Contemporary Tragic Representation and Response: An Originary Exploration

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The Scene

On Carling Avenue, in Ottawa, just west of Woodrofe, in the grassed median, is a small wooden erection, half-collapsed, possibly but not certainly a cross, the remains of something floral—perhaps plastic—and of a brown and yellow teddy-bear. In short, a “makeshift” or “roadside memorial.” I go by it regularly, and am watching it gradually disintegrate. More than once someone riding at my side has murmured “tragic.” Doubtless expressions that include the same word are voiced in the privacy of other passing cars.

Genre or Experience

Tragedy has been said by various commentators to have died, but people do continue to use the word and its cognates. What is the status of the term now? Is it a debased or dying analogy, or a category error? As Susan Sontag long ago pointed out, to ask such questions is a form of social or cultural critique.(1) Are we asking then if a human capacity the term once invoked has likewise been diluted or dispersed? Given the apparent seriousness of the contexts in which people—in all apparent sincerity—sometimes deploy it, would it be fair to claim this? On the other hand, might an attempt to retain it be a mere expression of self-righteousness, a resentful claiming of its authority for the naive language user, the non-elite, as it clearly has been with such left-wing defenders as Raymond Williams and, more recently, Terry Eagleton?(2) In the context of such all-encompassing struggles for centrality, for identity, perhaps some human response, once evoked by tragedy, really has been left behind.

Whatever it now signifies, however, it does seem anthropologically dubious to

ignore such a pervasive usage. Current users of the word clearly and often do aspire to reflect sentiments more significant (to them) than those conveyed by a dead metaphor, or a watered-down banality. At the same time, it would certainly be rash to ignore a debate which has, at the least, made problematic the present status of the dramatic genre. This paper will approach the matter by firstly seeing it as a question about a contemporary experience, rather than about the form of the representation which evoked that experience. It will then bring its findings to a comparison with the experience apparently generated by the ancient form, through different phases of its history, in order to estimate a degree of cultural change or continuity. This will be attempted through an originary analysis of a response to one recent memorial to—representation of—a putatively tragic death.

GA on the History of Tragic Representations

It might seem that Generative Anthropology has already narrated the death of tragedy, in ways not entirely inconsistent with those offered, for example, by George Steiner in his well-known book of 1961. Eric Gans has described this event in several different ways. The audience of classical tragedy, for example, "identified with the centrality [it] resented and [was] alienated from the centrality it desired. . the protagonist's suffering [was] experienced as the price of worldly centrality" and indeed tragedy could only emerge in a society that has developed a hierarchical organisation, or retains it. "Oedipus was the object of both resentment and admiration among the Thebans" and the audience was "both relieved and saddened by his downfall. These emotions [were] not simply correlated to 'pity' and 'terror.' The crux posed by Aristotle's famous sentence results from the fact that the two emotions are not really on the same plane of esthetic experience. What terrifies us is that resentment—our own resentment—has succeeded; we pity its victim. But in the act of pity, the fallen protagonist is no longer an object of resentment; he is a human being like ourselves."(3)

The ethical lesson of tragedy in this period was therefore *ne quid nimis*, which is familiarly "moderation in all things" but that Gans makes, "avoid centrality." You do *not* want to be there. But this lesson changes with history, and with it the genre, so that the Romantic-era "equivalent of tragedy is not the . . chastisement of a tyrant but the victimization of a superior individual, who is in at least unconscious complicity with the operation." What Romantic tragedy—or call it melodrama—teaches is the "the infinite value of self-centred subjectivity. .[which] at any price can never be sold too dear in the marketplace." You *want* the centre, and here's how to get it.(4)

More recently Gans has written that "until the postmodern era, Western culture had always maintained the subordination of the ethical paradox to the fundamental

paradox of the human. Tragedy, and the literary modes that derive from it, are structured by this subordination. . . The 'end of tragedy,' which so troubled the early romantics, corresponds to the beginning of the denial of the transcendent status of the primary human paradox over the second. When the human comes to be defined exclusively in terms of the oppression of one group by another, the problematizing of esthetic resolution is a symptom of this critical, albeit historically productive, anthropological misunderstanding."(5)

Or, more simply, the "automatic exclusion of the self from the centre," which for Gans is finally fundamental to tragedy, "could not survive the coming of Christianity, with its foregrounding of the moral equality of all."(6)

