THE ETHICAL FACE AND THE TRAGIC MASK: LEVINAS AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF TRAGEDY

by

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Abstract of Thesis:
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This thesis attempts to rethink the ethics of tragedy in light of Levinas' ethical theory. The tragic mask is thus considered in terms of the form which it gives to the radical alterity by which Levinas defines the face. Since the face is, by Levinas' definition, refractory to all form, any form-giving is necessarily an irresponsible act before it can be a responsible one. Nevertheless, I suggest that tragedy may be characterized by an irresponsible responsibility understood in light of the paradoxical formulations of responsibility proposed by Derrida, Adorno, and Blanchot.

Using this understanding of responsibility I attempt to reconsider the definitions according to which tragedy has traditionally been interpreted, primarily the notions of mimesis, catharsis and "tragic affirmation". Most importantly, I confront the tendency to view tragedy as an ethical totality which places the ethical burden solely on the shoulders of the tragic hero. Using my Levinasian framework, I attempt to show the constutive power of alterity in the formation of tragic subjectivity as well as the manner in which the tragic "said" leads back to a "saying" which disrupts any conception of a totality of ethical meaning. The conclusion drawn from this approach is thus that tragedy depends not on making responsibility and suffering absolutely meaningful, but in presenting ethics as a problem and thereby asserting the

necessity of contesting such meaning and of breaking with the generality of ethics. Tragedy is only responsible insofar as it is also irresponsible to the general orders of ethics and language.

Keywords: Ethics, Tragedy, Levinas, Blanchot, Adorno

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Introduction: The Ethics of Tragedy

1. The Ethical Face and the Tragic Mask

The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is based on his characterization of responsibility in terms of a relation to the face of the Other. For Levinas, the face is a radical alterity which cannot be contained within the materiality of the face. The relation of the "face to face" therefore cannot be described as a totality; the Other exceeds all thematization and thus calls the "I" into question. This experience of transcendence initiates my responsibility and my ethical relation towards the Other. This relation to the face precedes language and ontology and for Levinas is therefore the most fundamental human relation. In this thesis, I will use this Levinasian notion of the face to rethink the problem of the ethics of tragedy. Levinas himself has expressed a great deal of suspicion about the dissimulation required by art, and this suspicion is also incorporated within my thinking of the irresponsibility involved in tragedy.[1]

In Levinas' work, there are a number of explicit references to the tragic which suggest an original direction in which this problem may be taken. The ethical importance of tragedy has historically been asserted or denied on the basis of tragedy's embodiment of a system of values. Levinas' ethics, which argues against the

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[1] For a more thorough consideration of the problematic relation between Levinas' philosophy and literature see Jill Robbins' recent book, Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

possibility of conceiving of ethics as such a thematization of values, suggests the possibility of rethinking these traditional notions of the ethics of tragedy.

Most of Levinas' explicit references to tragedy are found in his early work, particularly Existence and Existents and Time and the Other. In addition to numerous references to Shakespeare which illustrate his theory, he provides an original reflection on the meaning of the tragic. These insights must be approached with some measure of caution since Levinas is inquiring into the question of what makes human experience tragic rather than what makes tragedy tragic. Nevertheless, what he says about the tragic does set out a position from which it will be possible to rethink the relation between ethics and tragedy.

Levinas' discussion of tragedy is part of his attempt to distance his philosophy from that of Heidegger (and also, to some degree, the long philosophical tradition which preceded Heidegger). According to Levinas, Heideggerian ontology "situates the tragic element in existence in... finitude and in the nothingness into which man is thrown insofar as he exists" (EE 19). He asks instead, "does solitude derive its tragic character from nothingness or from the privation of the Other that death accentuates? There is at least an ambiguity" (TO 40), and concludes that "solitude is not tragic because it is the privation of the other, but because it is shut up within the captivity of its identity, because it is matter" (TO 57). The Heideggerian view of existence, according to Levinas, sees life as tragic insofar as all human possibilities stand in relation to the inevitable and unsurpassable end of possibility that is death.

Levinas' critique argues instead that the tragic arises from the fact that there remains in life "something that death cannot resolve" (EE 20). Heidegger's notion of "being-towards-death" is formulated as Dasein's "ownmost" project, while Levinas sees death more radically as "the impossibility of having a project" (TO 74). For Heidegger, death is the horizon of mortality and therefore demands an "authentic" bearing towards death, while for Levinas death is that which always eludes us and therefore makes us responsible beyond ourselves. Thus, in the former case, death is tragic because it is inevitable and final while in the latter case, the possibility of the tragic comes from the fact that death is "never now" and therefore does not offer an end to our obligations of responsibility (TO 72).

Ethical responsibility is not touched by death, and we are thus irremissibly confronted with the bare fact of being. This irremissibility faces us with a world beyond the control of subjectivity; suffering in this context is not heroic and ennobling but elicits a more profound terror than that of death: the "horror of immortality", of the fact that we must endure (EE 63). Levinas opposes Heidegger by suggesting that "le Dasein est d'ores et déjà jeté *au milieu* de ses possibilités et non pas placé devant elles (Rolland 26). Thus for Levinas, the tragic figure is not the one who sees fate clearly and resolves to die well, but the one who is seized beforehand by the responsibility of the world of which he/she is so much a part that death does not offer an escape. As a result of this:

> One can say that tragedy, in general, is not simply the victory of fate over freedom, for through the death assumed at the moment of the alleged victory

> of fate the individual escapes fate. And it is for this reason that Hamlet is beyond tragedy or the tragedy of tragedy (TO 50).

Tragedy is neither the affirmation of the inevitability of fate or death nor of the nobility of the human spirit in the face of this inevitability, but is rather the impossibility of absolutely affirming the triumph of either of these forces. The escape from fate may also be seen in Jonathan Dollimore's description of the Greek attitude towards death; "The lure of death- to be free of finitude, contingency, danger; to be immortalized in legend- is confounded by the anonymity of actual death" (Death, Desire and Loss 19-20). Dollimore derives this truth from Odysseus' confrontation with the sirens, but I will show that this fear of the anonymity of death, and thus also of anonymous being, becomes more profound in tragedy. Death, in the Heideggerian sense, makes it necessary to give meaning to the human condition, and therefore also to human suffering. Following Levinas, however, I wish to pursue the idea that experience and suffering elude such possibilities of meaning and that tragedy, while giving expression to suffering, does not make it finally meaningful and comprehensible. Rather, tragedy represents a suffering which cannot be made intelligible through reason or an ethical code.

Therefore, I will argue that what is at stake in tragedy is a concern with the crisis of meaning brought about by the inadequacy of those systems which are supposed to organize the world and make it meaningful. George Steiner argues that tragedy shows that "the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited" (Death of

Tragedy 8) and that "we are punished far in excess of our guilt" (9). For Steiner, it is precisely because of the injustice inherent in tragedy that the hero is "ennobled" by suffering (10). The Levinasian reading of tragedy I am proposing opposes such a conclusion; Steiner implies that the injustice of human suffering demonstrates the transcendence of the human spirit purified by tragedy. On this view, the crises of reason, justice and order do not much affect the human spirit; they are beyond human control, and the hero's only responsibility is to endure. My contention is rather that the crises of order represented in tragedy signify the impossibility of absolutely affirming any such meaningfulness to the hero's act. Rather, tragic suffering occurs precisely at the point where the tragic hero is cut off from the world of meaning by the tragic crisis of order; the human spirit loses its ability to unproblematically assert its own nobility. Tragedy does not simply ennoble the human spirit by showing what it can endure but also shows what it must endure because it is human. Thus, while for Steiner, "tragedy is irrevocable" (8) - the effects of the break in order cannot be undone - I would use the Levinasian term "irremissible" to describe tragedy; tragic suffering persists, despite any meaning given to the failure of order. Tragedy is not an absolute failure of meaning, but it does demonstrate the fact that absolute meaning is impossible.

The Levinasian description of language in terms of the "saying" and the "said" may be used to account for the ambiguous nature of meaning in tragedy. For Levinas, saying is an ethical response to the face of the Other, and an acceptance of responsibility towards the Other. The saying results in a said which is both a "betrayal" insofar

as it gives form to the formlessness of saying (Otherwise Than Being 6) and is also "necessary" (43) because it continues to attest to the responsibility demonstrated by the saying. Thus, for Levinas, the said cannot ethically be allowed to form the terminal point of the saying; the asymmetrical relation with the Other demands a constant saying. The saying thus functions to destabilize the seemingly solid said; it "goes beyond the said" (23) and "is both the affirmation and retraction of the said" (44). A work of art is by definition something that has been said, but is not pure said; it retains the trace of the saying.

The reasons for understanding tragedy in these terms may be made clear with reference to the model of the tragic mask. Through the use of masks "the Greeks found it possible to face up to a number of diverse forms of otherness" (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 205). Thus, the masking involved in religious rites is intended to represent gods whose presence might otherwise provoke excessive emotion. This form of representation necessarily depended on the absence of the subject of representation. Thus:

> When the spectators beheld Agamemnon, Heracles or Oedipus before their very eyes, in the guise of their masks, they knew that those heroes were forever absent, could never be there where they saw them... What Dionysus brought about, and what the mask also rendered possible through what was brought to life when the actor donned it, was an eruption into the heart of public life of a dimension of existence totally alien to the quotidian world (204-205).

This account of the pre-history of tragedy suggests that what is at stake when tragedy is born is a relation between the proximity and absence of the divine Other. The Other takes the form of a disruption of the community, necessitating a religious (and later, a tragic) saying, which, although congealed into representation, cannot be entirely treated as a said. Along the same lines, Thomas G. Rosenmeyer argues that masks required very little in terms of specific detail since "what the masks cannot provide is, in many instances... furnished by verbal cues; the imagination does the rest" (54). The key point in both examples is that the tragic mask is a form which relies less on verisimilitude than on the activation by performance which gives it its power. This activation, then, must be understood in terms of a saying which illuminates temporarily but whose meaning can never be reduced into what has been said, depending as it does on the proximity of the Other.

It is inevitable, however, that a saying result in a said; thus, the mask becomes a signifier of an absent transcendence. The ethics of tragedy therefore depends on the relation between the mask-as-said and the face-as-saying. Levinas articulates the tension in this way:

> The face presents itself in its nudity; it is neither a form concealing, but thereby indicating, a ground nor a phenomenon that hides, but thereby betrays, a thing itself. Otherwise, the face would be one with a mask, but a mask presupposes a face (Basic Philosophical Writings 60).

The face is something more than a sign while the mask only signifies a relation to a face. Thus, ethics lies beyond the aesthetic

form of tragedy, but its trace remains present within that form. The tragic mask signifies an ethics, but is not itself purely ethical; it stands between the responsibility of the face and the non-responsiveness of the object. Thus, my argument will maintain that while neither tragedy nor its ethical significance can be defined strictly by what is represented, the concrete nature of the said cannot be overlooked in an interpretation of the significance of the tragic saying.

This Levinasian approach to the tragic will be developed throughout this thesis with reference to a number of other thinkers. In Chapter 1, it will be used to approach a philosophic tradition that overwhelmingly seeks to account for tragedy in terms of a totality. Two of the most original books derived from this tradition, Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy and Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, will be considered in terms of the manner in which they suggest a break with tradition, but maintain the tendency of that tradition to view tragedy as a unified construct. The second chapter will be concerned with showing the direction in which a rethinking of the ethics of tragedy, particularly the relation between tragedy and suffering, may be understood. This will be done from the horizon of the 20th century; the philosophy of Levinas, Blanchot, and Adorno, the literature of the absurd and the relation of all these to the historical fact of the Holocaust. In the final chapter, the ethics of tragedy will be considered in the light of the concern of psychoanalysis with many concepts intimately related to tragedy, such as catharsis and mourning.

2. The Ethics of Mimesis

> Art cannot, for its part, allow itself, in its works, to be appointed a councillor of the conscience and it cannot permit what is represented rather than the actual representation, to be the object of attention (Benjamin 105).

Much of what I have said so far implies a reinterpretation of the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* , a term long associated with tragedy. If *mimesis* is carelessly interpreted as imitation with the purpose of approximating the world as accurately as possible, any interpretation of the ethics of tragedy can be little more than an attempt to derive the ethics of the world from tragedy. Benjamin emphasizes that it is not what lies behind the representation, but rather the representation itself which must be scrutinized. If meaning is seen only as a positive entity lying beyond art, then the only role art can play is that of the "councillor of conscience" which attempts to preach this meaning despite the limitations of its form.

An alternative understanding of *mimesis* is offered by Walter Kaufmann, who insists that the interpretation of *mimesis* provided by Hamlet's "hold the mirror up to nature" leads to a misunderstanding of what Greek tragedy sought to do (39). Kaufmann points out that Aristotle actually considered music to be the most *mimetic* of all the arts (37), suggesting that a better way to understand the imitation involved in *mimesis* is in terms of its imitation of a mood or feeling. Nietzsche's category of the Dionysian, which accounts for the impossibility of conveying the effect of a Beethoven symphony in words, would accord with this understanding of the term (Birth of Tragedy 54). Of course tragedy is

not exclusively music and therefore does not purely embody this sense of *mimesis* either. Tragedy neither points to a wholly concrete meaning of which it would be merely a semblance, nor does it provide us with a thoroughly abstract and transcendent truth of which it would be but an imperfect sign. Both definitions are valid in part, but the process of representing, or saying, stands in the way of attempts to reduce tragedy to either meaning.

This representing does not simply assert its content, but also problematizes it, thereby drawing attention to its own process. Thus, tragedy "does not reflect that reality but calls it into question. By depicting it rent and divided against itself, it turns it into a problem" (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 33). By presenting reality as a problem, tragic *mimesis* denies the coherence of that which it purports to imitate and therefore represents also the impossibility of a seamless reflection of that reality. Thus, tragic *mimesis* is always to some extent a representation of a crisis of meaning or order, often, according to Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, a crisis based on the ambiguity of judicial or legal terminology (39). The language of tragedy is similarly ambiguous, not simply because it signifies a multiplicity of meanings, but because it presents an infinitely problematic world; "man is not a being that can be described or defined; he is a problem, a riddle the double meanings of which are inexhaustible" (121). Thus, it is insufficient to speak of tragedy as a representation of a certain world or of certain values, but rather more useful to account for the manner in which it represents the crises inherent in its worlds and values. While tragedy makes use of concrete representations and language, it also acknowledges the

limitations of these forms. Understood in this way, the tragic effect can be situated at the breaking point of the absolute meaningfulness of representation.

This problem of meaningfulness returns us to Benjamin and his emphasis on the "actual representation" of tragedy. Benjamin says that tragedy must be understood in terms of:

> a comprehensive explanation of the underlying concept of its form, the metaphysical substance of which should not simply be found within, but should appear in action, like the blood coursing through the body (39).

This physical metaphor proclaims the resistance of the idea of the tragic to formal abstraction. At the same time, Benjamin implies that a given "action" is closely correlative with "the underlying concept of form" and that it embodies the "metaphysical substance" of tragedy more profoundly than any theory of form. This correlation can be clarified by the distinction Benjamin makes between "truth" and "knowledge": "truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession" (29). According to this definition, the "action" of tragedy must be seen as the "truth" of tragedy and not as "knowledge". Thus, Benjamin places the emphasis on the process of representation at work in the individual artwork by suggesting that form is often valued too abstractly and content often too concretely.

These insights point towards the importance of the processes of saying and representing, but the Benjaminian notions of "truth"

and "actual representation" must be problematized further. Adorno, while approving of Benjamin's aesthetics, suggests that even Benjamin could not place himself entirely on the side of the particular:

> The theory of art presupposes concrete analyses, not as proofs and examples but as its own condition. Benjamin, who philosophically potentiated to the extreme the immersion in concrete artworks, was himself motivated toward a turn to universal reflection in his theory of reproduction (Aesthetic Theory 263).

Adorno thus suggests that while Benjamin's concern with the concrete is an absolute necessity to the theory of art, the universal cannot be totally negated:

> The sole path of success that remains open to artworks is also that of their progressive impossibility. If recourse to the pregiven universality of genres has long been of no avail, the radically particular work verges on contingency and absolute indifference, and no intermediary provides for compromise (202).

Both Adorno and Benjamin problematize the idea of searching for a definition of tragedy through universal attributes; these can never sufficiently account for the life of the individual work. At the same time, however, for the "flesh and blood" of tragic action to become meaningful, the work must be situated in relation to a concept of the universal. Neither the universal nor the particular is sufficient to itself; Benjamin's "metaphysical substance" must therefore not be seen as the substance of tragedy in general, nor of the individual

work, but as a manifestation of the tension between the autonomous and generic aspects of the work. If we are to speak of form in terms of the manner in which it is enacted, as Benjamin suggests, we must also take into account Adorno's caution that the universal form and the particular action exist in tension with one another and do not mutually explicate one another.

At the same time, the impossibility pointed out by Adorno must be emphasized here. Tragedy, more than most other genres, bears the connotation of transcendence; from its religious origins to the Dionysian dissipation of form proclaimed by Nietzsche to the everyday uses of the adjective "tragic", the word "tragedy" is used to describe something wholly beyond what is bound up in its form or in the factuality of its event. Following Adorno, however, my analysis will be based on the fact that this transcendent power, without being negated, cannot be spoken of independently of form, but is always caught in an irresolvable tension with it. Those qualities that are refractory to formalization do not constitute the essence of tragedy but rather, they institute the essential relation between transcendence and the necessities of materiality. It is in this relation that I will seek to explore the ethics of tragedy, acknowledging that the ethical situation of tragedy is necessarily also bound up with its aesthetic immanence.

