would eventually hold and store the manuscripts and performances, wrought with obsessional intent and discipline, for which the cities and culture do not necessarily care. The women and men of the monastery, not seeking fame or recognition, necessarily living hand-to-mouth, expecting neither payment, approval nor gratitude, have the sole desire to keep the dreams of the imagination alive, in a culture which would gladly have them criminalized or killed as a means of keeping the ideological and religious peace.

In the night air one might hear from these monasteries the catch in the throat of a woman's orgasmic cry, smell the sweat of the male body, experienced then inscribed within the dramatic text and by the dramatic body—both of which arise from the bodies and imaginations which the words of the manuscript render viable and visible as the performed drama. It is a dream of theatre that we will not see in our lifetime, that our sons and daughters will likely not see in theirs, given the direction in which history seems to be moving: deeper into industry, administration, puritanism and materialism, producing the real, bright exposure of the catastrophes that have introduced a post-human age.

To put the names of individual artists to the candle lights would be presumptive here, not only because they may be inferred by the material presented, but also because the list would be incomplete: they define themselves in their work and intent, and they may desire to remain in the night, the more easily to conduct their work. Dream work is private and secret, even the description of the dream is intimate, shared only among those

whom one feels secure and safe in communicating—there are dire risks involved, revelations and intimacies. But the description of the dream in drama remains necessary. Among the most important legacies that parents can leave to their children is the continuation of that dream, that such investigations are of enormous value in the dark world: a dream is a parent's gift of love to a child, who may make further careful, personal steps to its realization.