Tragedy and Tragic Effect

These and other useful conceptualizations locate what is crucial to tragedy in the experience of the audience. Or perhaps more precisely, in a *suite* of experiences—resentment, desire, fear, pity, even paradoxicality itself—undergone by the audience. The formal requirements—which were much more central to Aristotle's definition—are largely reduced to a configuration of centre and periphery, with a representation of suffering taking place in the former, and the defining experience occurring in the latter, albeit mediated by the presence of other actors on the centralizing stage. Historical change need not be reflected in alterations of this formal structure. The human being in the centre always suffers, and indeed Romantic and post-Romantic tragedy may strive to preserve the prestigious ancient forms. But the Romantic audience has a different experience, draws a different lesson. Antigone or Cassandra are undoubtedly superior individuals, and a Romantic or *a fortiori* a postmodern audience somehow able to watch them go to their deaths on a classical stage would surely think of them as victims. Doubtless playwrights in either era facilitate—teach—these responses, but their intentions are not the determinant factor. The intended lesson may not be taken. What *makes* melodrama or tragedy takes place in the audience.

A "suite of experiences" we might for present purposes call the tragic effect. This Gans more generally refers to as an "aesthetic effect," and indeed "the true scene of aesthetic value is not the public stage but the individual scene of representation."(7) But the question we pursue here requires us to try to isolate a specifically tragic mode of this effect. Even if it is true that for the classical audience "the notion of a 'real-life tragedy' would be inconceivable,"(8) this is a question of form or content, and not of effect. Is there an effect which may be common to classical and contemporary audiences? Is it possible, to put it another way, to distinguish a tragic aesthetic effect from a melodramatic one, and ask if the former can or still does occur here and now?

To locate the tragic effect in audience experience has already implied the possibility of different audience responses to the same forms. We gestured this way just now, when we imagined post-moderns admiring Antigone. The functional unanimity of the originary scene—it only *is* a scene for those who stay to gaze and repeat, who become human—must also be an aspect of its uniqueness. Never again would it *necessarily* be unanimous: on subsequent occasions, even under the powerful compulsions of ritual, even if a now-human being cannot choose but understand the sign, can never be indifferent to it, it is in principle possible for him or her not to imitate it, to ignore it and draw away, even perhaps to resent not the sacred centre but the call to imitate its designation. Even if this is vanishingly rare and difficult at first—as hard as it still is to resist the contagious passion of an enveloping mob—it is a measure of cultural history that it becomes increasingly easy, and that the available responses multiply. Till at last, in a market, one must take one's tragedies, as one takes one's sacralities, where one finds them, "disseminated," optional, evanescent. But even the claim of the partisans of classical tragedy that the Athenian theatre encapsulated an entire and admirably unified community is surely a sentimental exaggeration. Did no one stay home? Did no one's mind wander? Did no one fail to desire, identify or resent? So, inversely, may we not ask if the tragic effect remains possible in an individual response to a representation consensually judged non-tragic, in a broadly anti-tragic age?

Features of the Tragic and Melodramatic Effects

What is crucial, in originary terms? Like other aesthetic effects, or events, the tragic effect may be expected to have two phases, "oscillations" perhaps but of potentially quite varied periods.(9) The phases are firstly an identification with, and thus resentment of the "worldly centrality" of another human being, and secondly a peace made with that resentment, in an indeterminate but temporary period of aesthetic satisfaction in the sign, which functions as a renunciation of desire for the centre. The passage from resentment to peace, in tragedy, is marked by some degree of recognition, on the part of the viewer, of the implication of his or her own desires in the creation of the centre and thus the suffering—the sacrificial suffering—of that human being. This is a *moral* recognition, involving the inalienable sense of human equality violated by the presence in the centre of the tragic hero, but recuperated in a pitying concern for him. The entire process involves, as Gans calls it, an "aesthetic resolution" or acceptance of the most fundamental paradox of human desire, that we desire what we do not desire, that worldly desire finds its complement in unworldly or virtual satisfaction in the sign, which is also a sacrifice of that desire. This resolution or effect is, however, like all aesthetic experience, unstable and temporary.

What, by contrast, is basic to the melodramatic aesthetic effect? It too has phases.