The Levinasian view of this issue, while it does not resolve the Adornian paradox, provides a way of speaking about the contradictory "flesh and blood" of tragedy. Levinas follows in the path of Franz Rosenzweig, an early 20th century Jewish writer who criticized the tradition of German idealism. Rosenzweig argues that

the particular should be understood as "surprise, not a given, but ever a new gift or, better still, a present, for in the present the thing presented disappears behind the gesture of presenting" (46). This movement of appearing and disappearing is the same process at work in the Levinasian saying and unsaying of the said; the gesture takes precedence over the product. Similarly, the significance of the particular is developed in Levinas' "philosophical priority of the existent over being" (Totality and Infinity 51). Levinas, however, develops a more complex relation between the particular and being; "the very individuality of an individual is a way of being. Socrates socratizes, or Socrates is Socrates, is the *way* Socrates is. Predication makes the time of essence be heard" (OBBE 41). An individual is thus a verb "on the verge of becoming a noun" but always made ambiguous by "the copula *is* " (41). Levinas' assertion of the ambiguity of the existent unsettles the thought of an abstract system in which the individual can be annihilated by being; in every present moment there appears a tension between the existent and the general sense of being.

Thus, Benjamin's "action" points to a particularity, a "way of being" tragic which bears within itself the tension between universal and particular, in a saying that necessarily results in a said. Yet what is of particular interest in tragedy is the presence of an element which is refractory to formalization and which manifests the contradiction between transcendence and immanence. The tragic representation of the unrepresentable thus leads to a perpetuation of the saying by representing precisely the inability of representation to assimilate the saying into the said.

This brief digression on tragic *mimesis* and form suggests a number of useful points which will be taken up in pursuing the problem of the ethics of tragedy. Positive views of tragedy tend to privilege its transcendent aspect without adequately considering the fact that what lies beyond representation testifies just as much to its failure as to its success. The representation of the failure of representation, the saying and unsaying of language, brings us towards, but can never fully represent, the unspeakable. This is perhaps the great power of the tragic. On the other hand, critiques of tragedy tend to focus, just as unfairly, on the immanent side of tragedy; tragedy thus becomes equated with reason or with ethics as a general form excluding all possibility of real transcendence. Again, the failure of representation is not fully taken into account; in tragedy, reason and an ethical code are invoked, but only insofar as their limitations are also presented and problematized. Thus, ultimately, my project is not to save or denounce the aesthetic privilege given to tragedy, but to reconsider the ethical possibilities of the form in the light of contemporary theory. Nor does this reconsideration seek to uphold tragedy as an exemplary ethical form, but to explore its uniquely problematic relation to ethics; tragedy is a breach in the ethical order, but one which may also be seen to be responsible to some extent through its relation to the Levinasian "beyond".

Chapter 1: The Birth of Tragedy and the Tragedy of Birth: Levinas with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard

1. The Multiple Births of Tragedy

The philosophers of the German tradition preceding Nietzsche and Kierkegaard incorporated tragedy into their philosophical systems but only to demonstrate its connection to a higher philosophical unity. For example, in his Philosophy of Art, Schelling speaks of tragedy as representing a harmony between freedom and necessity (251). This enables him to see tragedy as a totality, a "geometric or arithmetical problem that unfolds with complete purity and without a break" (261). Furthermore, the tragic hero's subjectivity is not at all problematic; "there can never be any doubt how he will act" (256). Ultimately, all of the elements of tragedy, including tragedy itself, are only significant insofar as they are part of a greater totality.

As I have suggested, the alternative presented by a Levinasian approach is based on a different understanding of the attitude of tragedy towards itself and therefore also towards ethics. For Levinas the ethical subject is differently constituted; it is not a product of freedom and necessity but is responsible for a debt contracted "before any freedom" (OBBE 12). Thus, the view of the tragic hero as a subject who chooses to be fully responsible for his/her actions and who is thus a representative of human freedom struggling with necessity bears no resemblance to the Levinasian ethical subject. This view of the tragic hero is too limited and does not fully account for the problematic relation between the hero and

the inevitability of death and fate. Levinas' claim that the individual "escapes fate" at the point of death necessitates a more complex thinking of this relation. This point of view will be advanced in relation to the views of tragedy put forward by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.

The originality of Nietzsche's project can be seen in its reversal of the priorities of Hegel and Schelling. The ecstasy of the aesthetic is a necessary condition for life and not simply part of its system. However, this aesthetic ideal of tragedy does not so much overturn as take the place of the earlier philosophical ideal, sharing its tendency to interpret tragedy as a revelation of unity, albeit at a different level of experience. As Simon Critchley points out, Nietzsche did later criticize the book's "artist's metaphysics" but he "maintains to the end the idea of art as tragic affirmation" (Ethics Politics Subjectivity 219). Thus, Nietzsche's book shares Levinas' opposition to totalizing philosophical systems and to the primacy accorded to reason but is diametrically opposed to Levinas in his conception of an aesthetic affirmation of life.

Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche, puts in question the value of the rational in tragedy; for Nietzsche, reason is the product of the Socratic-Euripidean influence, whereas for Kierkegaard it is the essence of tragedy itself. Kierkegaard maintains the necessity of going beyond the closed aesthetic and ethical dimensions of tragedy into a realm of faith beyond the ethical. Thus, he also shares with Levinas the desire to break apart the totalizing systems which threaten to subsume the particularity of the ethical subject within them. Levinas, however, criticizes Kierkegaard's willingness to

reject the ethical on the grounds of its systematization rather than rethink the ethical in other terms, as Levinas himself does. Similarly, Kierkegaard diminishes the importance of the category of the tragic without exploring the possibilities for a different kind of relation between the tragic and the ethical than those suggested by Hegel or Schelling. Kierkegaard would probably accept Schelling's claim that "Greek tragedy is "completely ethical and based on the highest morality" (257) but he also claims that the "highest morality" is still not as high as the realm of faith. In this chapter, then, the work of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard will be considered in a Levinasian context and their insights on tragedy will be developed with a view to an even more radical rethinking of the problem of ethics and tragedy.

2. The Mask of Dionysus and the Ethical Face

Nietzsche attributes the birth of tragedy to the brief historical convergence of the two aesthetic impulses that he calls Apollinian and Dionysian. This convergence entails a balance in the tension between the Apollinian ideal of individuality bounded by well-defined limits, and the ambiguously terrifying and ecstatic "collapse of the *principium individuationis*" characterized by Dionysus (BT 36). The Apollinian and Dionysian are both celebrations of life. Apollo is the god of the principle of life; Nietzsche says "existence under the bright sun of such gods is desirable in itself" (43). Dionysus, however, is the god of the force of life, whose worshippers seize each moment violently and pleasurably as if it

were the last. Homer was essentially Apollinian, since "the real pain for Homeric men is caused by parting from [life]" (43). Tragedy is only born with the touch of Dionysus, which creates a problematic tension, catching the hero between the two gods. This tension, unlike the ethical tension outlined in my introduction, is wholly aesthetic; "the interplay of Apollonian and Dionysian energy remains equally confined to the aesthetic sphere, as appearance and the dissolution of appearance" (Benjamin 102). Both energies are entirely self-affirmative, allowing nothing of the ethical or the self-reflective to become attached to the ecstasy of the "dissolution of appearance". Dionysus and Apollo thus share the same orientation towards life, that of an intense assumption of life, even though they assume this orientation in diametrically opposed ways.

The convergence of Apollo and Dionysus raises the artist to a higher level, one which enables the genius to say 'I' and to refer not to "the waking, empirically real man" but to "the truly existent and eternal self resting at the basis of things" (BT 50). Nietzsche fractures artistic subjectivity only in order to reassert the centrality of the genius who is "at once subject and object, at once poet, actor and spectator" (52). When Nietzsche says, then, that "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*" (52) he rejects both the need for any non-aesthetic justification of lived experience, as well as the need for such experience itself. By making the artist both subject and object, Nietzsche seeks to reinstate a totalizing vision of artistic creation which synthesizes both Dionysian and Apollinian into "the eternal essence of art" (52). Nietzsche himself calls this view "inverted

Platonism" since "the artistic forms are more real than actuality, actuality is the imitation of artistic forms" (quoted in Sallis 30). Thus, while "Nietzsche constantly evokes art as a means to combat the truth, that same art, when posited as 'sovereign and universal,' will become yet another version of the truth" (Carroll 3). While Apollo and Dionysus may be seen to exist in productive tension with one another, the resolution and reification of this tension serves as the basis for another all-encompassing system of aesthetics.

This aesthetic of tragedy is based on what Nietzsche calls "Greek cheerfulness", the ability to seize life joyfully, expressed most powerfully in tragedy. Apollo is "an exuberant, triumphant life in which all things, whether good or evil, are deified" (BT 41), emphasizing that the oppositional forces at work in tragedy are in fact "beyond good and evil". When he says that "the noble human being does not sin" (68) Nietzsche defends the autonomy of the tragic hero by suggesting that "*in nature* hubris attends upon every piece of individual self-assertion and that it is often a mistake for us to apply a socio-moral code to behaviour in tragic drama" (May 10). The individual may be punished for the act of self-assertion but this does not necessarily entail a moral judgment upon the action; the self-assertion is valuable in itself as an assertion of life.

On the other hand, Levinas claims that the entrance of the subject into the world is preceded by an unpayable debt. While Levinas and Nietzsche both resist the application of a moral code as such, Levinas' resistance, however, stems from the fact that the obligation to the Other precedes all thematization, and that any moral code could only be finite and therefore theoretically capable

of being fulfilled. Nietzsche, however, is scornful of this idea of debt, arguing instead that this "debt to the deity" is a socially and historically constructed illusion (On the Genealogy of Morals 90). Through this argument, he expresses more clearly the reason for his ethical admiration of the Greeks: their gods, "in those days... took upon themselves, not the punishment but, what is *nobler*, the guilt" (94). For Nietzsche, guilt is that which one must have the strength to assume, whereas for Levinas guilt is a priori and it is therefore not enough to assume this responsibility; it is necessary to be willing to sacrifice oneself for it. Thus, Nietzsche's view of tragedy is one which subordinates the ethical dimension of guilt and suffering to the psychological state of "saying Yes to life even in the strangest and hardest problems" (Ecce Homo 273). The Levinasian concept of "saying" as the obligation to respond to the Other disputes this claim that life is something to which one can choose to say yes. Life is there, in the form of irremissible being, before the subject can choose to say yes or no; the "yes" precedes our coming into the world. No amount of affirmation can overcome the fact that even before the affirmation of life, "there is".

Nietzsche, in reflecting on The Birth of Tragedy towards the end of his career decided that it was "about how the Greeks got over their pessimism, how they *overcame* it" and argues that "precisely their tragedies show that the Greeks were *not* pessimists" (EH 270). This is certainly true, and the value of Nietzsche's book stems primarily from its articulation of this truth, but at the same time, tragedy involves a responsibility that cannot be overcome, and which also plays an essential role. The aesthetic "saying Yes to life" which

Nietzsche sees in the Greeks is counter-balanced by the neutrality of being which always returns after the ecstasy of the "yes". For Levinas, saying goes in both directions, creating and destroying the said. This is what makes the tragic hero a problem rather than the mere purveyor of "metaphysical comfort" (BT 59).

For Nietzsche this comfort entails the feeling conveyed by tragedy that "life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable" (59). However, once "everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea" (59-60). Nietzsche compares this Dionysian experience with that of Hamlet:

> both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge* , and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion... (60).

Nietzsche here speaks of knowledge as if it could be absolute and in terms which exemplify Benjamin's equation of knowledge with possession. Nietzsche describes a Dionysian man who is really able to "possess" knowledge of life, strip away all illusion of its meaningfulness and who must therefore turn to the "saving sorceress" of art (60). To revive Benjamin's opposition, however, the "truth" of Hamlet lies entirely in opposition to such knowledge; it is Hamlet's inability to know which keeps him suspended between courses of action, unable to decide anything, or even to cease acting.

Hamlet's nausea, as well as the nausea experienced after the illusion of tragedy has subsided, cannot be overcome by the Dionysian, but is itself an essential part of what Nietzsche calls the Dionysian.

Hamlet's inaction cannot be merely chalked up to knowledge; it is a function precisely of the indeterminacy of mortal knowledge. Hamlet's first appearance in the play illustrates the ambiguity which plagues him. His claim to "know not 'seems'" shows both that he does know 'seems', admitting that his "are actions that a man might play", and also, more importantly, that he, as a result, knows that appearances cannot be trusted. The indeterminate knowledge provided by appearances is the central motif of Hamlet's tragedy. He ends his list of negations, of things which cannot define him with the claim that "I have that within which passes show" (I.ii.76-86). He believes in his own "eternal self" against the falsity of the appearances of the world around him. However, while Nietzsche suggests that this renders him psychologically incapable of action, it is clear that Hamlet still wants to act, but has lost his faith in the correlation between essence and appearance. When Hamlet encounters a ghost, albeit in the shape of his father, there is no earthly way of determining whether it is a good spirit or an evil one; "The spirit that I have seen/ May be a devil, and the devil hath power/ T'assume a pleasing shape" (II.ii.610-12). Even if Hamlet is searching for excuses not to act at this point, the fact that he is still trying to convince himself one way or the other is significant. This indeterminacy sums up the tragedy of knowledge; knowledge is necessary for action, but one who knows must know that knowledge can never be absolute. He hatches the scheme of the play because he

believes that it will reveal the truth; "The players cannot keep counsel; they'll tell all", Hamlet says after the dumb show (III.ii.146-7). He puts his faith in the expectation that "seems" can be reconciled with "is" through performance, but even when the play has its desired effect, the disjunction between essence and appearance continues to thwart his ability to act. He cannot kill Claudius while praying, lest the act send the king to heaven, but the king himself knows that he is only going through the motions of prayer (III.iii.96-98).

More significantly, Hamlet's reflection on murder is forestalled by the inability to know what is beyond death. As Levinas puts it: "Hamlet recoils before the 'not to be' because he has a foreboding of the return to being ('to dye, to sleepe, perchance to Dreame')" (EE 62). Furthermore, Levinas interprets nausea, against Nietzsche, as an awareness of the "impossibility of death" (61). For Nietzsche, tragedy functions to "overcome" this nausea, but for Levinas this overcoming is impossible. To go further, I would argue that this impossibility is central to tragedy, so that while Nietzsche's aesthetics suggest that knowledge *should* kill action, tragedy is precisely the proof that it cannot do so. The Dionysian retreat into art is thus essentially an attempt to escape from being, an escape which the nausea-inducing "there is" continues to flout.

Hamlet is indeed a useful example to consider since it is the meta-tragedy *par excellence.* It is Hamlet's awareness of the inadequacy of human knowledge which places him in his tragic situation; it is this which makes him distinct from Aeschylus' Orestes, who is caught up in a similar situation. Hamlet is unable to

assume the traditional role of the tragic hero because he is too self-conscious and therefore lacks the necessary decisiveness. So Hamlet must be seen to some extent as a special case. Hamlet's tragedy lies in his inability to act either positively or negatively, either by completing his mourning for his father, or by acceding to the tragic-heroic role which his father's ghost has determined for him. Hamlet is a man in perpetual mourning, and part of this mourning is for a world whose structure makes sense. The generating force of the play is the impossibility of such a structure. Hamlet's encounter with the ghost, the play within the play, and Hamlet's own feigned madness all illustrate the indeterminacy of appearances and the failure of claims of knowledge. Each encounter seems to be bringing Hamlet closer to knowledge but there is an artifice in each which opens a space of ambiguity. Yet even when this ambiguity is erased, Hamlet still cannot act. This does not prove Nietzsche's point, however, for Hamlet is equally unable not to act. Nausea in Hamlet is more conducive to Levinas' definition than Nietzsche's, for Hamlet's nausea can be accounted for by the fact that he is haunted not only by the ghost but by a constant awareness of being. Hamlet does not "know too much", except insofar as he knows the instability of systems of knowledge and systems of being which prevent him from asserting any absolute meaning upon which he could act.

To reiterate, however, Hamlet is a special case; it dramatizes a self-conscious awareness of the problem of being and knowledge and thus of tragedy itself. Hamlet's death is a failure of tragedy; "Hamlet, who is inwardly destroyed because he could find no other solution to the problem of existence than the negation of life, is

killed by a poisoned rapier!... by a completely external accident" (Benjamin 136). Hamlet is thus, as Levinas says, a "tragedy of tragedy"; it ends with a death that is as out of joint with the supposed essence of the character as every case of "seeming" in the play. Hamlet's failure to die a tragic death suggests the difference between himself and Dionysian man in Nietzsche's sense; whereas the Dionysian is characterized by an ecstatic seizure of nothingness and nausea at the mundane nature of life, Hamlet remains vacillating on the edge of nothingness until an accident prevents him from grasping it. Dionysian man "possesses" the knowledge that life is meaningless; Hamlet merely suspects it. Hamlet's tragedy thus lies in his failure to be tragic and his fate is an insistent reminder of the neutrality of being which prevents a complete seizure of nothingness.