Desire for and resentment of worldly centrality are here, however, more directly resolved into imagined satisfaction, a sparagmos. Rather than implicating desire in the sacrificial violence converging upon the centre, rather than of fleeing that centre, the melodramatic experience is of storming it on a wave of sentiment generated by the intuition of human moral equality. In effect rejecting the tragic-aesthetic resolution and its quietus, its peace, this experience ends not a with a pitying concern for another, one's own victim, but with an identification with him or her or them—which thus engenders a *self*-pity, even if that may to variable degrees be displaced from the imagined self of those feeling it onto surrogates or clients or fellow-sufferers. Its investments are at any rate fundamentally *ethical* in character—urgently altruistic or self-indulgent or somewhere between as the case may be—seeking adjustments to social relations, a relocation or redistribution of centrality in the guise of a protest against any human occupation of it. As such, they almost invariably feature villainy and villains of some kind—that is, easily displaced pseudo-claimants on centrality—objects of a resentment, concomitant with self-pity, more readily and pleasurably gratified than that of the tragic effect. The melodramatic effect is also, however, unstable and temporary.

We may easily recognise, of course, a risk of question-begging here, in establishing definitions which may prove convenient to our argument. The previous two paragraphs are thus merely our best attempt to reflect established GA principles, the overall set of assumptions upon which the argument proceeds.

Makeshift Memorials as Melodramas

A certain scholarship has developed around makeshift memorials and similar "spontaneous" phenomena, but most of it has been concerned with reading into them the motives and purposes of those establishing them. This scholarship, although estimable at times, is thus compromised for present purposes by what a literary scholar would call the "intentional fallacy." For example,

the introduction of one anthology of writings devoted to such memorials ascribes to their erectors a list of motives which include "marking locations," "memorializing what happened," "expressing grief and sorrow," "precipitating new actions in the social and political sphere," "protesting" and "asking for social change," "seeking to understand what has happened," "asking for responsibilities," "managing in situ the emotional consequences of traumatic death," and "making premature deaths . . meaningful."(10) As this list suggests, the scholarship is somewhat prone, after it has talked about them as "coping mechanisms" and so forth, to conceive of the memorials as what one influential scholar of the subject has deemed, explicitly evoking J. L Austin, examples of "performativity."(11) The general tenor of these analyses is to see the memorials primarily as expressions of resentment: protests

against the behaviour of other people or institutions; separate, more “spontaneous,” “sincere” and “authentic” rivals to the established order of mourning performed by churches and governments; “democratic” and “local” resistance to an oppressive and unresponsive universality.(12) That is, many scholars read such memorials, starting from their humble and makeshift forms, as outcries against usurped centrality and attempts at reclamation thereof. As melodramas. This perspective is often quite reasonable, more especially with those memorials which explicitly thematize, for example, the evil of drunk driving. Such memorials certainly have their villains, and their class of victims, even where there is but a single death. They clearly intend to, and likely do evoke the melodramatic aesthetic effect in some of their viewers, some of the time. Indeed, their apparent motivation, through obviously mimetic means, doubtless contributes to this result. And even upon those who detect and resent the intention and its designs, the final effect is unlikely to be tragic.

The Ottawa Memorial’s Effect and On Whom

In the case of the memorial that is our focus, however, such an intention is not clearly to be seen. This is at least partly because the details and thematics of this memorial are, deliberately or not, obscure. One can be sure of very little. Is that indeed a cross? It might not be—the neighbourhood around the memorial is mixed, containing both recent immigrants and longer-term residents of many traditions. Does the teddy bear signify it was a child who died, or someone else, about whom comparably tender, familial sentiments are evoked? Could it have been put there by a child, the child’s own beloved possession, for a parent? The scholarship does help us to expect that, given an evolving genre or imitated practice, the latter is less likely. Was there one death, or more than one? Was it a car crash, or a car hitting a pedestrian? Was the memorial erected by surviving relatives or, partly or completely, by others? Such information, if it ever was part of the memorial, has been effaced, and it is in any case a place difficult of access in the middle of a busy road. Was there fault, was there a villain? Some scholars insist that even where there is no clear case articulated, the memorial-makers *must* be indicting the inadequacy of institutional efforts to protect public safety in our society.(13) This kind of projection of one’s own priorities, of course, is a peril of the intentional fallacy. In fact, there is practically no narrative here, and no identified villain. But one does enter into a created world, whose two certainties seem to be death, possibly the death of a child, and mourners who have erected the memorial. One is given few cues as to the effect one might appropriately experience. One can only observe that effect.

Of course, reader response criticism has its problems, too. Individual aesthetic effects are almost by definition variable and opaque, even when under the sway of

the most masterful artists. As we noted above, there were probably some Greeks whom Sophocles left cold. It is something of a truism but worth noting yet again that most attempts to describe an aesthetic effect end up as descriptions instead of aesthetic tactics apparently intended to evoke it.

When an aesthetic effect or experience *has* explicitly been made the object of study, it has usually been that of the commentator, sometimes alone, but often impressionistically extended to others, even to a collective "we." Occasionally this is bolstered by textual evidence, the specific testimony of others. Often the fame or canonical status of the art-object producing the putative effect is mustered in a more generalized support of an assumed experience of significance undergone by many. These manoeuvres are predicated, usually implicitly, on a human commonality, an appeal to which was a for time effective, but for historical reasons we shall not pursue here, now seems considerably less so.

By assuming the at least potential non-unanimity of any human experience around a centre of shared attention, with the crucial exception of the originary event itself, the present exploration has placed itself in a particular position with regard to this familiar crux. On the one hand, we affirm through the hypothesis of the originary event a common humanity, in that we assume, in every human experience, desire and resentment mediated by the sign. We insist that any response to a cultural sign can in principle be understood and described in these fundamental terms. But on the other, we launch ourselves into history, which we implicitly conceptualize as the ongoing generation of differences through the *repetition* of signs and the concomitant intensification of desire and making-inadequate of each given sign's effect of pacification, its deferral of violence—providing the impulse and need for new signs. We expect such differences to arise, in the forms of signs and in the varieties of response to them. Conviction as to both human continuity and historical difference leaves us radically open to the possibility of understanding cultural events—representations and responses—wherever and whenever they occur. We resist either the historicist denial of the possibility of fundamental understanding or the ahistorical erasure of differences. We can also therefore hope to answer the limited but specific question we began with on the evidence of a single human experience at a given moment of time. We can do so provided we can indeed understand that experience in universal or originary terms, and that we can firmly link it to the aesthetic object in question, rather than to other influences. (That is, if our analysis can persuasively rule out such mediated effects as those produced by an attempt merely to be different from the existing scholarship on makeshift memorials, or to appear sincere, and so forth.)

Wherever the experience is that of the commentator him or herself, of course, any number of personal factors might seem to cry out for compensation. In my own

case, my parenthood of a child of teddy-bear age would probably be foremost, to which might be added the bending of otherwise “normal” responses by a scholarly preoccupation with tragedy particular to someone writing a book on the subject. Still, any such factors are finally attributes of a human being, to whom the tragic effect may nonetheless occur.

Finally, though, the direct and specific causality of the effect by the specific aesthetic object under discussion probably cannot be sustained without recourse to readers’ own imagined responses, or at least the imagined plausibility of such responses in others. No single aesthetic object—as the proponents of “textuality” have of course been arguing for decades—operates fully in isolation. But nothing in our approach rules out cultural context—quite the opposite: we are interested in what happens in a specific here and now, with all that involves. But if the existence of tragic experience, somewhere at some time, is to be granted at all, those who thereby affirm some sense of what such an experience encompasses may surely take the further step of judging of its recurrence in a given instance, even by report if the report is to be trusted. Such a judgement need not assume its potential repetition, let alone its regularity or necessity in this or any subsequent context, evoked by this or any other aesthetic object.

Makeshift Memorial Aesthetics

Ought this or any makeshift memorial be thought of as a work of art at all? Again, happenstance must play a role. Something of a ritual may have accompanied its erection, making its functionality predominate over any invitation it might offer to aesthetic contemplation, at least at that time. And, it may once have communicated the same information a newspaper item might have done, a different but equally non-aesthetic priority. But for what remains on view now, its largely illegible signs, its recognisably funereal form, there is probably no better category. It has passed, as have many more famous monuments to the now-forgotten dead, into the domain of the aesthetic. Such works were doubtless intended to memorialize, as we may assume the Ottawa makeshift was also intended to do. But if we remember Pope Julius II or other such worthies, it is largely because of their patronage of the tomb-maker, Michelangelo. What we see and what we look at are Moses with the tablets, or the nude human forms of night and dawn.(14) In the case of the erection on Carling Avenue, the dead may indeed be brought to mind by some passers-by, family, neighbours, but to most its subject is anonymous.