Hamlet's tragedy can thus be characterized as an inability to accede to the role of Orestes, whom he resembles in many ways. Nietzsche uses Hamlet as an example but does not say whether he believes that Hamlet itself shares any greater affinity to Greek tragedy. For my purposes, Hamlet is an excellent example of the manner in which tragedy dramatizes the impossibility of an unequivocal tragic hero; the hero is not only caught between freedom and necessity, but between being and nothingness. The tragic hero is not only a representation of a human seizing fate, but of the "recoil" of being which reminds us of the impossibility of the hero ever being simply equivalent to his/her fate. This theme is quite explicit in Hamlet, but it remains to be seen how the fate of Orestes compares with that of Hamlet.

While the situations in which Hamlet and Orestes find themselves are similar, their tragedies clearly take place on an entirely different level. Hamlet, as we have seen, is too aware of the distance between "seems" and "is"; he wants a clear-cut course of action, but when one presents itself, he does not take it. He does not find it "humiliating", as Nietzsche suggests, that he is supposed to act, but rather, is quite unable to convince himself of any course of action. He is never compelled to do anything, and as a result he does nothing.

It is quite clear, on the other hand, that Orestes must choose between "the curse of his mother" if he kills her and "the curse of his father" if he fails to take revenge. His course of action has already been prophesied by Cassandra (Agamemnon 1279-1285) and been given the objective approval of Pylades (Libation Bearers 900-902). There is certainly no suspense involved in the Oresteia nor does Orestes reflect on existence in the same way that Hamlet does. Neither does Orestes represent Nietzsche's Dionysian in any way; he is, in fact, quite aware that he must act. Part of this awareness derives from the threats that Apollo's oracle makes should he fail to act. This introduces the common motif in Greek tragedy of fate working through human agents. There thus can be seen a dual motion within the tragic presentation of the hero; Orestes heroically seizes his fate, and bravely commits a deed he knows is not entirely justifiable. At the same time it is clear that Orestes, like Hamlet, although in a different way, cannot choose nothingness. He is perfectly willing to die; he says, "let me but take her life and die for it" (LB 438), but he does not die, and the chorus laments the pain he

suffers because he still lives (LB 1007-1009). He proclaims that; "I have won, but my victory is soiled and has no pride" (LB 1017). He has no pride in his action but has acted because fate has riveted him to being, in the Levinasian sense. He ends the play hounded by the Furies who are representative of the retribution he has incurred; only he can see them, and they serve as an insistent reminder of his guilt. Thus, both Apollo and the Furies function to reveal the dual nature of Orestes as tragic hero who affirms his own fate, but whose suffering is not entirely heroic, also attesting to the impossibility of his death.

Orestes is thus not a simple representation of optimism, but is involved in a contestation of the ethical. Greek tragedy presents on stage not simply a celebration of life but a contestation of its absurdity. It is not a saying Yes to life, but it does show that it is impossible to simply say No. The position of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, that tragedy presents reality as a problem, has already been briefly mentioned. For them, this problem is historically situated in the gap which develops between a religious and mythological past and the newly developed legal and political institutions; "the tragic sense of responsibility emerges when human action becomes the object of reflection and debate while still not being regarded as sufficiently autonomous to be fully self-sufficient" (27). While we need not dwell on the precise historical circumstances, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet do present us with a framework for looking at tragedy that provides a contrast with Nietzsche's. According to this framework, tragedy is not an experience of immediacy, but rather it "establishes a distance

between itself and the myths of the heroes that inspire it" (26). Thus, tragedy is not to be seen as having been born from Dionysus' touching of the Apollinian epic, but from a sense of human responsibility which opens a gap between the human and the divine.

Vernant and Vidal-Naquet oppose the problematic tragic hero to the Homeric epic hero whose heroism is not yet in question. Nietzsche asserts that for the Homeric hero death is the worst thing, reversing the words of Silenus to the mortal King Midas, "what is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing.* But the second best for you is- to die soon" into the Apollinian words "to die soon is worst of all... the next worst- to die at all" (BT 42-43). The Iliad is often cited as a precursor of Greek tragedy, but it is worth noting the difference between the epic view of death found in Homer and that of his successors. In Homer, death is indeed sorrowful insofar as it is the absence of life, but Achilles willingly chooses a short, glorious life rather than a prolonged anonymity. Tragic heroes also very often make choices which shorten their life-span, but in tragedy there is something beyond the mere choice between living and dying. Tragic decisions are made more difficult by an awareness of "being" in the paradoxical sense conveyed by the words of Silenus; nothingness is the best possibility, but this has already been precluded- not even death can erase being entirely (it is only second best) since death cannot erase the fact of being, at least insofar as it has been. This is what Levinas calls "anonymous being", the "il y a" or "there is" (EE 57).

The "there is" is not entirely contradictory to Nietzsche's definition of nausea, but Nietzsche's interpretation of nausea does not adequately account for the role that this aspect of being plays in tragedy. For Nietzsche, art justifies life, makes us want to embrace life and forget its absurdity, but he is also aware that when we return from art to life there is a horror at the seeming loss of meaning. The aesthetic vision of The Birth of Tragedy effaces this horror by asserting the power of art. The opposing Levinasian view, however, would be that art is not sufficient to banish the "there is" which "murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself" (EE 57). Beyond the "horrible truth" which "outweighs any motive for action" for Hamlet (BT 60) "there is" this anonymous being which prevents total inaction and forms a key aspect of tragedy. Death is bad for the Homeric hero because it is the end of life, but the tragic hero fears not only death but also life. Levinas says that:

> It is because the *there is* has such a complete hold on us that we cannot take nothingness and death lightly, and we tremble before them. The fear of nothingness is but the measure of our involvement in Being. Existence of itself harbors something tragic which is not only there because of its finitude. Something that death cannot resolve (EE 20).

These concerns all resound within the aesthetic construction of tragedy; there is no heroic self-affirmation without this trembling in the language of tragedy and a relation to what is beyond death. Thus, for Levinas, nausea is not simply a horror at the meaninglessness of life, nor is it "an anxiety about death" but rather:

> a participation in the *there is*, in the *there is* which returns in the heart of every negation, in the *there is* that has "no exits." It is, if we may say so, the impossibility of death, the universality of existence even in its annihilation (EE 61).

Death is the bane of the Homeric hero, but it is commonplace. The tragic hero has some measure of understanding of "the impossibility of death" even in the face of death. Thus, tragedy does indeed suggest that the Greeks were not pessimists, but neither did they "overcome" pessimism through tragedy; they confronted it with an entirely new set of options.

The central role of the "there is" in tragedy can be demonstrated once again with reference to Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, who point out the importance of legal terminology in Greek tragedy and note the frequency with which the conflict over the definition of a single word can form the linchpin of a tragedy. For example:

> For Antigone, *nómos* denotes the opposite to what Creon, in the particular position in which he is placed, also calls *nómos*. For the girl the word means "religious rule"; for Creon it means "an edict promulgated by the head of the state." And, in truth, the semantic field of *nómos* is broad enough to cover, among others, both these meanings (113-114).

Many other similar examples may be cited to show the way in which Greek tragedy turns around the ambiguity both of specific uses of language and of the broad notion of justice. To return to Aeschylus' Oresteia, Orestes must commit a sin against the Furies, who demand

vengeance for the slaying of kin, because his mother murdered his father, and he must either commit matricide or else leave his father unavenged. Justice in this case cannot be humanly satisfied and later in the trilogy two forces (the new Olympian gods and the old chthonic gods) put forth their claims to being the source of universal justice. In Aeschylus' trilogy the conflict is resolved, but this is not always the case, nor does it entirely erase the cause of this conflict.

These examples given by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet show the way in which an emerging Athenian culture began to map out the spaces of justice on top of the nausea-inducing "there is". Indeed, the end of the Oresteia can serve as an apt metaphor for this process, showing as it does the anthropomorphic Olympians asserting their superiority over the brutal, earthly deities, without, nevertheless, being able to banish them completely. There inevitably prove to be spaces upon which no single code of justice can map itself without contradiction and tragedy thus emerges in this gap in the symbolic order where the meaning of being is in crisis and the bare fact of being therefore asserts itself.

In this interpretation of the birth of tragedy, an understanding of its ethics begins to emerge. Unlike Nietzsche's interpretation of the nausea of everyday life which would make life unbearable without the healing power of art, Levinas derives a kind of positivity from the concept of nausea. Nausea in this sense demands action rather than defeats it:

> Our existence in the world, with its desires and everyday agitation, is then not an immense fraud, a

> fall into inauthenticity, an evasion of our deepest destiny. It is but the amplification of that resistance against anonymous and fateful being by which existence becomes consciousness, that is, a relationship which both fills up, and maintains, the interval (EE 51).

While Nietzsche considers action to be humiliating for "Dionysian man", for Levinas the nausea to which the ethical subject is riveted requires this action. Moreover, Levinas opposes the Heideggerian notion of authenticity by arguing that this action thereby defines the ethical subject. Thus, while Nietzsche rejects the value of the mundane and changeable nature of life in the name of the "eternal nature of things", Levinas suggests that the particularity of the existent has value beyond the generality of being.

In Levinas' later work, this particularity becomes more explicitly ethical and is defined by an election to responsibility which each one must accept. This ethical position is not unambiguous for tragedy. Levinas' ethics of the face has been contrasted with the aesthetic function of the mask. And yet, tragedy depends on the mask in a number of senses. The relation between the face and the mask has already been briefly discussed, and the fact that the mask is a signification of the face is crucial. Levinas describes the advent of the face as "a coming forth from nowhere... where precisely an existent presents itself personally" (Totality and Infinity 142) and which "breaks through the form which nevertheless delimits it" (198). It is this "breaking through" which compels an ethical response to the Other:

> The will is free to assume this responsibility in whatever sense it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself; it is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced it. *In the welcoming of the face the will opens to reason.* (218-219)

It would be entirely appropriate to view tragedy, with its religious origins and connotations, as a form of response to the infinity of the face, but at the same time, the face presented on the tragic stage is masked and therefore not equivalent to the face of the Other.

For Nietzsche, both Apollo and Dionysus are masked gods; Apollo is the god of the form itself, Dionysus represents the breaking of that form and the absence which its presence evokes. Levinas sees this rupture in much more radical terms however:

> To poetic activity... where in a dionysiac mode the artist (according to Nietzsche's expression) becomes a work of art- is opposed the language that at each instant dispels the charm of rhythm and prevents the initiative from becoming a role. Discourse is rupture and commencement... (TI 203).

Nietzsche's aesthetics deny the alterity of language by encompassing it within the confines of the creating artist. Levinas attributes this denial of alterity to all poetic language, but the significance which I have been seeking to attach to the tragic mask depends on the fact that it confronts an audience with an uncanny alterity, not because it is a face, but because it resembles one. To speak of an ethics of tragedy, then, we must consider both the alterity with which tragedy confronts us, and the egoity which shapes the structure of this confrontation.

Thus, my Levinasian reading of Nietzsche aims to suggest that there is in fact something ethical about tragedy which is lost in the Apollonian-Dionysian world presented by Nietzsche. The Dionysian "dissolution of appearance" can never be accomplished in its aesthetic fullness, but necessarily leaves a remainder due to the ever-present "there is" which prevents the existent from being entirely dissolved in being. The tragic hero must therefore be seen not solely as Nietzsche's "Dionysian man" who scorns all that does not put him in touch with the "eternal nature of things" but as an existent who is riveted to the particularity of his/her being. The tragic hero institutes a problematic relation to ethics, revealing an ever present responsibility and not an absolute affirmation of the authenticity of his/her being.

3. Kierkegaard: Tragedy and Trembling

The problem of the relation between ethics and tragedy is much more of an explicit concern for Kierkegaard, both in Fear and Trembling and in the essay in Either/Or entitled "The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern". The first work revolves around Abraham, the second, Antigone, but both texts demonstrate Kierkegaard's distinction between the ethical and the aesthetic. For Kierkegaard, the God of Judaism is harshly ethical, while "in Greece, the wrath of the gods had no ethical character, but only aesthetic ambiguity" (Either/Or 148). In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard emphasizes the limitations of the ethical and upholds Abraham as a "knight of faith" who surpasses the ethical and shows himself to be

greater than the tragic hero by assuming full responsibility himself. Thus, we are presented with two oppositions: the first between the ethical and the aesthetic, the second between the ethical and the leap out of the ethical into faith.

This does not mean, of course, that the distinction is a simple one; the problematic relation between aesthetic and ethical is played out throughout Kierkegaard's work, most notably in Either/Or, which juxtaposes an aesthetic voice with an ethical one. "The Ancient Tragical Motif" is ascribed to the voice of A, the aesthete. The key dichotomy developed in this text is between the "infinite gentleness" of tragedy and the ethical, which is "strict and harsh" (143). The most significant opposition developed in Fear and Trembling is between the ethical and the faith beyond ethics which Kierkegaard attributes to Abraham. Thus, while A sees the aesthetic as a force which mitigates the harsh law of the ethical, Johannes de Silentio (the pseudonym under which Fear and Trembling was published) is concerned with the leap past the ethical (and its tragic mitigation) to the religious (which is also important for A). These two divergent texts are both concerned with the responsibility of the tragic, but before approaching the question of the ethics of tragedy, Kierkegaard's vision of the ethical must be further scrutinized.

In both works, the ethical is defined as a structure which is demanding and harsh, but, since it is universal, it is easy for the ethical subject to know the duty demanded by ethics. Kierkegaard, in advocating the need to make a leap beyond this structure, opposes the Hegelian tradition in which everything must be disclosed and

nothing can exceed the totality of the universal. In contrast, Levinas' thoughts on Hegel and Kierkegaard advocate redefining the ethical and rediscovering its significance. He asks "whether the true ethical stage is correctly described by Kierkegaard as generality and equivalence of the inner and the outer" and suggests that there may be another way of perceiving existence rather than in terms of either pure totality or Kierkegaard's pure particularity (Proper Names 68-69). Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical "begins the disdain for the ethical basis of being" which "has led us to the amoralism of most recent philosophers", including Nietzsche (72). The problem, for both Levinas and Kierkegaard, is that in the generality of ethics "the singularity of the *I* would be lost under the rule that is valid for all" (72). Kierkegaard's solution to this problem is to oppose ethics with something beyond; Levinas' is to understand ethics differently.

For Levinas "subjectivity *is* in that responsibility [for the Other] and only irreducible subjectivity can assume responsibility. That is what constitutes the ethical" (73). Thus, the concept of subjectivity may be redeemed from the generality of the ethical by introducing an alterity within the subject which is nevertheless non-assimilable. The subject, while remaining the "same", "fixed in its identity... nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity" (TI 26-27). This gives rise to a conception of infinity which breaks up subjectivity and prevents the totalization of an ethical system based on the unity of the subject. Thus, Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity is put in a different perspective; "the putting in

question of the *I* in the face of the Other is a new tension in the *I* and is not a tensing on oneself" (PN 73).

Levinas' critique of Kierkegaard's definition of ethics thus maintains that Kierkegaard too willingly accepts the terms of the philosophical tradition against which he is reacting. While he tries to go beyond Hegelian ethics, Kierkegaard does not leave room for the possibility of defining ethics in a more positive way. Similarly, Kierkegaard's conception of tragedy and the tragic hero relies very much on the interpretation generally given by the philosophical tradition. Kierkegaard says that the tragic hero remains within the ethical, which is very much the definition given by Hegel and Schelling. With the possibility of rethinking the ethical, however, comes the possibility of rethinking tragedy. The tragic hero takes on a different relation to the ethical understood in the Levinasian sense of an I in tension with the Other.

In the two Kierkegaard texts in question, tragedy appears as an aesthetic category which, whatever its relation to the ethical, certainly does not go beyond it. A, the aesthete, formulates the problem of the definition of the tragic in this way:

> If the individual is isolated, then he is either absolutely the creator of his own destiny, in which case nothing tragic remains, but only the evil- for it is not even tragic that an individual should be blindly engrossed in himself, it is his own fault- or the individuals are only modifications of the eternal substance of existence, and so again the tragic is lost (158).

This is, of course, a purely aesthetic paradox for A and his solution is a mediation between the two positions. As has been seen, Levinas and Adorno, however, see an ethical tension in the problematic relation between general and particular. A's use of the word "evil" is intriguing, however, insofar as it suggests that the tragic does bear some relation to the ethical. This, for A, would not be the case:

> It is certainly a misunderstanding of the tragic, when our age strives to let the whole tragic destiny become transubstantiated in individuality and subjectivity... one would throw his whole life upon his shoulders, as being the result of his own acts... but in so doing, one would also transform his aesthetic guilt into an ethical one. The tragic hero thus becomes bad; evil becomes precisely the tragic subject; but evil has no aesthetic interest... (142).

A is insistent that aesthetic subjectivity not be equated with ethical subjectivity. While this is indeed a necessary distinction, the implication that the ethical and the aesthetic have no points of contact whatsoever must be disputed. A's comments may be usefully compared with those made by Benjamin, who criticizes the same tendency in the philosophical tradition:

> Although, in general, one hardly dare treat it so unquestioningly as a faithful imitation of nature, the work of art is unhesitatingly accepted as the exemplary copy of moral phenomena without any consideration of how susceptible such phenomena are to representation. The object in question here is not the significance of moral content for the criticism of a work of art; the question is a different one, indeed, a double one. Do the actions and attitudes depicted in a work of art have moral

> significance as images of reality? And: can the content of a work of art, in the last analysis, be adequately understood in terms of moral insights? (104).