Even so, we perhaps *can* call this ostensive art. Almost without narrative, it points, saying, here was a death, a child’s death. A close-to if not absolutely minimal art—perhaps this claim is not controversial. But can we align it with, enroll it amongst, works of the pre-eminent high art-form, tragedy? To continue in the

logical path we have chosen, this too must be determined through its effect.

An Experience of the Memorial

What then *are* my experiences—do they rise to this level? Of course, often they do not. Sometimes I even forget to glance over, and recently, as I have begun to try to analyse it, my response has begun to dry up. I may have murdered whatever that response was to dissect it.

Still, it was intense enough, at times, to be remembered. If there were phases, they were passed through so rapidly as to seem almost instantaneous. But to slow them down, perhaps unnaturally, let us say, my attention is drawn, the first time I drive down this stretch of the Avenue. Of the accompanying resentment I can call out the traces of an irritation, a dismay, a shying from unwanted knowledge—a resistance to being forced to pay this tribute to another's centrality. I can detail no articulated scepticism of my own, but can imagine it. A form of such scepticism might be to raise the question of taste. This is *not* Michelangelo, it is crappy, it is sentimental, maybe even disingenuous, a motivated attempt to assume the mantle of naivety. Or maybe it's kitsch. If "kitsch is not a low but a middlebrow phenomenon, what someone else mistakes for high culture,"(15) to quote Gans again, perhaps this is the funereal equivalent of kitsch, a middlebrow—can one even say, *middlehearted*?—no, let us just fall back on the ever-useful *bourgeois*—attempt to project a culturally prestigious sincerity and emotion. After all, if not mass-produced this memorial, as the scholarship reminds us, follows a recent trend, resembles many others, is plainly imitative of other people's responses to other deaths. Am *I* the victim here, of kitsch? For most who experience something as kitsch, the effect is surely a kind of embarrassment at someone else's inability to hide their desires . (Some soi-disant connoisseurs self-consciously enough express their delight at the phenomenon, prize and collect it even. But this is a kind of pleasureful experience of superiority, unlikely in the present instance. No one collects kitschy expressions of human grief—one hopes not anyway.) Out of embarrassment—always the product of a too-importunate appeal to one's own desires—arises a kind of defensive contempt for others' obvious slavery to mimetic effects, to the hailings of a child-centred ideology for example, for their inability even in such an extremity to rise to universals, for their lack of dignity. This in turn might cascade into an equally defensive complaint at the way kitsch (somehow) debases or contaminates real aesthetics, or in this case, bypasses and empties out long-established forms of mourning, the established churches' rituals or other forms of communal observance, and is thus a play for special attention, for identity, a kind of grotesque egotism, opposite to the more seemly case in which mourners submerge their sufferings into common, impersonal mechanisms. Again, this time in a negative way, such responses implicitly identify the memorial as melodrama. Kitsch is surely

quite close to melodrama—melodrama that has been identified as such—at least in the generally accepted sense of the term melodrama.

But, for me, such resentful defences barely register, and vanish without trace. They are overcome, I think, by an intuitive conviction of great strength as to the authenticity of the memorial, the actuality of the death in question, testified to by the place itself by the roadway. I reject without consideration the possibility that the memorial is aspirational in any way—this is the *beauty* of its form to me, its uniformity with others of its kind, its *lack* of any markers of distinction, its minimality—and if *this* is a reading of authorial intention it is so only to a near-zero degree. I remain within its created world, the nakedness of that world, and under this temporary spell, quickly transcend my resentment of its authority over my attention.

How does this come about? There is indeed a phase of imaginative identification. For me, however, the identification is not with the already dead child—I assume a child, that is how indeed I "identify"—but with those other shadowy figures in this minimal drama, the parents. This core moment in the experience is almost unbearable, and cannot be long sustained. I wince. Theirs is a centrality from which I do not feel excluded . . because I do not want to be there. I pass onward to pity.

What, however, about a moral recognition of the implication of my own desires in the creation of the centre and thus an acceptance of the sacrificial suffering of the human being located there?