Both passages show a resistance to the tendency to assume a direct relation between the ethical and the aesthetic, but Benjamin points out other directions which the passage from the aesthetic to the ethical might take. Furthermore, he poses the problematic question of the relation between ethics and representation. A's comments show that he assumes ethics to be beyond representation, and, as an aesthete, he therefore has no further interest in the ethical.

Similarly, Johannes de Silentio presents a vision of tragedy which is completely self-enclosed, but which in this case is placed entirely within the ethical. In other words, he does precisely what A says cannot be done; he throws full responsibility upon the shoulders of the tragic hero. He does this not to make the tragic hero evil, but rather to serve as a foil for Abraham. For Kierkegaard, the tragic hero lies somewhere between faith and unbelief:

> Abraham is therefore at no instant the tragic hero, but something quite different, either a murderer or a man of faith. The middle-term that saves the tragic hero is something that Abraham lacks. That is why I can understand a tragic hero, but not Abraham, even though in a certain lunatic sense I admire him more than all the others (<u>Fear and Trembling</u> 85-86).

The hero is great, but not as great as Abraham, because he is ethically explicable. The Benjaminian questions return however; how representable are ethical phenomena? How explicable are they? Do

we not have to search in a different way than in terms of a work's imitation in order to explain its moral meaningfulness? These questions, along with the Levinas' reading of Kierkegaardian subjectivity, suggest that not only must we think of the ethical differently, but also of the relation between the ethical and the aesthetic.

Derrida's reading of Fear and Trembling in The Gift of Death develops a more subtle view of the ethical. He speaks of "the aporia of responsibility" according to which, "far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to *irresponsibility*" (61). As a result, "ethics must be sacrificed in the name of duty. It is a duty not to respect, out of duty, ethical duty" (67). In this, he remains very close to Kierkegaard's rejection of ethics, but Derrida is also very much concerned with the way in which the formation of responsibility is bound up with the concept of irresponsibility. Thus, while Kierkegaard believes in the paradox "that the single individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham is done for" (FT 144), the relation to responsibility posited by Derrida is not absolute, but mediated by the rupture of the ethical. Derrida says "I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality" (GD 70). It is significant that Derrida speaks of the duty not to respect duty, since an awareness of the generality of ethics remains essential to the concept of responsibility.

Thus, while Kierkegaard's argument is based on the fact that Abraham must either be judged according to the ethical (as a

murderer) or according to the religious (as a "knight of faith"), Derrida insists that Abraham is "at the same time the most moral and the most immoral" (72). The domain of the ethical is not erased by Abraham, it is only ruptured, and always reconstitutes itself; it is perhaps in this way that we must understand Levinas' suggestion that "Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama" (PN 77). The ethical must be more than the harsh comfort of a moral code, it must function as a discomfort which imposes a constant awareness of irresponsibility, even when we take the vertiginous leap of faith beyond it. It is not the codification of ethics which is of value to the concept of responsibility but the fact that ethics imposes itself as an order in relation to which an ethical position must be taken.

This is, perhaps how we must understand the irremissibility of being in tragedy; the ethical, while commanding us to go beyond it, always returns and never permits us to remain beyond. In the Oresteia, the Furies are an indication of what Kierkegaard calls aesthetic ambiguity, and will haunt Orestes whether or not he acts, but this is not a suspension of the ethical. The ethical is itself this ambiguity and Orestes' position is a dramatization of the necessity to go beyond the ethical, while his punishment and subsequent purification are an indication of the fact that the ethical always returns and responsibility is never fulfilled.

Derrida and Kierkegaard agree on the relation of the tragic to the ethical. For both thinkers, the tragic hero has the comfort of

knowing that his/her position is an ethical one, and of being able to disclose it and contest it. Kierkegaard argues that:

> every emotion in him belongs to the universal, he is revealed and in this disclosure is the beloved son of ethics... He can be sure that all that it is possible to say against him has been said, unsparingly, mercilessly- and to contend with the whole world is a comfort, but to contend with oneself dreadful... the tragic hero knows nothing of the terrible responsibility of solitude (137-138).

The tragic hero, who has the comfort of being known a hero, is relieved of his/her burden by being able to speak. Kierkegaard thus sees language in tragedy as indicative of "aesthetic ambiguity" rather than a genuinely ethical problem. Tragedy is comforting because it provides an aesthetic solution to the harshness of the ethical. I will reconsider these claims in the next two chapters, but here the key point is that for Kierkegaard it is precisely because the tragic hero is caught within the tragic crisis of meaning that the hero remains within the ethical. Sophocles' Antigone, then, would remain within the ethical because she is able to articulate her definition of *nómos* (even if the problem of the word's meaning remains unresolved), to justify the action she takes in burying Polyneices and to give expression to the depths of her sorrow.

For Kierkegaard, something is required to lift the subject above the ethical, and, as Levinas suggests, this is secrecy; "the subject has a secret, for ever inexpressible, which determines his or her very subjectivity... no expression could express or assuage it" (PN 67). Thus, when Kierkegaard rewrites Antigone's story "*his*

Antigone cannot give voice to her sorrow; its cause must, forever, remain secret" (Steiner, Antigones 60). Kierkegaard suggests "there is nothing, perhaps, which ennobles a human being so much as keeping a secret" (E/O 155). Ultimately, however, while the tragic hero's ability to speak may make him/her less of an ethical exemplar, Kierkegaard's privileging of the secret only reverses the relation, making those who do not wish to be heroic to be seen as the true heroes. Rather than seeing the tragic hero's suffering as "ennobling", Kierkegaard sees the knight of faith's ability to conceal his suffering as "ennobling". The paradigm of heroism, however, remains the same, with the interpretation hinging on the presence in the hero of some quality which makes him/her an exemplary figure.

The truth of this statement can be illustrated with an example in which Abraham's situation is reversed. Rolf Hochhuth's play, The Deputy, a polemic against the Catholic church's role in the Holocaust, inverts the positions Kierkegaard describes in the biblical narrative. Riccardo, a priest who knows the atrocities being committed by Hitler, considers himself guilty for not speaking out against them. His father replies "your duty is *obedience* . You are far too- too insignificant to bear the guilt" (103). For Riccardo, secrecy coincides with the (Kierkegaardian) ethical; he is told that he does not understand the "meaning" of the events and should therefore keep quiet. He asks, "would you have me look down, supercilious and serene, with the notorious glazed eyes of the philosopher, and dialectilize a meaning into this murdering?" (104) This rejection of the generality of meaning would accord with both Levinas' and Kierkegaard's conceptions of responsibility, but what is particularly

noteworthy is the fact that in order to break with the generality of ethics, the values of secrecy and silence must be breached. For the same reason that Kierkegaard argues the tragic hero does not go far enough, so any definition of what would ennoble humankind is insufficient. For Riccardo, there is no course of action which could prove ennobling; even if he speaks out, even his ultimate sacrifice in Auschwitz, where he willingly takes the place of a Jewish prisoner, proves nothing unless it is the impossibility of the ennobling. It is true that Riccardo is "fully disclosed", that he has the comfort of having the worst known and of having the worst done to him, but it is impossible to suggest that he should have gone further. If his situation can be seen as tragic it is precisely because, despite his disclosure, he still feels the "terrible responsibility of solitude"; perhaps the definition of the truly tragic hero is the one who knows that the comfort of disclosure is no comfort at all.

Disclosure does not reduce responsibility; this is why Abraham does not speak, knowing that he will still have to climb Mount Moriah. The tragic hero perhaps does not accept this truth with the same calm as the faithful Abraham, as Antigone's conflict with Creon shows. Nevertheless, the ultimate lesson is the same; both Abraham and Antigone are riveted to their particular responsibility, which remains untouched by anything they may say or that may be said against them.

For Kierkegaard, the secret breaks through the generality of the ethical, while for Levinas, it is the ethical face of the Other which does this. Both of these are at work in tragedy, although, as Benjamin says, not as "exemplary copies of moral phenomena". The

tragic hero is not a "knight of faith" since, as Kierkegaard himself maintains, the "knight of faith" is defined by an inexpressible particularity. As Benjamin shows, however, this is not the most important point; the key question is whether the representation involved in tragedy can be understood in terms of its ethical significance.

This question may be pursued in an analysis of King Lear. Cordelia's decision to "love and be silent" (I.i.62) presents an interesting counterpoint to Kierkegaard's tragic hero, who is based on disclosure. Clearly, Cordelia's aesthetic appeal is based precisely upon her disclosure of her silence, made in asides and on her behalf by Kent; insofar as speech equals disclosure, Cordelia is disclosed to us. In relation to Lear, however, she remains concealed; "I love your Majesty/ According to my bond; no more nor less" (I.i.92-93). Cordelia's tragedy lies in her decision that she cannot fully disclose herself, that what lies beyond her "bond" (that is, beyond the ethical) cannot be spoken. The "nothing" of her answer expresses the nothingness of language but since Lear sees nothing beyond language, disclosure cannot take place. Correlatively, "the articulated silence of Cordelia's discourse... is probably importantly linked to the larger structure of Cordelia's relative absence from the play" (Barker 12). Cordelia's marginal position at the limits of language and of the plot thus suggest that to represent that which lies beyond the ethical order, representation must be minimized.

Secrecy, however, is not developed in spite of representation but through representation itself. Kierkegaard emphasizes that Abraham speaks but does not reveal himself when he answers Isaac's

question about the lamb for the sacrifice by saying "God will provide". He neither lies nor remains silent. So it is also with Cordelia, who knows that the filial "bond" by which she defines her love stands far in excess of Lear's understanding of it. Thus may she be "ennobled" by her secrecy, but this is not the key ethical point. King Lear involves a representation which reveals the limitations of ethics; Cordelia's "nothing" reveals the impossibility of representing the truth and for this reason she cannot be the focus of representation. At the same time, this "nothing" makes nothingness impossible; the ethical does not demand silence, for this would be to abolish the ethical through extreme relativism. Nor is full disclosure possible, as Cordelia's example demonstrates.

Moreover, the play itself lacks disclosure; Edgar's concluding injunction to "speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (V.iii.324) might be taken as the moral of the play, a disclosure of the necessity of disclosure. The ethical dimension is not so easily accounted for, however, since Cordelia's problem has not been speaking what she feels but the disjunction between what she feels and what can be said. This problem is left unresolved except in the sense that the play stands as a representation which calls attention to the failures both of the ethical order and of representation.[1]

In pursuing a Levinasian ethics of tragedy then, it is necessary to problematize what Kierkegaard calls disclosure, and to suggest that language and the ethical function differently within tragedy than within the example of Abraham used by Kierkegaard. I have

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[1] Jonathan Dollimore gives a more detailed reading of the end of King Lear in Radical Tragedy. He argues that "Lear actually refuses... that autonomy of value which humanist critics so often insist that it ultimately affirms" (202).

already suggested that it is necessary to look at tragedy on the basis of the Levinasian saying, but with the reservation that tragedy is not a purely ethical utterance. Tragedy responds to the face of the Other in the sense that it addresses an ethical problem, it points beyond the ethical generality by representing ethics as a problem and not as a solution. Thus, the disclosure of the tragic hero must not be taken to suggest that he/she may be comprehended absolutely. Rather, it testifies to a failure of the generalities of ethics and language; the irreparable ambiguity of the language of tragedy suggests that "it is the nature of the universe to be in conflict" (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 114).

Similarly, if we are to speak meaningfully about the ethics of tragedy, it should not be in order to make the tragic hero understood, nor to make the convergence of tragic forces intelligible in terms of a balance or symmetry, but to illustrate the irreducible ethical problematic posed by tragedy. Kierkegaard's criticism of the disclosure of the tragic hero assumes a correlation between the generalities of language and ethics. Following Levinas, however, it seems to me that the ethical aspect of the language of tragedy comes from the fact that it is at once Saying and Said. Tragedy is both a response to the face of the Other and also an indication of the impossibility of complete disclosure, of a said pure enough to respond to the Other. Thus, I will not argue that tragedy goes beyond ethics in Kierkegaard's sense, but rather that the responsibility of tragedy is closely linked to its irresponsibility to the ethical order. The vital importance of this paradox for tragedy will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: The Language of Tragedy and the Tragedy of Language: Levinas with Adorno and Blanchot

1. The Tragic Aporia

In the previous chapter, I argued that the break with tradition initiated by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard needs to be taken further in order to develop the rethinking of the ethics of tragedy proposed in my introduction. In this chapter, therefore, it will be necessary to attempt to show the direction in which such a rethinking might be taken. I have suggested that The Birth of Tragedy and Fear and Trembling are works which oppose rigorous systematization and rationality but which maintain the underlying philosophical assumption of a unity of experience. By focusing in this chapter on contemporary theorists for whom such a thinking of unity has become impossible, the assumptions which the philosophical tradition has made about tragedy may be more radically rethought.

Two thinkers whose work is highly relevant to this problem are Maurice Blanchot and Theodor Adorno. While each has a different set of theoretical concerns, both are proponents of a fragmentary style and are very conscious of writing under the shadow of the Holocaust. After the Holocaust they find themselves confronted with the fact that the project of interpreting life in terms of a universal meaning has become impossible, if it has not always been impossible.

Adorno's Aesthetic Theory is concerned with presenting the artwork in all of its contradictoriness. An artwork is immanent and fixed in its form, yet its effect relies on its ability to express

something beyond its physical existence. Every understanding of art is therefore always partly false; "only he understands an artwork who grasps it as a complex nexus of truth, which inevitably involves its relation to untruth" (262). For Adorno, therefore, aesthetics always implies that the truth of art cannot be taken for granted; "every theory of art must at the same time be the critique of art" (83). Art can only be understood insofar as its very possibility is thrown into question.

Similarly, Blanchot's Writing of the Disaster figures a paradoxical relation between the terms "writing" and "disaster". The disaster is the beyond of language that makes language impossible to formulate as a totality; "the disaster, although named, does not figure in language" (31). "*When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster* " (33). "Writing" for Blanchot, like art for Adorno, must necessarily leave something out, must be in some part untrue. It is therefore impossible to speak of the aesthetic as a totality which depends on the security of the symbolic order; "trust in language is the opposite- distrust of language- situated within language" (38). Every use of language implies this distrust, this knowledge of its insufficiency. Yet, at the same time, there is an "impatience" which initiates the necessary process of naming despite this inadequacy of language (39).

Both thinkers are also concerned with the ethical problems posed by representation. Adorno's consideration of the "guilt" of the artwork is based on the fact that the immanent nature of the aesthetic necessarily puts art in relation to the ethical; "the unity of logos, because it mutilates, is enmeshed in the nexus of its guilt"

(186). Art is guilty not because it is false, but because the truth of its internal tension can never be fully manifested; "As soon as unity becomes stable, it is already lost" (187). This guilt cannot be overcome through aesthetic means, since the aesthetic always requires some measure of stability. For this reason Adorno says that "artworks that want to free themselves of their guilt weaken themselves as artworks" (208). Thus, through this consideration of guilt, Adorno shows the limitations of a tradition which interprets tragedy according to its unity without adequately thinking of the "violence done to multiplicity" inherent within this unity (186).

Thus, as I have shown in my discussion of Kierkegaard, the ethics of tragedy is defined not by responsibility but by irresponsibility to the generality of ethics. The ethical significance of tragedy cannot be derived from the reification of its aesthetic unity, but depends on the tension between this immanent unity and its transcendence, its saying and its said. For Adorno, the artwork can never satisfy the ethical and fulfill its responsibility:

> The artwork is not only the echo of suffering, it diminishes it; form, the organon of its seriousness, is at the same time the organon of the neutralization of suffering. Art thereby falls into an unsolvable aporia. The demand for complete responsibility on the part of artworks increases the burden of their guilt; therefore this demand is to be set in counterpoint with the antithetical demand for irresponsibility (39).

The demand for irresponsibility, for Adorno as for Derrida, constitutes a necessary part of responsibility. Derrida's understanding of ethics is that to be absolutely responsible means

to break with the ethical and therefore to be absolutely irresponsible. Adorno's description of the responsibility of the aesthetic work maintains that to be responsible it must strive for accurate representation, but that this act of representation is necessarily unfaithful by being faithful to what it represents. The aesthetic breaks with the ethical precisely because it is encompassed within it. This break is not necessarily the absolutely responsible and irresponsible break of which Derrida speaks, but it does show the manner in which the aesthetic is intimately involved with the ethical.

Similarly, Blanchot's formulation of "the writing of the disaster" depends on the ethical implications of an aesthetic form. Writing bears an impossible relation to the disaster, which is beyond language and appears only as a trace. Writing can never reach the disaster and for this reason is "without importance" (13). At the same time, "silence is impossible" (11) and writing is therefore linked to the impossibility of fulfilling the "infinite debt" for which we are responsible (9). The disaster initiates an obligation of writing which demands a response, but the response can never be sufficient. Blanchot says that "what exceeds the system is the impossibility of its failure, and likewise the impossibility of its success" (47). This paradox sums up the ethical bearing of writing, which can neither break the system, nor give in to it, but can only produce this excess which leaves the system in this state of impossibility.