There is, at least, an occluded, even mysterious transfer of the intensity of desire into a feeling of culpability. I experience a feeling to the effect of *"better you than me*. . I still have *my* child," and then a self-consciousness about doing so, a sentiment perhaps akin to what is spoken of as "survivor's guilt." This sequence leaves one, by much common testimony, "humbled." By this I think we mean persuaded of *ne quid nimis*, set back, albeit temporarily, some little distance from our own selfish, that is, mimetic desires and resentments. In likewise common parlance, "it makes you think" or "it puts things in perspective." This seems to me, at its dark, fatalistic heart, a pagan, not a Christian intuition. Archaic, even, primitive. Some sort of sacrificial exchange—you not me—seems to occur. It does not beautify me, it does not centralize me, this feeling, *you not me*. I would rather not even own it. But it is strong.

"You not me" implies interchangeability, the truest terror. It is thus the most intensely authentic expression of moral equality, beside which, in such a context, any expression of ethical care must seem defensive, even patronising, an evasion.

"The sacred centre is a dangerous place," Gans reminds us. The danger at the

centre is inseparable from the vulnerability of desiring, or loving. The more intense the desire, the more dangerous. But does this work here in an originary sense? Surely we are not going to appropriate each other's children! Not usually, although it has been known to happen. And although we certainly do resent the centrality assumed by other parents—witness "my kid can beat up your honours' student" bumper-stickers—if any blessing of centrality can seem *not* to be produced by the desires of others, the "natural" parent-child bond might be it. But if I am right to speak here of a tragic effect, then this exception cannot be granted: my case does rest on the assumption of a fiercely rivalrous dimension in this desire, as in any other, or even more so. If I am happy in and accepting of the joy of others in their children—if I love those children—this is an achievement of culture, of memorials including this one, a deferral of violence. There is no natural, communal, human parenting urge.

"Cultural knowledge of this danger," Gans continues, "justifies the effort we make in learning to discipline our imagination to see the centre of desire as a place of absence rather than plenitude, of suffering rather than bliss. High culture teaches us to respect esthetic form not merely as a barrier to physical possession but as a deferral of even imaginary possession in the service of the eternal renewal of desire."(16)

Cultural knowledge clearly does guide me in my response. Indeed, every ordinary person who passes this place and murmurs something about it being a tragedy is surely heir to a culture that has in its past Sophocles and Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Racine, even if we all swim now in an ocean of the melodramatic and victimary. However, no earlier art-work seems better suited than this one to teach *me*, at least, of the ultimate emptiness of victimary centrality. No, no, no, I do *not* want to be there. And from this sentiment, in my other phase of response, that "ultimate askesis" of which Gans also speaks, pity, the recognition of our fellow-human "as our Other and not as our Object."(17)

Representation, Resentment, Tragedy

Has the analysis above expanded the field for the tragic effect so broadly as to lose all contact with Sophocles et al? Gans in several places makes the point that in a fundamental sense *all* representation is tragic. Its task is *always* to reconcile us, for some crucial interval, with the impossibility of our final or utter achievement of the centre. It conveys to us the terror of the desire—our desire—which has created that centre, and then made it impossible of achievement. Still, my own idea of resentment, as I have written elsewhere,(18) is that it is at bottom a question. *Why* can I not have my object of desire? Or, in the secondary ethical situation after the rise of the big man and human usurpation of centrality, why *you* and not me?

Resentment is stilled, deferred, when the question, for the moment, in its context, is answered. I do not, cannot, want the centre occupied by this dead child or his or her parents. It is deserved. You did not choose it. It chose you. This is a very particular kind of answer, that perhaps only tragedy provides.

Some More Tentative Conclusions

Are representations like the makeshift memorial the minimal but still operative forms of tragedy in the postmodern era?

Perhaps, stripped of its generic features, of its narrative, of its props, it does not much *matter* that the tragic in so general a sense has persisted, especially if only verifiable in a single instance. Our inquiry, after all, *has* been exceedingly sharply limited, certainly in the context of the grander conclusions of either literary historians or psychologists, or even by comparison to the more modest ideological projects of the memorial scholars. We have conceded that a single human experience does not certainly imply others, although we may also say it does allow for the possibility. Certainly, the experience described above is no spur to action, beyond the clinging ever more fiercely and fearfully to what we already have, aspiring to nothing beyond that. Calls to action are the domain, rightfully so, of melodrama, the melodrama of the victimary, but also, if I may so phrase it for my particular readership, the melodrama of the victims of the victimary, we who resent the centrality of the purveyors of victimhood. The great “realm of social action” as the leading critic of the genre, Robert Heilman, puts it,(19) of the purposeful, political and pragmatic, belongs with the sparagmos, and thus with melodrama. Nor should we underestimate the power, indeed the value of that genre, or its effect. Melodrama may fairly be said to have triumphed in its rivalry with its own formal, established Other, tragedy. “Under such banners militant,”(20) in Wordsworth’s phrase, the mind of man imagines, erects on its internal scene, multitudinous possibilities of progress.