For both Adorno and Blanchot, the aesthetic can only be responsible insofar as it does not seek to make a claim of complete

responsibility for itself; in Levinasian terms, it must not allow the solidity of the said to cause us to forget the saying. Blanchot says that "writing, without placing itself above art, supposes that one not prefer art, but efface art as writing effaces itself" (53). The writing/art dichotomy at work here functions in a very similar way to Levinas' saying/said; "writing" and "saying" are ethical in the respect that they fulfill the necessity of language as a response to the Other. As Adorno shows, however, the responsibility of this language is also its irresponsibility. The aesthetic belongs to the ethical insofar as it belongs to language (and all aesthetic forms bear some relation to language) but it is precisely through language that it fails to fulfill its ethical responsibility.

Aesthetic language is of course a special kind of saying; on one hand, it is an evasion of a purely ethical relation to the Other, but on the other hand, it is an awareness of the impossibility of such a relation. Ultimately, then, the ethical orientation of the aesthetic field derives from its breach of the supposed ethical totality which confronts it in the form of a said. In re-initiating the saying of language, the aesthetic re-opens the ethical, albeit at the expense of betraying it. Tragedy takes on special significance in this context due to its emphasis on the radical incommensurability of language; it is precisely because tragedy shows the ethical order in irreparable conflict with itself that it can be seen as responsible in this sense. Its responsible and irresponsible aesthetic saying effaces all possibility of a stable said. Tragedy thus presents itself as an ethical aporia; through language it can take on responsibility, but because of language it cannot satisfy this responsibility.

2. The Other and the Tragic Word

> It is not the word that divulges a secret, but rather, the one that transgresses an interdict (Lacoue-Labarthe 24).

It is necessary to further clarify the particular significance of the tragic word in relation to the wider aesthetic field. The analyses of Adorno and Blanchot apply to all art and language, but my interest in tragic language comes from the manner in which it strives to represent the aporia of responsibility. As Rosenzweig puts it, "tragedy casts itself in the artistic form of drama just in order to represent speechlessness" (77). Unlike Rosenzweig (and Kierkegaard, among others), however, my concern is not limited to the ethics of the hero's relation to language. For Rosenzweig, the essence of the tragic hero is silence and tragic dialogue "does not create any relation between two wills because each of these wills can only will its isolation" (78). This is undoubtedly true, and in this sense tragic language is very difficult to interpret in a Levinasian way since it depends in many ways on the failure to recognize the proximity of the neighbour. However, I am more interested in the wider scope of this movement and the manner in which tragic isolation does indeed reveal a fundamental relation to the Other.

Thus, while I have emphasized the breakdown of meaning in tragic language, I wish to account for this not through the fundamental inadequacy of language, but through the relation of this finite language to an overflowing of responsibility. As I have shown, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet focus on the fact that there are key nodal points in tragic language which are overdetermined by numerous

possible interpretations. Tragic characters isolate themselves within language by assuming one interpretation which excludes the possibility of accepting ambiguity. Similarly, Rosenmeyer says of the language in Aeschylus that it is:

> self-absorbed, isolated, marked off from what precedes and what follows by a gulf of silence.... each Aeschylean speech act is, as it were, enveloped by silence; the speaker is alone with his impulse toward communication (189).

Clearly, however, what is tragic about the Aeschylean or the Sophoclean world is not simply the emptiness of its language, or the isolation of its heroes. Rather, the hero's solitude defined in terms of a relation to language holds a greater significance. As Levinas says, what makes solitude tragic is the fact of being riveted to matter, to one's particular being; for Levinas, this solitude is defined by a responsibility which is mine alone. To be alone with language in the tragic sense is thus to be aware of responsibility while facing the impossibility of satisfying it; it is the overflowing of language by the Other which gives rise to the tragic word that Lacoue-Labarthe calls "the word of infinite desire" (24).

My Levinasian interpretation of the preceding analyses of Greek tragedy attempts to understand the fundamental aspects of tragic ambiguity and separation in terms of the face of the Other. I have attempted to show that the contestation of meaning represented by tragedy cannot be simply resolved through reference to a higher totality of values (heroic, humanist, ethical or otherwise) which claim to "know" the solution to the problem of

meaning. My interpretation depends on the assumption that the tragic mask signifies the alterity of the face despite its absence. Clearly, however, this alterity is not made explicit through tragic dialogue, which, as seen above, displays the failure of one character to recognize the position of another. Implicit within this tragic representation, however, is an alterity which lies beneath the failure of language. If language were simply ambiguous and multivalent, this would not be tragic. The different possible meanings of a word only give rise to tragedy in situations which force characters to stake everything on the correctness of their own interpretations. To follow the example given earlier, Antigone's tragic significance comes from the fact that Antigone and Creon are willing to go to extremes to uphold their definition; the ambiguity of the term *nómos* is only the necessary backdrop to this action. Furthermore, this example also shows that the tragic conflict of meaning depends not on human decision, but on interpretations of the ambiguity of the gods; both Antigone and Creon use *nómos* to signify their responsibility to divine law. In this way, the isolation of the two characters becomes tragic not because they fail to recognize the validity of the other's viewpoint, but because they cannot help but fail due to the divine demands of their responsibility.

This conception of language implies not a lack of meaning but an excess. If language and justice become tragically ambiguous, it is not because these concepts are not sufficiently articulated to be resolved into a totality, but because of the radical impossibility of the responsibilities to which they respond. The tragedy of language thus derives from the revelation of its inability to answer to this

excess of responsibility. To apply the Levinas/Heidegger opposition described in my introduction, language is not tragic simply because it is finite and therefore dependent on the subject for meaning, but becomes tragic only when it is put in contact with something in excess of its finitude as well as that of the subject. In other words, the tragedy of language stems not from the inherent failure of meaning implied by the tragic crises of language and order, but from the radical alterity that tears language despite itself precisely because it is ungraspable in language.

The application of this theory to Greek tragedy may be demonstrated through another reference to Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, who claim that:

> Perhaps the essential feature that defines [Greek tragedy] is that the drama brought to the stage unfolds both at the level of everyday existence, in a human, opaque time made up of successive and limited present moments, and also beyond this earthly life, in a divine, omnipresent time that at every instant encompasses the totality of events, sometimes to conceal them and sometimes to make them plain, but always so that nothing escapes it or is lost in oblivion (43-44).

This emphasis on the totality of divine time seems somewhat antithetical to my Levinasian stance, but I would emphasize that the relation of the human to the divine is marked by impossibility; the impossible desire of the language of the hero is to bring the divine totality to bear on the human level. Antigone and Creon are both forced to come to terms with the impossibility of making their interpretations of justice absolute.

The tragic depends not on divinely ordained fate, but on the human relation to this divine level. Oedipus is a tragic figure not because of the fate he cannot avoid but because he fails to see the disjunction between the human level and the divine level on which this fate operates. He sees himself as the master of the human level without recognizing that he is utterly powerless in relation to the divine level. The tragedy of Oedipus is characteristic insofar as it derives from the fact that he is riveted to the human level despite the relation to the divine sought by his language.

Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's view is that "the tragic consciousness of responsibility appears when the human and divine levels are sufficiently distinct for them to be opposed while still appearing inseparable" (27). This understanding of responsibility can be interpreted in terms of what Levinas calls separation; I am separated from the Other, but I am nevertheless bound by my responsibility to the Other. It is thus neither the absence nor the intolerable presence of the gods that makes Greek tragedy tragic, but rather the separation which demands an impossible responsibility of the human. While the language of the tragic hero is in many respects heedless of the presence of alterity, this heedlessness is based on a relation to the Other, through which meaning is sought on the human level. Tragedy thus arises in the hero's failure to achieve absolute meaningfulness, brought about by the impossibility of a fully ethical response to the Other.

Antigone is presented as an ethical subject whose responsibility toward her brother causes her to bury him despite Creon's edict. In her separation, she responds to the absolute

singularity of the Other as opposed to the generality of Creon's ethics and she thus determines her responsibility for herself. She is thus both responsible and irresponsible, in Derrida's sense of responsibility, but the tragedy of this responsibility comes from the fact that she cannot remain beyond the ethical. She is forced to justify herself in terms of the ethical and she does this through reference to another generality of ethics: the divine laws which she says Creon himself has broken. Thus, in response to Kierkegaard's claim that tragedy is defined by the generality of ethics, the tragic language of Antigone demonstrates the impossibility and the necessity of formulating an absolute generality of ethics. Although Antigone begins by responding to the singularity of her responsibility, what is dramatized in the play is not the singular opposed to the general (Antigone implies that a general rule may be derived from her specific case) nor of divine law opposed to human law (both Antigone and Creon claim divine justification) but the fact that responsibility lies beyond the generality of ethics even as it requires expression on the level of that generality.

The conflict between Antigone and Creon leads to a crisis of meaning which demonstrates the impossibility of affirming a single unified ethical system. Antigone can follow her interpretation of *nómos* to the death, but she cannot make it absolute, she cannot abolish Creon's point of view. Similarly, Creon's use of force cannot efface Antigone's dissenting opinion. At the same time, both are entirely committed to the responsibility which bids them uphold their own positions. Responsibility thus overflows the systems of laws through which Antigone and Creon propose to satisfy it. The

tragic crisis of meaning, which takes place on the human level, is initiated by the excess of responsibility to the Other which breaks through language but remains beyond it.

This may also be seen through the specific reference made by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet to time. Human time is marked by the fact that it is limited to the present; human responsibility entails not being able to know for certain the consequences or causes of human acts. This notion of a double time also has Levinasian resonances; Levinas refers to the diachrony of signification which divides the ethical saying from the said, making the two aspects of language incommensurable. Through a "relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present", saying transcends what is made present in the said (BPW 117). The language said by tragedy reflects the human inability to fully know responsibility, yet is also caught up in the relation of the saying of the word to the Other.

The responsibility of Antigone's saying cannot be understood within a human system of the said, although her act, once completed, can be no more than that. She assumes her responsibility in the present, but invokes the "omnipresent" time of the gods and its unchanging law, calling divine law "a currency that everlastingly is valid, an origin beyond the birth of man" (210). This appeal to the timeless within the present characterizes the relation between the human level and the divine; Antigone accepts responsibility for upholding the timeless, divine law, but in her limited human time she is exceeded by her responsibility. This is demonstrated with remarkable dramatic economy by the fact that she has to bury Polyneices twice; her responsibility is thus portrayed as being

irremissibly present in its futility. Creon has the power to remove the dirt from the corpse as often as Antigone buries it, and thus her responsibility remains. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard's claim that the tragic hero can be understood must be questioned; for Kierkegaard, her disclosure would come from her arguments, her justifications and the sorrows she expresses, but these do not really give us an understanding of her responsibility. What Antigone's language makes intelligible is precisely the unintelligibility of her responsibility to the Other; we can never understand the moment in which responsibility is assumed because that moment is always already past and beyond disclosure. Thus the power of the play does not depend on the profundity of Antigone's subjectivity so much as on the inexpressibility of what Levinas calls the tension between the I and the Other.

Thus, I wish to suggest that the level of the "said" of Antigone is not to be the basis of an ethical understanding of the play. The various assessments of the legitimacy of the positions taken and the arguments used by Antigone and Creon may be valid as far as they go, but the fact that so many different arguments have been made on this point demonstrates an ambiguity which has a greater significance. Without seeking to espouse an entirely relativistic viewpoint, the key seems to me to be that the play shows its action to be irresolvably problematic; it posits itself as an ethical problem. As Vernant and Vidal-Naquet claim, tragedy presents the human condition as infinitely problematic and, as Antigone shows, the tragic problem is not one which can be solved on the level of human knowledge. Antigone is striking in terms of ethics because it

represents the problem of responsibility, but also because it reveals the trace of a saying which signals that what is said in the play is not an ethical solution but a problem. The saying, however, leads back to a responsibility which is never present and thus can never be fulfilled. Antigone suggests a relation between the word and the Other which is not the same as the explicit relation between the human level and the divine level in the play but which does testify to both the interconnectedness and separation involved in the relation between human language and the Other.

3. The Sounds of Silence

The tragic hero is riveted to being and therefore to a responsibility which implies a relation to a system of language and silence. Given what I have said thus far, the relation between language (Kierkegaard's disclosure) and silence (Rosenmeyer's engulfing silence) cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy. There is something which remains silent and undisclosable in language, while the rustling of silence also testifies to the presence of the Other.

The Other, whose presence disrupts any conception of the ethical as a totality, also breaks apart language. The notion of diachrony described above implies an ethics formulated as a call which resounds beyond any possibility of being fully answered. Blanchot explains the resultant relation to language in these terms:

> To be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible. That is why we desire it. Writing (or Telling, as distinct from anything written or told) precedes

> every phenomenon, every manifestation or show: all appearing (11).

Writing, for Blanchot, like Levinas' saying, precedes the written or the said. Thus, there are two kinds of silence: the silence that is not said and the silence that is not saying. The silence that is not said is therefore still a modality of the saying; this is why to be silent is still to speak and why "mortal silence does not keep still" (59). Blanchot speaks of the more radical silence as "the silent outside... the silence of silence which by no means has any relation to language for it does not come from language but has always already departed from it" (57). This silence "is, however, language's outside" (57) and therefore remains bound to language as the most radical negation of all possibility of speaking. This is where the passivity of the neutral "there is" emerges.

The "there is", for both Blanchot and Levinas, ensures the impossibility of absolute silence. Levinas speaks of "the murmur of silence, in which essence is identified as an entity", using this "murmur" or "resonance" of silence to characterize the underside of the thematization of entities (OBBE 38). While entities are posited as themes, the fact of this positing reveals a more fundamental essence of being. In speaking of an aesthetic positing such as tragedy, the neutral "there is" is also heard. It is this "murmur" of silence which prevents us from locating the essence of tragedy in the said; the tragic hero is posited *as* hero, but is also caught up in the murmur of this positing and is therefore not purely equivalent to the essence of heroism.

As I have suggested, the specifically tragic relation to language is not "tragic affirmation" in the face of nothingness, but is the resonance of neutral being which renders affirmation necessarily incomplete. By representing the failure of the symbolic order, tragedy shows its own failure to cover over the horror of anonymous being and to master it through the said. What remains is the trace of a saying which cannot be incorporated into a said, because the said is broken apart from inside. This is what I have stressed in my interpretation of Antigone; Antigone's significance comes from the fact that her relation to the Other contests the symbolic order and reveals the abyss beneath it. Antigone could give in to Creon's interpretation of *nómos* because it is supported by force, but the fact that she refuses leaves us with the realization that no amount of force can make the symbolic/legal code cohere. The excess of responsibility towards the Other returns the tragic hero more forcefully to the irremissible being which precedes law and language. Antigone's descent into the earth is thus not only a literal act, but a metaphorical return from the domain of society and language into the speechless but irremissible depths of the earth.

The ethical significance of tragedy derives from the responsibility and the irresponsibility it shows in the face of language. It responds to the ethical with a language which reveals the inadequacies of the system of generalities implied by both language and the ethical as a code. My criticism of Kierkegaard has revolved around the impossibility of sustaining a view of ethics as a totality and therefore of assimilating what he calls tragic "disclosure" to the ethical. While Kierkegaard claims that tragic

speech means that the hero never has to suffer the "burden of solitude", my contention is that the hero's relation to language is precisely what brings about this burden. It is ultimately because the tragic hero is alone with his/her language while simultaneously being responsible for it in the face of the Other that tragedy comes about. Absolute silence and full disclosure are both rendered impossible by this relation to language; it is in the movement between them that the ethical relation can be perceived.

Jean-Luc Godard's film version of King Lear illustrates the problematic of this movement, intercutting self-reflexive titles with the action, overlapping numerous voices and punning on the play's central word, "nothing". Godard's own voice is heard over the opening scene describing Norman Mailer's decision to quit the project; "words are reckless. Words are one thing and reality... is another thing and between them is no thing". Cordelia's "nothing" is here recognized in all its ambiguity; it is at once the negation which divides words from reality as well as the transparency which allows them to connect. Shakespeare's Cordelia negates the word even while invoking her bond, which proves to be real; Godard's Mailer breaks his bond, his contract to act in the film, an act which justifies Godard's claim about the recklessness of words.

The "no thing" that divides words from reality recurs throughout Godard's film and functions as a variation of the Levinasian "there is". Both phrases describe the neutrality of being; the "there is" does not name any particular being, while "no thing", as a pun on "nothing" draws attention to itself as a thing that is nothing, that survives its own negation. "No thing" thus may perhaps

be taken as an apt characterization of Adorno's aesthetics; despite the negation of reality effected by art, the artwork remains a thing, albeit a thing that is "no thing". "No thing" is also present in Blanchot's words:

> *Blackness and void, responding to the suddenness of the opening and giving themselves unalloyed, announce the revelation of the outside by absence, loss and the lack of any beyond.- But 'the beyond,' stopped from having anything to do with this scene at all by the verdict of that emptied word 'nothing' - which is itself nothing- is quite to the contrary called into the scene...as soon as...the tension of nothing, of being and of there is intervene and provoke the interminable shuddering* (WD 115-116).

This shuddering, also invoked by Adorno, attests to the alterity located within the aesthetic which causes a break in what is said and invokes a response to what lies beyond its meaning. This is the function of the various layers of speech in the film, which are built on the foundation of the Shakespearean text. They thus emphasize a multiplicity of saying, decentring the said and problematizing its meaning. Godard's version of this tragedy seeks to reinforce the impossibility of silence in the face of an aesthetic said, such as a Shakespearean text. The play is a "no thing" which requires further negation. Godard thus implicitly places himself as artist in Cordelia's role; his obligation is to proclaim the "no thingness" of the aesthetic, to negate the said but not to abandon it. To cite Blanchot once again, "*with the words 'there is' and 'nothing,' the*

enigma continues to rule, preventing installation and repose " (137): in other words, preventing the said from taking hold.

While Godard's avant-garde aesthetics take a radical approach to tragedy, the film does explicitly demonstrate a bearing towards language implicit even in Shakespeare's play. Cordelia's "nothing" is as material and as immaterial as Godard's "no thing"; both require the use of language to demonstrate its power and its limitations and both imply a fidelity to a saying which cannot be captured within the said. Thus, both provide some measure of refutation to Kierkegaard's assumption that the disclosure offered to the tragic hero saves him/her for the ethical. The language of the hero is made tragic by the revelation of its "no thingness", of the impossibility of the hero's responsibility being fully realized in the said of language. Instead, the tragic hero falls through the safety net of disclosure and is in this way subjected to the "terrible burden of solitude".

Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is another contemporary approach to tragedy which confronts us with the absurdity of tragic affirmation and tragic time. The two peripheral figures from Hamlet are turned into comic characters with an awareness of the irremissibility of their situation. They are trapped in a world in which every coin turns up heads and all they are able to know are the words of Shakespeare's text, which they internalize but cannot interpret. Guildenstern laments, "we only know what we're told, and that's little enough. And for all we know it isn't even true" (48). To observe the incomplete revelations which are given to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern- they realize that their world is "fixed", that they are not real human beings, but they do not

have any idea why this is- is comic because it exposes the trick upon which drama depends. Guildenstern's final "well, we'll know better next time" (91) is almost pathetic, but since the whole play has depended on our awareness of the fictionality of the characters, it remains comic.

Amidst all this comedy, however, remains the fact that what we laugh at is the exposure of the workings of tragedy. The player insists, "we're tragedians you see. We follow directions- there is no *choice* involved" (58). This lack of choice is demonstrated by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern every time they are swept up into the action of the plot of Hamlet, forced to speak their Shakespearean lines until they are ultimately left alone again, wondering what is going on. The play shows the interminable present of dramatic time and thus poke fun at the idea that tragedy can be taken seriously. Rosencrantz delivers a monologue about "being dead in a box", which is somewhat reminiscent of Hamlet's famous monologue:

> one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead* ... which should make all the difference... shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never *know* you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being *asleep* in a box... (50).

Rosencrantz's ruminations on the irremissibility of being are, on the face of it, a comic version of Hamlet's "to die, to sleep..." but also suggest an absurdity that is carried within the tragic itself. The death of a tragic character is always somewhat absurd, given that the character is not at all alive; Guildenstern protests to the Player that "you can't act death" (61). Guildenstern believes (and this is

remarkable since he is able to believe so little- he is not even certain of his name) that death must be transcendent in some way, if only in its finality. His disappointment is a comic recognition of the absurdity of tragedy, but this absurdity is not strictly comic.

Guildenstern's belief in the power of death illustrates the tension inherent within tragedy between death and suffering and their representation. Tragedy makes us believe in death, but, as in the telling scene in which Guildenstern stabs and thinks he has killed the player, only to find that his dagger has a retractable blade, tragedy proves to be deathless (89-90). Adorno suggests that the fact that artworks cannot die "is internalized by them directly as an expression of horror" (147). The implications of this will be further pursued in the final chapter, but here what is most noteworthy is what the play reveals about the relation of the comic and the tragic to this horror.

Simon Critchley argues that "humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement* " (EPS 224). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a wonderful illustration of Critchley's definition of comedy; by acknowledging the horror of our being and laughing at it, we can accept it. More significantly, the play also implies the inherent limitations of what Critchley calls "tragic affirmation". The tragic is not only bound up with its affirmation but also with the endless repetition of itself and its relation to that which escapes the affirmation implied by representation. Critchley values comedy because it enables us to come to terms with our finitude through its emphasis on the "there

is". I suggest that tragedy, rather than being the antithesis of this position, shares a similar concern with the problem of finitude, focusing instead on the manner in which the irremissibility of being produces a horror of finitude. So while Critchley proposes that "tragedy is insufficiently tragic because it is too heroic. Only comedy is truly tragic... by not being tragedy" (235), I would suggest that tragedy too is "not tragic enough" according to the heroic paradigm according to which Critchley defines tragedy. If comedy and tragedy have moved closer in the twentieth century it is perhaps due to the fact that all art now shows us that it is horrific that we are still able to laugh and comic that we are still able to take ourselves seriously.

The relation of the absurd to the tragic may also be seen in Adorno's reading of Beckett: "Beckett's plays are absurd not because of the absence of any meaning, for then they would be simply irrelevant, but because they put meaning on trial" (AT 153). Just as Greek tragedy treats the meaning of social reality as a "problem", according to Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, Beckett goes further and questions the very possibility of meaning. Beckett's work refuses to accept the platitude that God is dead by continuing to question His existence. The work of Stoppard, Godard and Beckett is marked by a crisis of meaning even more extreme than that which emerges in tragedy, and by a need to contest all possibility of meaning rather than focusing on the impossibility of resolving certain kinds of ambiguities. Despite the curious and sometimes painful absence of the Other in these works, they do display a form of responsibility by asking the necessary question of the possibility of alterity in and

through language. They present an extreme version of the tragic relationship to language and the Other and in so doing they question the possibility of transcending the materiality of language. Their lesson for the analysis of tragedy comes from the manner in which they illustrate the "no thing" of tragic affirmation and formulate even more strongly the crisis of the separated existent.

4. The Language of the Silent Cry

> Sometimes a scream is better than a thesis-
> Ralph Waldo Emerson
>
> Sometimes even music cannot substitute for tears-
> Paul Simon

I have tried to show that this questioning of "tragic affirmation" is not only a modern phenomenon, although contemporary reworkings of tragedy have provided the most radical examples. Greek tragedy represents a rupture in the fabric of human meaning which prevents the absolute affirmation of the hero. Thus far in this chapter I have argued that the tragic hero's relation to language is not one of pure isolation but of separation. The language of tragedy is thus not merely self-involved monologue but produces a tension between various interpretations which reveals not only a plurality of meaning on the human level but also an excess of meaning and of responsibility stemming from the relation between the human and the divine. It is precisely because the relation to the Other overflows language and holds the hero responsible that the failure of language becomes tragic. The tragedy of language may thus

be characterized by the ungraspable presence of the Other inside language. While my analysis of Antigone suggested the presence of something unrepresentable in the present of tragic time, what follows is an attempt to discuss the manner in which tragic representation approaches what is unrepresentable.

If the tragic saying disrupts what is said, this implies the operation of a form of expression that does not fall entirely within the significatory structure of language. Since this saying inevitably becomes said, what is essential is the manner in which its expression prevents the said from manifesting itself as a totality and continues to signal the process of the saying. I have already suggested that for a crisis of meaning to take on tragic dimensions, the value of each meaning must be derived from a relation to the Other. Similarly, the result of the tragic conflict is invariably punishment and suffering in the name of the Other which also exceeds the capacity of language to express it.

The paradoxical figure of the silent cry will suggest one manner of describing this saying that is both responsible and irresponsible. While the notions of silence and the cry seem to be opposites, both are also antithetical to the signifyingness of language. Silence is thus both antithetical to and a counterpart of the cry, as though the convergence of cry and silence might produce the purest form of expression, which would also be the purest form of silence. All this is not intended to deny the fact that tragedy is expressed in language (although Nietzsche asserts that in Greek tragedy music is more important than words (BT 105)) but to

suggest that the relation that silence and screaming bear to language can potentially break open its signifying structure.

George Steiner ends The Death of Tragedy with three curious anecdotes about the relation between language, tragedy and the 20th century. While his argument up to this point has theoretically disputed the possibility of tragedy in the modern world, he suggests quite the opposite, however, when he describes Helene Weigel's portrayal of Mother Courage. He describes the scene in which Mother Courage is forced to pretend not to recognize the corpse of her son:

> As the body was carried off, Weigel looked the other way and tore her mouth wide open. The shape of the gesture was that of the screaming horse in Picasso's *Guernica* . The sound that came out was raw and terrible beyond any description I could give of it. But, in fact, there was no sound. Nothing. The sound was total silence. It was silence which screamed and screamed through the whole theatre... And that scream inside the silence seemed to me to be the same as Cassandra's when she divines the reek of blood in the house of Atreus (354).

The example is specifically tragic; for Steiner, this scream seems to be the most intuitive understanding we have of tragedy, a fundamentally pure form of expression, a "wild and pure lament" which essentially characterizes the human condition in a hostile world (354). Thus, in a reversal of the trajectory of his argument Steiner emphasizes the Benjaminian notion of the "blood in the veins" of the performance. In this example, the possibility of tragedy seems to derive not from the system of its form but from its pure expression of pain.

The silence of the scream is also worth noting; in terms of the specific performance, the character of Mother Courage is unable to scream because this will give her away. If the play is tragic (and Steiner has already argued that it is not) it is because the need for self-preservation has broken the code of maternal responsibility. Mother Courage's tragedy is the fact that she has been forced to place such a value on self-preservation that she is unable to maintain any other code of value or responsibility at all. Weigel's expression of suffering might make a case for the tragic nature of the heroine who is thus seen to be painfully riveted to her being. In that single gesture, Weigel conveys Mother Courage's recognition of her failure of responsibility, if not the terrible burden of solitude of a character whose responsibility must remain entirely undisclosed.

More generally, the silent nature of the scream indicates a negation of the impulse to expression, as if acknowledging the impossibility of adequate expression. The formless impulse to expression of the cry joined with the silence that negates it suggests a movement towards and away from the said which acknowledges the inability of any expression to do justice to suffering.

The significance of this fact may be seen further in a comparison of the previous anecdote with another from the same chapter. After relating a story about a prisoner of war camp in Poland, Steiner says that: "One woman told of what had been done to her sister in the death-camp at Matthausen. I will not set it down here, for it is the kind of thing under which language breaks" (352). Steiner is certainly not the only thinker who has questioned the

power of language after the Holocaust, but because he does so in a book about tragedy, the relation between this breaking of language and the tragic is invited. Does Steiner wish to suggest that there is a modality of injustice so extreme that it defies the language of the lament of what he calls "absolute tragedy"? Is Weigel's silent scream an adequate expression of terror, or does it too fail to do justice to unspeakable suffering? Or is it perhaps rather the case that tragedy is itself a particular example of the breaking of language of which it might be said that the Holocaust, in the extremity of the questions of self-preservation and responsibility it poses, is the absolute? While the relationship between the two anecdotes is not entirely clear, the motif of the silent scream does suggest that if tragedy has value as the expression of suffering, it is insofar as it depends on a mode of expression which does not depend strictly on the signifyingness of language.

Adorno also speaks about the possibilities and responsibilities of expression in the context of the Holocaust:

> perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living (Negative Dialectics 362-3).

The Levinasian rejoinder would be that we have no choice but to go on living; as his "Useless Suffering" suggests, guilt must become an obligation rather than a debilitating burden. Citing Emil Fackenheim, Levinas says that "to renounce after Auschwitz this God absent from Auschwitz... would amount to finishing the criminal enterprise of

National-Socialism" (163). The meaning of a continued life remains in question however; while Adorno concedes the right to scream, he makes it clear that "attempts to express death in language are futile" (ND 371).

Thus, the question for aesthetics is whether art is capable of going beyond this futility and of succeeding on a level of expression not limited to the systematization of language. It would be impossible to avoid this aspect of language altogether insofar as every saying becomes a said. The scream, however, implies that the expression of suffering cannot take place entirely within language. Adorno says that "expression [of suffering] is the element immanent to art through which, as one of its constituents, art defends itself against the immanence that it develops by its law of form" (AT 110). Thus, suffering is, for Adorno, much like Levinas' Other who invokes a saying that breaks through the said. The analogy is apt since the suffering of the other is perhaps the most fundamental explanation given by Levinas of the responsibility invoked by the Other. While suffering does break through immanence, however, as above, this movement is not entirely responsible:

> By their own apriori... artworks become entangled in the nexus of guilt. Whereas each artwork that succeeds transcends this nexus, each must atone for this transcendence, and therefore its language seeks to withdraw into silence: An artwork is, as Beckett wrote, *a desecration of silence* (134).

Thus, the desire for responsibility seems to lead towards silence while the need for expression demands some form of release, even (and perhaps exemplarily) a scream.

This framework seems vaguely Kierkegaardian, equating the responsible act with silence while treating the desire for expression as a somewhat less noble pursuit. The key difference seems to be that Adorno is less willing to believe in extremes; while the artwork desires silence, there is also a responsibility involved in expression, and expression itself for Adorno seems to lie on a different plane than disclosure for Kierkegaard. Disclosure entails making oneself comprehensible on the order of the ethical, while expression is much more cathartic:

> Latently implicit in expression is the trust that by being spoken or screamed all will be made better... That it is spoken, that distance is thus won from the trapped immediacy of suffering, transforms suffering just as screaming diminishes unbearable pain. Expression that has been objectivated as language endures; what has once been said never fades away completely, neither the evil nor the good, neither the slogan of "the final solution" nor the hope of reconciliation (117).

The implications of catharsis will be explored in the final chapter, but what is of particular interest here is the link between expression and screaming. While Adorno does maintain that language cannot adequately speak of the atrocities of the Holocaust and that it irresponsibly transforms the suffering of which it speaks, there is yet a certain benefit to its production of a said. Language can function analogously to the scream, if considered in terms of release and transformation rather than of signification and fidelity. The permanence of the said does not give life meaning; "even prior to Auschwitz it was an affirmative lie, given historical experience, to

ascribe any positive meaning to existence" (152). What this process does suggest, however, is that aesthetic expression can be responsible to suffering through an irresponsibility of representation which does not reduce suffering to a meaningful signification.

Thus, it would seem that if tragedy were to have a place in the Adornian framework it would have to be considered very much in the manner of the scream. Silence and screaming are antithetical but allied values which oppose all pretense of rationality in a world which cannot be reduced to rational systems of meaning. Just as the Holocaust radically challenges a rational understanding of being by confronting us with the brute facts of self-preservation and responsibility, so too does it inform art and prevent aesthetic language from asserting itself as sovereignly meaningful. For Adorno, as for Steiner (although I have suggested that Steiner's position is somewhat more ambiguous), developments in modern art, whether independent of the fact of the Holocaust or in conjunction with it, have put an end to tragedy as a genre:

> All that by which aesthetic pedants once zealously distinguished the tragic from the mournful- the affirmation of death, the idea that the infinite glimmers through the demise of the finite, the meaning of suffering- all this now returns in judgment on tragedy. Wholly negative artworks now parody the tragic. Rather than being tragic, all art is mournful... (28).

While Adorno rejects the term "tragic", he primarily disputes the traditional valuation of tragedy. The central issue for what I have

been calling tragedy is not the attribution of meaning to suffering but precisely the crisis of meaning initiated by this aesthetic experience. The silent cry thus becomes the manifestation of this tragic/mournful crisis of meaning insofar as it both expresses suffering that cries out for expression while at the same time silencing itself, tacitly acknowledging the impossibility of any fully responsible mode of expression which would resolve this crisis and restore meaning.

Blanchot too speaks of the manner in which silence and the cry are intimately bound together:

> Silence is perhaps a word, a paradoxical word, the silence of the word *silence* , yet surely we feel that it is linked to the cry, the voiceless cry, which breaks with all utterances... the cry tends to exceed all language even if it lends itself to recuperation as language effect... the patience of the cry: it does not simply come to a halt, reduced to nonsense, yet it does remain outside of sense- a meaning infinitely suspended, decried, decipherable-indecipherable (WD 51).

This passage restates the problem of the impossibility of silence in terms of the relation between expression and language. It is through the paradoxical nature of silence that this affinity to the cry becomes apparent; while silence lies beyond language it remains bound up with it in the possibility of speaking. Thus, silence is found not only in the absence of language, but in its excess. Silence is impossible because language and being are never entirely absent. Similarly, language and being are always limited, so it is equally impossible to eliminate silence. The paradoxical silent cry suggests

that it may be possible to be outside of sense, but not reduced to nonsense. As Blanchot says, however, this cry is always susceptible to being recuperated into the system of language; it only succeeds insofar as it suspends the process of totalization through its expression without signification.

Both Adorno and Blanchot, in speaking of the cry, present the possibility of destabilizing the structure of language and conceiving of a possible mode of expression which does not reductively impose meaning on experience. Both emphasize the importance of the movement implied by the silent cry; it at once accepts and refuses the rules of language. It is only through this double movement that a responsible form of saying may be undertaken, a saying which does not claim to manifest an absolute meaning but which takes on meaning only insofar as it contests the possibility of meaningfulness. This is, for Blanchot, the essence of writing; "to keep still, *preserving* silence: this is what, all unknowing, we all want to do, writing" (122).