But perhaps it is also true that where the tragic effect still occurs, in however limited a way, it does still involve an embrace rather than a denial of the primary moral paradox. This, in GA terms, is the special human capacity implicit in the survival of tragedy. In any such instance the centre is locally, temporarily recreated. Does this really occur on the periphery, a transaction in the market? I feel I have had no transaction with the dead child or parents—I have only borne witness and not to their suffering in particular, and not so as to confer any particular benefit upon them—although, who knows, perhaps they would disagree. At any rate, do certain still-shared desires actually, if minimally, work to recreate here the old, ritual centre? Is a tacit, virtual communality established, an invisible bond with other humans who feel the same way? Not the communality of activists, to be

achieved by overthrowing others, though “local” to be sure, but with no determined boundaries—*potentially* universal. Even if we share little else, even a religion?

Finally, the degree to which my response has depended upon my belief in the actuality of this death makes me wonder if the tragic effect can now no longer be generated by any form of fiction. Is it in *this* sense that tragedy has died? Locating the tragic effect in the audience would seem to require the continuing possibility of fictional representations producing it for some if not all or even most viewers. An adult’s melodrama, for example, might be a child’s tragedy. Nonetheless, even there, such (naive?) audiences may have so fully suspended their disbelief as not to be experiencing fiction at all. Because all *fictional* suffering must apparently now seem motivated — even where it succeeds in extracting tears from the erstwhile devotee of high art. (Tears of self-pity are as sincere as any!) But this intuition or suspicion of a planned or rhetorical effect, this sense of its intentions, its *motivation*, remains to me the crucial sign of melodrama. Indeed, wherever one cannot transcend the intentional fallacy, so called, one is surely in the territory of melodrama. Where one apparently does, however briefly, transcend it—a necessary if not sufficient condition—can we say that the tragic effect is at least possible?

Notes

1. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. 1966. New York: Anchor Books, 1990. 132. (back)

2. In, respectively, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), and *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). (back)

3. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. 139-140. (back)

4. *Originary Thinking*, 167. (back)

5. “The Ethical Paradox and the Origins of Victimary Thought,” June 27, 2009, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw375.htm. (back)

6. *Originary Thinking*, 148. (back)

7. *Originary Thinking*, 143. (back)

8. *Originary Thinking*, 145. (back)

9. “Esthetic experience may be defined within the originary scene as the oscillation between the contemplation of the sign representing the central object and the

contemplation of the object as referred to by the sign." *Originary Thinking*, 117. (back)

10. Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero. "Rethinking Memorialization: The Concepts of Grassroots Memorials." *Grassroots Memorials: The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011. 2-10. (back)

11. Jack Santino. *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 1. (back)

12. John Belshaw and Diane Purvey note the scholarship which sees the memorials as expressions of "secularism," which "elude the religious ceremonial practices with which mourning was formerly imbued," although they note that many memorials are ornamented with explicitly Christian crosses. *Private Grief, Public Mourning: The Rise of the Roadside Shrine in B.C.* Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2009. 13-14. See also Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 12. (back)

13. "Although they do not overtly criticize unsafe driving conditions, it can be rightly argued that each roadside memorial reflects a moral warning and has its implicit grassroots political message." Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 4. (back)

14. The latter on the same sculptor's tomb of Lorenzo de Medici. (back)

15. "A Rembrandt in the Elevator," May 10, 1997, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw92.htm. (back)

16. Ibid. (back)

17. Ibid. (back)

18. *Lord Byron and the History of Desire*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009. 138ff. (back)

19. *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968. 97. (back)

20. *The Prelude* (1850) 6.609. Wordsworth speaks of the aspirational, as it were, from the loftiest end of the broad spectrum of Romantic-melodramatic affirmations of the power of the individual, internal scene of representation, capable, in its exalted centrality, of "hope that can never die, / Effort, and expectation, and desire, / And something evermore about to be…." 6-606-08. (back)