Blanchot, like Adorno, considers the manner in which the Holocaust throws into question the possibility of aesthetic meaningfulness, saying that "there is a limit at which the practice of any art becomes an affront to affliction" (83). The responsibility of art thus implied both by Blanchot and Adorno is both a responsibility of silence- not to affront affliction by asserting art as a saving value- and a responsibility of expression, one which demands the expression of affliction despite the fact that expression alters and fails to do justice to it. Lacoue-Labarthe's

indictment of Heidegger's silence to Paul Celan evokes not only the impossibility of silence, but the heavy responsibility of speech:

> a single word: a word about pain... From there, perhaps, all might still be possible. Not "life,"... which remained possible, as we know, even in Auschwitz, but existence, poetry, speech. Language. That is, the relation to others (38).

Blanchot cites the words of one who was killed at Auschwitz; "the truth will always be more atrocious, more tragic than what will be said about it" (82). In light of this, how can art be responsible? The answer is paradoxical, as both Adorno and Blanchot show; art can only be responsible by acknowledging that it is irresponsible. Thus, the paradoxical figure of the silent cry, as Steiner so powerfully illustrates, is an acknowledgement of what cannot be expressed within language as well as an acknowledgement of the necessity of expression. If the silent cry may be taken as an apt description of the workings of tragedy, it shows that the responsibility of tragedy is to represent the breaking of its own language, and equally to strive for expression. Thus, by representing language and ethics as problems, and by expressing a horror beyond the limits of language, the responsibility of tragedy signals itself, even as this expression becomes articulated in the irresponsibility of language. The tragic saying is thus ethical only insofar as it signifies its own failure to fulfill responsibility and thus calls for a constant saying.

5. Tragedy and Reason

> *"Our horror, our stupor,"* Antelme states, *"was our lucidity"* (Blanchot Reader 238).

One thread running throughout this chapter which is particularly relevant to the problem of responsibly approaching the horror of suffering is the weight of reason. This manifests itself not only in the fact that language thought in terms of the said seems capable of reducing suffering to a rationally understood meaning, but perhaps more strongly in the fact that reason can break down where lucidity does not. As Blanchot's reading of Robert Antelme's L'Espèce Humaine suggests, the problem of suffering is not limited to the extremes of torment, but to the fact that we continue to attribute meaning to these extremes even when faced with the utter meaninglessness of the world. This is why, in speaking of tragedy as a "silent cry", it is essential to emphasize the manner in which it cannot escape from language; silence and screaming are only expressive insofar as they function in relation to a system of language. Their exemplary expressiveness comes from the failure of signification which they signify. More significantly, tragic saying becomes said; this makes it meaningful even as it also resists meaning. Blanchot says of Antelme, that for him, and for many others as well, "it is not a question of telling one's story, of testifying, but essentially of *speaking* " (240). To testify, one could only report the evidence of one's lucidity, but in speaking it may be possible to contest the primacy of reason and of meaningfulness.

Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard reject the control that rationality seems to have over art; Nietzsche privileges the Dionysian over the Socratic, while Kierkegaard privileges the "knight of faith" over the "intelligible" tragic hero. While Nietzsche's critique focuses on the Euripidean-Socratic death of tragedy, Kierkegaard locates tragedy much more generally within the confines of reason. My analyses of Blanchot and Adorno, however, show the limitations of understanding tragic practice according to a rational framework. To represent suffering is not necessarily to subordinate it to the processes of reason. If tragedy is to be effective it must reveal to us the place where reason breaks down, where we understand that we can no longer understand. If tragedy is to be responsible it must accept the paradox that it must express the inexpressibility of suffering and thus show its inability to make suffering completely meaningful. This is why the analyses in this chapter have included two "absurdist" revisions of Shakespeare; they expose an absurdity which is not simply within themselves but which comes precisely from the workings of tragedy itself.

Sophocles' Oedipus the King is, perhaps, the ultimate tragedy of reason, and will serve to show the manner in which this absurdity functions. The manner in which Sophocles chooses to relate the legendary material accounts for much of its dramatic force. The play unfolds as a search for truth conducted by a man known as the solver of the riddle of man, a man who is thought to know what "man" is. His tragedy, of course, lies in the fact that he fails to recognize the limitations of that knowledge. It is the collision between the sovereign knowledge which Oedipus believes he has, and the

unknowable divine level that generates his tragedy. In Kierkegaard's terms, Oedipus is fully disclosed; he finally knows himself and he submits to punishment for what he is. Clearly, however, there is more to it than this, since Oedipus is disclosed precisely in the failure of all codes of disclosure. It is because Oedipus did not know, and more strongly, cannot know who he is that he may be seen to suffer the "terrible burden of solitude".

It is often stated as a truism that Oedipus' self-blinding is a metaphor for his newly acquired inner knowledge; when Oedipus can see, he cannot see himself, when he blinds himself, he knows himself. This interpretation appeals to a rational form of aesthetics, one which values the symmetry that seems to reassert knowledge in its sovereign place. In opposing this view, I would dare to suggest the obvious; Oedipus' blindness is symbolic precisely of human blindness. Certainly, the connection between the revelation of his origin and his decision never to see the world again cannot be ignored, but this revelation cannot be understood as a restoration of the value of knowledge. Oedipus blinds himself not because he sees too much, but because he is able to see too little. He trusted in his faculties, his eyes and his reason, and these failed him. By blinding himself, he repudiates those faculties which he once held to be sovereign and he accepts the punishment which is inflicted not because of his crimes, which he committed unknowingly, but because of his irresponsibility towards his human condition. The blinding stands for his return to the irremissibility of being, to that bare being which he sought to disguise through knowledge and enjoyment; "why should I see, when nothing sweet there is to see with sight?"

(1333-4). Thus he lives on, lucid, but aware that sweetness is no longer possible for him. It is at this moment that he, and the audience of the tragedy, find themselves at the edge of the abyss where the mastery of reason and the sovereignty of the symbolic order are removed from under their feet. To reassert the sovereignty of knowledge through the disastrous truth which has been revealed to Oedipus is to turn away from the abyss and ignore the significance of his suffering.

Thus, the ethics of tragedy may be seen in the manner in which the codes of reason and meaning, which are accepted as necessary to the representation of suffering, are also challenged and shown not to be absolute. The suffering of Oedipus is located far beyond the power of reason; on the order of justice he has not sinned at all if sin is defined as an evil deed done consciously and deliberately. It is because this excess of suffering is inexplicable according to the logic of ethics that it has its tragic power and that it reveals the abyssal depths beneath the illusion of the system of knowledge. Thus, in this play, we may hear the silent cry behind the language of Oedipus' anguish which fails to be understood symbolically in terms of the justice of punishment, but which does remind us of the inadequacy of language to express this anguish.

What each of the analyses in this chapter points to is that effect of the proximity of the neighbour which Levinas evocatively refers to as "the thorn in the flesh of reason" (<u>OBBE</u> 84). This turn of phrase is indeed highly suggestive, insofar as it not only invokes the alterity that breaks through the order of the said but also uses a metaphor of suffering in its description of the process. It is

precisely because the Other causes us to suffer, to take on the suffering of the other human being that reason, and language understood only according to the laws of reason, fails. The thorn in the flesh of reason is what causes language to break and causes us to cry out instead. The Holocaust is perhaps the ultimate reminder of the suffering which exceeds the limits of reason and tears at its structure. The trajectory of tragedy which I have attempted to trace is one which follows reason to that abyssal point where it no longer holds and evokes a feeling of nausea and horror at the exposure of being which it reveals.

The danger, however, which these analyses subtly suggest, is the threat of the subsumption of the cry back into the system of language. This is indeed in many ways unavoidable, but the question of our responsibility towards this expression is still relevant. As Jean Baudrillard has astutely observed of the Holocaust, "the more we scrutinize the facts, the more carefully we study details with a view to identifying causes, the greater is the tendency for them to cease to exist, and to cease *to have existed*" (91-92). The possibility of asserting the supremacy of reason is not necessarily destroyed by the thorns that tear it and it is essential to note that Baudrillard indicts both those who deny and those who try too hard to preserve the "reality" of the event. Similarly, the tragic cry and its outpouring of emotion have historically been recuperated back into an emotional economy under the name of catharsis. The ramifications of this and the possibilities of thinking otherwise about tragedy will be considered further in the final chapter.

Chapter 3: The Death of Tragedy and the Tragedy of Death: Levinas with Lacan and Zizek

1. Catharsis and Philosophy

The notion of catharsis and the attitude towards it taken by the thinkers I have been considering has been both explicit and implicit in much of the previous two chapters. For Nietzsche, Aristotle's catharsis is too sterile an account of the life of tragedy; he criticizes Aristotle on the basis that he "completely sanctioned the read-drama" (quoted in Sallis 97 n.11). At the same time, however, Nietzsche values tragedy for the "metaphysical comfort", through which it overcomes the horror of the everyday (BT 59). Thus, while Nietzsche rejects the idea of the purgation of emotions put forward by Aristotle, he himself does continue to maintain that the abyssal Dionysian experience has a kind of healing power. This process shares the Aristotelian movement of evoking a powerful emotion which is then superseded by a feeling of comfort.

Kierkegaard seems to accept Aristotle's formulations much less problematically. He says in Either/Or that "there lies a sadness and a healing power in the tragic, which one truly should not despise" (143) and claims in Fear and Trembling that even greater than the tragic injunction, "weep for him, for he deserves it" is the injunction of faith: "do not weep for me, but weep for yourself" (94). These passages further demonstrate Kierkegaard's view of tragedy as a totality. In tragedy weeping is for something that is "deserved" and serves the purpose of "healing"; in Kierkegaard's view there is

nothing in tragedy which would exceed this system and break through the totality constituted by the ethical.

As suggested above, Adorno's consideration of catharsis is more intricate. Adorno agrees that art and screaming both reduce pain, but he also suggests that there is an irresponsibility involved in this process caused by the fact that suffering exceeds the capacity of the system to alleviate it. Adorno calls art a "neutralization of suffering", suggesting indeed a cathartic effect, but also claiming that this is the origin of the guilt of the artwork (39). More specifically, he says that for Aristotle, catharsis amounted to a "sublimation... a purging action directed against the affects and an ally of repression" but that the concept is really "part of a superannuated mythology of art and inadequate to the actual effects of art" (238). Adorno points out the psychoanalytic implications of Aristotle's notion of catharsis, which will be central to this chapter. As Adorno argues, the problem with the pride of place given catharsis as the primary tragic effect is that it depends on a simplified understanding of the psychological relation between the spectator and tragedy. Seen in this way, the emotion evoked by tragedy could be recuperated into a psychological cycle of affect; both the action and emotion evoked by tragedy would thereby be resolved and tragedy could be interpreted as a totality. This chapter will therefore explore the reasons why this interpretation of the psychological effects of tragedy is, as Adorno says, inadequate. By pursuing a psychoanalytic reading of tragedy in conjunction with the Levinasian reading proposed thus far, I hope to

show the extent to which tragedy may be seen to exceed a general economy of psychical energy, and thus also the generality of ethics.

In doing so, I am not attempting to deny that catharsis is at least part of our reaction to tragedy. As Kierkegaard says, "one truly should not despise" its effects, but I do wish to suggest that the healing or comfort provided by catharsis is not the only or even the primary effect of tragedy. Rather, I argue that the depth of the tragic effect derives from the fact that not every reaction evoked by tragedy is entirely purged and that death is therefore presented not as a comfort, but as an impossibility. If catharsis is, as Adorno says, "inadequate" to the description of tragedy, it is because the meaning of tragedy cannot be closed off neatly. The tragic effect does not rely solely on releasing us from our emotions but on the manner in which it conveys the impossibility of release. Just as the tragedy of the hero derives not from an acceptance of death, but from being riveted to being, so too does the tragic effect succeed not by eliciting our acceptance of the hero's fate (for this is what catharsis aims at) but from riveting us to being, instilling in us the same sense of the horror of nothingness. In short, while Aristotle is aware of the "terror" evoked by tragedy, he explains it away too easily.

2. Levinas, Lacan and the Place of Ethics

Before addressing the contribution of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the problem of catharsis, it is worth making a few points of comparison between Lacan's work and the Levinasian framework

which I have been using. Lacan's Ethics of Psychoanalysis seminar presents a view of ethics which is both strikingly similar and radically opposed to that of Levinas. Lacan suggests that ethics "is to be articulated from the point of view of man in relation to the real" (11). The Lacanian real is very close to the Levinasian "there is"; both suggest a mode of being which is inaccessible and irreducible to the subject and at the same time the most fundamental, central quality of the subject. As Zizek puts it:

> the Real cannot be signified not because it is outside, external to the symbolic order, but precisely because it is inherent to it, its internal limit: the Real is the internal stumbling block on account of which the symbolic system can never 'become itself', achieve its self-identity (Plague of Fantasies 217).

The significance which I have attributed to "irremissible being" in tragedy might equally well be discussed in terms of the Real; the tragic experience is a questioning of meaning which focuses attention on the manner in which the Real prevents the symbolic from achieving self-identity. Thus, for Lacan, as for Levinas, although with vastly different implications for each, ethics is based on the impossibility of encompassing subjectivity within ontology. To cite Zizek once again:

> there is ethics- that is to say, an injunction which cannot be grounded in ontology- in so far as there is a crack in the ontological edifice of the universe: at its most elementary, ethics designates fidelity to this crack (214).

This ethical "crack" in the edifice of tragedy is what I have been focusing on in my attempt to suggest that the ethics of tragedy cannot be summed up by the totality of its concrete representation.

While this notion of ethics as a rupture in ontological totality is common to Levinas and Zizek/Lacan, this rupture is interpreted in vastly different ways. For Levinas, the radical alterity of the Other precedes any relation that can be thematized, and therefore constitutes the originary obligation. For Levinas, then, "fidelity to the crack" is more precisely fidelity to what is beyond the crack; ethics precedes ontology and for this reason ontology cannot cover over the foundations of ethics without revealing its crack. Zizek's use of the metaphor of the "crack", however, certainly suggests the internal impossibility of a coherent symbolic, ontological structure similar to the internal impossibility of the artwork posited by Adorno. Thus, while the Real lies beyond the symbolic, it is not its radical alterity which disrupts the symbolic, but the uncanny way in which it is more same than the same. The significance of the ethical relation is vastly different in this sense; Levinasian ethics revolves around responsibility to the Other, while Lacan's formulation of the responsibility "not to give ground on one's desire" (319) would seem to place the emphasis on the subject.

The most striking similarity, however, between Levinas and Lacan is their insistent refusal of the sovereignty and full intelligibility of the subject, in favour of a conception of a subject governed by something beyond consciousness. Levinas says that "the subject then cannot be described on the basis of intentionality, representational activity, objectification, freedom and will" but

that "the self is characterized by a passivity that cannot be taken up" (OBBE 53-54). Similarly, Lacan criticizes Freud for suggesting that the unconscious imbues human activity with "a hidden meaning that one can have access to" (312). The emphasis which both thinkers place on the ungraspable experience which nevertheless constitutes the subject thus demonstrates the fundamental impossibility for both Levinas and Lacan of articulating ethical subjectivity as a totality in itself.

The purpose of this comparison of Levinas and Lacan for my consideration of tragedy is to show that Lacan's analyses of tragedy might provide an alternate but also closely related viewpoint. While the framework I have been using has been very much based on the Levinasian conception of language as both saying and said, a Lacanian analysis would trace the breakdown of the symbolic order through the eruptions of the Real which resist it. Since both thinkers reject the notion of a clearly defined ethical subject, a rethinking of the ethics of tragedy entails, in both cases, more attention to the structure of tragedy than the subjectivity supposedly mirrored in it.

Two examples, again from Zizek's The Plague of Fantasies, should suffice to show a similar aesthetic concern within the two frameworks. Zizek's Lacanian redefinition of phenomenology as "the description of the ways in which the breakdown (failure) of symbolization, which cannot be signified, *shows itself* " (217) again bears a relation to Levinas' reinterpretation of phenomenology based on an alterity that breaks through all signification. The aesthetic significance of this, for Zizek, is that "what appears in art, what art demonstrates, is the Idea's *failure* to signify itself directly" (217).

This inevitable failure, as Blanchot and Adorno suggest, demands a rethinking of the significance of art insofar as it has been based on the positivity of the idea. The significance of this notion of art coincides with what I have been suggesting about the failure of representation symbolized by tragedy. Zizek describes this Lacanian phenomenology as the "description, not interpretation, of the spectral domain of mirages, of 'negative magnitudes' which positivize the lack in the symbolic order" (218). Zizek here describes a positivity which emerges from the lack of the symbolic order not through interpretation but "description". This suggests once again the possibility of viewing the positivity of the said not as a symbolic unity interpretable in itself, but rather as a representation which shows its own failure and thereby resists the sovereignty of rationality.

In another section of his book, Zizek considers the ethics of representation in terms of the relation between what art says and what it really means. In considering works of art which have been interpreted as espousing "totalitarian" viewpoints, he concludes that this interpretation is wrong for a work which "publicly displays the underlying obscene phantasmic support of 'totalitarianism' in all its inconsistency" (72). He goes on to propose that the ethical commitment of the contemporary artist is indeed to show this "phantasmic support" which lies beneath the "fantasy" of representation (74). Again, such an understanding of ethics stresses the need to demonstrate the failure of the said in order to return to the saying. For Zizek, however, this saying is not a priori ethical, but

invokes ethics insofar as the said reveals the specific conditions under which it comes to be said.

These examples, and, more generally, this comparison between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Levinasian ethics, suggest a slightly different framework from the one I have been using. I have tried to show both the manner in which the radical alterity of language described by Levinas both appears and fails to appear in tragedy and the manner in which the ethical saying disrupts and unsays what is said. The version of this process described by Zizek suggests rather that what might be considered to "unsay" the said is its "phantasmic support", which does not erase the said but which reveals that it says more than is said. The most radical point of divergence, then, comes from Zizek's understanding of the ethical duty of art to reveal the phantasmic support which underlies the notion of fantasy often associated with art.

3. Antigone and the Ethics of Desire

Thus far in this chapter, two central problems which are of specific relevance to the psychoanalytic paradigm have been formulated. The problem of catharsis as the purgation of psychical energies has been posed in light of the implication that it is inadequate to account for the entirety of the tragic effect, both for the spectator and the theorist. The Levinasian objection to the theory of catharsis would once again make reference to the irremissibility of being and the impossibility of death even in the face of death. When tragedy ends, if it has a significant effect, it is

because something remains unpurged. The Lacanian interpretation of catharsis, while not oriented in quite the same way, does share a similar concern with what cannot be purged.

The second problem is that of the underlying "phantasmic support" of tragedy. While I have suggested that the language of tragedy exposes the process of its saying, Zizek's theory raises the issue of the problematic of desire, also bound up with the problem of catharsis. Desire, death and representation thus all arise as central elements which might combine to formulate the fundamental problem of this chapter: if we reject the traditional notion of catharsis, how do we account for the power of tragedy and the appeal of the representation of death which it entails?

Lacan's reading of Sophocles' Antigone will help in approaching these questions and in connecting the problems of the psychology of catharsis with the wider ethical questions opened by it. Lacan rejects the Aristotelian notion of a "moral catharsis" and formulates instead his own interpretation of how catharsis might work. He refers to the purgation of fear and pity as operating on "the order of the imaginary. And we are purged of it through the intervention of one image among others" (248). For Lacan, the central image of the play is what he calls the "unbearable splendor" of Antigone; her beauty is captivating and "disturbs us" (247). This phrase emphasizes the fact that we react to her in her physical presence above and beyond the abstract claims embodied by her actions. Antigone's beauty then is not something which helps to make her intelligible, but rather, it captures us before the issues of justice and meaning through which we strive to make her

intelligible. The effect of catharsis is thus not entirely purgation, since desire is "not completely extinguished by the apprehension of beauty"; the effect the image has is to "split desire" (248) by eliminating the object through a fixation on the image (249). The central image is entirely captivating, and this is what enables catharsis to take place, without, however, effecting a "reconciliation" at the end of the tragedy, an interpretation which Lacan says is patently false (250). Thus we may begin to see the implications of Lacan's somewhat more profound definition of catharsis.

Catharsis, for Lacan, does not work along the rather crude lines according to which it is traditionally interpreted. The idea of building emotions only to purge them is reinterpreted as a purgation in the imaginary in which the object remains lost even while the image captures desire. Lacan does suggest that the difference between these two notions is the difference between pleasure and desire; when Aristotle speaks of catharsis, he describes it as a kind of pleasure, which Lacan defines as "the law of that which functions previous to that apparatus where desire's formidable center sucks us in" (246). Desire, for Lacan, is what leads "beyond the pleasure principle" and thus beyond a definition of catharsis that would enclose the emotional effect of tragedy within the system of pleasure.

Desire is also central to the formulation of ethics which Lacan derives from Antigone, an ethics which he sets in opposition to the Aristotelian notion of moral catharsis and the Freudian notion of medical catharsis which Lacan connects to the "accessible" Freudian

unconscious (312). Lacan criticizes these notions of catharsis because they are based on the idea of "purity" and the belief that after purging off the inessential only the essential will remain; that is, the "essential" moral lesson or the "essential" unconscious. To this, Lacan opposes the ethical injunction that "the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire" (319). Lacan opposes this ethics to what he calls the "morality of power" of which Aristotle's formulation of catharsis provides one example. Thus, while this might seem to raise up desire as the basis of a new morality, the fact that desire is split and not entirely accessible to consciousness shows that desire is not at all capable of being fully realized in a system of morality.

This interpretation would certainly coincide with Zizek's interpretation of Lacan, which emphasizes the distance that sustains Lacanian desire. It remains to examine the significance of Antigone for this ethics of desire. Zizek emphasizes that Lacan's injunction not to give ground on one's desire "in no way condones the suicidal persistence in following one's Thing... one is faithful to one's desire by maintaining the gap which sustains desire" (PF 239). And yet, this seems to be precisely what Antigone does; Lacan speaks of her precisely in terms of her connection to the death drive. Lacan situates Antigone in the space "between two deaths", a space defined by the presence of the "signifying chain" (212). Antigone is between her natural death, which is to come at the end of the play, and her symbolic death, which, Lacan emphasizes, has already taken place. It is thus because Antigone takes "the stance of the-race-is-run" (279) that her action is "something very different from an act

of suicide" (286). Antigone is thus exemplary not because she pursues her death, but because she accepts the consequences of the death she has already died according to her desire.

Lacan's purpose in pursuing this interpretation of Antigone is to formulate an opposition to those traditional interpretations which appropriate Antigone to speak for morality, religion or the process of "moral catharsis". By problematizing these systems of meaning, Lacan places the focus of tragedy on the workings of individual desire and accounts for the ethics of tragedy in terms of fidelity to that desire. In aligning the working of the tragedy with the goals of psychoanalysis, Lacan suggests that the goal of analysis should not be the "comfort" of "moralizing rationalization" (303). Instead, he suggests, the key to our experience of tragedy lies not in the immediate satisfactions of what it represents or offers, but in its presentation of the trajectory of a desire which is not coerced by the promise of various "goods" but holds to its course. This understanding of ethics is compatible with what I have said about responsibility in tragedy in the sense that both are defined not by a system according to which behaviour is determined but by a duty to that which is inaccessible to the level of consciousness.

4. Hamlet and the Work of Mourning

Lacan emphasizes that Antigone comes to us from a zone between deaths, that she is, in an important sense, already dead. In this way, he is able to illustrate the ethical significance of her relation to her death and her desire. The question which remains for

us is how death and desire in tragedy relate to the spectator's experience of death and desire. Lacan's redefinition of catharsis suggests an experience which brings the spectator into contact with the order of the imaginary without that experience being integrated into the realm of the symbolic. Philippe Van Haute suggests that what Lacan is ultimately searching for in both tragedy and psychoanalysis is an ethics "that would enable us to carry out our mourning over the loss of the sovereign good" (119). This notion of mourning is indeed of vital importance to the understanding of tragedy, but must be understood not in the cathartic sense of purging emotion, but rather as an ongoing process essential to tragedy.

Lacan's interpretation of Hamlet is taken from his seminar of the year previous to his reading of Antigone, a detail which is given significance by Zizek's claim that it is the Ethics of Psychoanalysis seminar which heralds a new phase in Lacan's thought, characterized by an increasing emphasis on the "kernel" of the Real (Sublime Object of Ideology 138). Lacan's use of the notion of "mourning" in his comments on Hamlet already shows something of an increased concern with the role played by the real. He begins by illustrating the relationship between the mourner and the lost object:

> Laertes leaps into the grave and embraces the object whose loss is the cause of his desire, an object that has attained an existence that is all the more absolute because it no longer corresponds to anything in reality. The one unbearable dimension of possible human experience is not the experience of one's own death, which no one has, but the experience of the death of another (37).

Lacan's concern with the experience of the death of another bears a similarity to Levinas; death is impossible insofar as it is my death, but, for Levinas, this impossibility connects me to my responsibility for the death of the Other. For Lacan, the death of the other creates a "hole in the real" which "sets the signifier in motion" (38). Through the signifier, the process of mourning sets out to restore the integrity of the symbolic order:

> The work of mourning is first of all performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of signifying elements to cope with the hole that has been created in existence, for it is the system of signifiers in their totality which is impeached by the least instance of mourning (38).

Mourning can thus be characterized as a state in which the validity of the symbolic order is suspended while the mourner seeks to fill the hole that would replenish it.

This questioning of the totality of the symbolic is akin to what I have described as the characteristic mode of tragedy, but the relation between tragedy and mourning must be explored further. Lacan links mourning to ritual and emphasizes the fact that Hamlet is a tragedy of the underworld because of the failure of proper rites to be accorded to Hamlet's father and later to Polonius (39). The significance of ritual forms another version of symbolic crisis akin to the lexical ambiguity discussed by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, but one which entails a greater possibility for resolution; neglected rituals may be performed properly, but ambiguity in language is not so easily resolved. Clearly, as Lacan suggests, the specifically tragic concern with ritual invariably involves to some extent a

failure of ritual and is necessarily linked to a "crime" of some kind (41). Lacan invokes the psychoanalytic use of the Oedipus story which for Freud showed the fundamental truth that "the law can only be conceived on the basis of something more primordial, a crime" (42). Taken only this far it would seem quite conceivable to think of tragedy as beginning with a crime, going through a process of mourning and/or atonement, and ending with the proper rituals which will ensure the perpetuation of order. The arrival of Fortinbras in Hamlet, Malcolm in Macbeth and the tradition of the *deus ex machina* in Greek tragedy would seem to confirm this hypothesis.

To go further, however, the question of ritual leads from the rituals in tragedy to the ritual of tragedy itself. The tragic effect, the question of what one is left with at the end of tragedy has been considered in terms of catharsis and now in terms of the reinscription of order. Neither of these notions is "to be despised", but it is necessary to return to the question with which this chapter began; is there really nothing that remains unpurged? Is Hamlet a successful tragedy because, in the words of the player in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, "everyone marked for death dies" (57)? Or do we rather share Guildenstern's futile remonstration: "I'm talking about death- and you've never experienced *that*. And you cannot *act* it. You die a thousand casual deaths- with none of the intensity that squeezes out life..." (89)? We return, essentially, to the question of *mimesis* and of whether we are, first of all, taken in by the illusion of tragedy and second, whether we are satisfied by it.

Lacan's emphasis on the rebirth of the order of law from the originary crime is primarily directed against a tendency to interpret Freud's Oedipus on the basis of his crime without considering the whole trajectory of the plot and the end which emphasizes the possibility of rebirth. As I have noted, however, Lacan argues in The Ethics of Psychoanalysis that tragedy does not end with reconciliation, citing Antigone and Oedipus at Colonus as prime examples of tragic ends which are impossible to see in this light. It may well be, then, that it is inappropriate to speak about "tragic endings" in such a general sense, since they tend to bring with them varying degrees of reconciliation, but I do wish to suggest that the workings of tragedy necessarily entail that no reinscription of order can totally efface the tragic failure of order.

Lacan's concern for the reinscription of order and proper ritual is not to be understood as an attempt to inscribe an absolute meaning, but rather to suggest the manner in which tragic experience is structured. The failed rituals of Hamlet and the impurity of Oedipus necessitate the proper rituals and atonements. The effect of this reinscription of order has historically been considered in the terms described at the beginning of this chapter, of the healing power of tragedy and of a catharsis which purges fear and pity in order to reintroduce stability and order. A Lacanian interpretation, however, would not accept the finality of this view. To pursue Zizek's suggestion, we must analyze the "phantasmic support" of the order that is reinscribed; for every tragedy the question must be raised of the extent to which the newly inscribed order continues to be undermined by the crisis of order

demonstrated in the play.[1] In general terms, we may ask if the inscription of order depends on a crisis of order and very often the death of one or both parties involved in the conflict, can this order be taken as absolute? More specifically, different tragedies inscribe their supports in different ways. My analysis of Oedipus the King in the previous chapter suggests that the sovereignty of the category of "knowledge" is irreparably undermined by the play. Nevertheless, this does not contradict Lacan's belief that there is an important rebirth of order implied in the play; my argument only suggests that our relation to this order has necessarily been altered. The failure of knowledge and the injustice of Oedipus' suffering do suggest, however, that the experience of the play must exceed the possibility of meaning provided by the new order at the end. The chorus' final injunction to "count no man blessed in his life until he's crossed life's bounds unstruck by ruin still" (1529-30) attests to the inscrutability of fate. The implication is therefore that Creon's rule is underwritten by the lesson of Oedipus and that Creon will not challenge the mastery of gods and fate as Oedipus did. At the same time, the play has thus demonstrated that ruin may strike at any time and that there is no surety against it. This is an apt description of what Levinas refers to as the "horror of immortality"; to live under such an order is to live under the burden of responsibility. Thus, the return of order at the end of the play is by no means false, but neither does it dissolve the tragedy which precedes it, nor the responsibility entailed by that tragedy.

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[1] In addition to Jonathan Dollimore's already cited analysis of the ending of King Lear, Francis Barker discusses the crises of order in Lear, Hamlet, and Macbeth in his chapter "The Information of the Absolute" in The Culture of Violence (3-92).

To conclude more generally, and to return to my Levinasian framework, these Lacanian analyses demonstrate the way in which tragedy is structured, without using this structure to account for the whole of the tragic. The psychoanalytic approach to catharsis and order in tragedy accords with the ethical considerations of the previous chapters. The Levinasian ethical revelation of the impossibility of death is thus realized in tragedy, in its concern with the death of the other and in the impossibility of this death forming the ethical end point of tragedy. Despite the possibility of order offered by the resolution of tragedy, its ending is never pure reconciliation and therefore the re-establishment of order is never the absolute meaning of tragedy.

5. The Deathlessness of Tragedy

The analyses in this chapter are very closely linked to those of Adorno and Blanchot in the previous chapter. Two passages from Adorno are particularly relevant to the concerns raised in this chapter. His claim that artworks internalize their own deathlessness as an expression of horror may be seen in the tension produced by the tragic representation of death (AT 147). Tragedy represents death, but only by creating a representation that cannot die; this tragic paradox ensures that death cannot be made sovereignly meaningful, as it remains profoundly ungraspable. The work of mourning which is involved in tragedy remains always partially incomplete insofar as the death of the Other is always

presented as a death that is not mine and which therefore does not relieve me of my responsibility.

This brings to mind Adorno's comments in Negative Dialectics, that "attempts to express death in language are futile" (371) and "to go after the whole, to calculate the net profit of life- this is death" (377). Clearly, such attempts are made within tragedy, but they are circumscribed by the impossibility of their success, producing the collision which makes the work both responsible and irresponsible. Ultimately, what tragedy represents is the human desire to go after the whole and the necessary failure caused by the fact that this desire overflows totality. The impossibility of the whole is what makes tragedy deathless.

This deathlessness, it may be argued, seems more like a modern understanding of art than an ancient one. Indeed, my emphasis on such 20th century thinkers as Adorno and Levinas may suggest that I am attempting to imbue the ancients with too much of a modern consciousness. My argument certainly would seem to share more with modern theories of drama and poetic language, many of which I have cited in support of my interpretation of tragedy. Is there not a gulf, signalled most explicitly by George Steiner's The Death of Tragedy between the modern consciousness and the ancient?

My answer to this is that what I have been attempting to describe under the possibly no longer meaningful term "tragedy" has been the tearing of language and the breaking of the mask that takes place despite itself in the tragic relation to the Other. The fact that this "despite itself" takes place exemplarily only very rarely in

human history has been accounted for by Camus, who uses the metaphor of the "pendulum of civilization" which creates tragedy when it is "half way between a sacred society and a society built around man" (305). For Camus, therefore, it was the excessive rationalism of the post-Renaissance period which swung the pendulum too far towards the human. The focus of my argument upon Greek and Shakespearean tragedy thus follows this assessment of the necessary conditions of tragedy; specifically, it emphasizes the condition that tragedy be part of a world which is not thoroughly defined by rationality. While I would still suggest that some measure of the "despite itself" must apply even to rationalist tragedies, it is specifically the awareness of the failure of absolute rationalism in the face of the Other which defines tragedy as I have used the term.

Thus, the question of the relation between ancient tragedy and modernity is not one which depends on this difference in consciousness; tragedy can be defined neither by what was known as tragedy or what can be explicitly known about tragedy. Levinas describes Western philosophy as a system of thought for which "knowing, in its thirst and its gratification, remains the norm of the spiritual, and transcendence is excluded both from intelligibility and philosophy" (OBBE 96). My analysis of tragedy suggests the significance of the "transcendent" over against the "spiritual" for both the Greeks and Shakespeare, without trying to separate the transcendent from the form in which it appears in tragedy. If there is an affinity between the contemporary theorists whom I have discussed and the great tragedians, it derives from the fact that the

distance between the human and the divine described by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet as well as by Camus results in a skepticism towards the notion of a unity of meaning promised by either a faith in gods or humankind. Camus thus claims that the possibility of modern tragedy is tied up with the fact that today, "the individual is recognizing his limits" (306) and we are less prone to assert the absolute mastery of humanity over the world. Most importantly, as Levinas shows, we must recognize the limits of human knowledge.

Perhaps the most significant challenges to human limits in this century have been those I have discussed in this chapter and the previous one: the incomprehensible human suffering of the Holocaust and the failure of the human capacity for comprehension developed from the Freudian discovery of the unconscious. These challenges by no means determine anything about the fate of tragedy however; as I have shown, the collapse of limits attest as much to the impossibility of an expression responsible to the transcendent as its imminent return. The pendulum has perhaps swung too far to return to a balanced cycle of history.

Nevertheless, by way of conclusion, I wish to further explore the link between contemporary thought and tragedy. Among Steiner's arguments for the death of tragedy is the death of God signalled by the Holocaust; the arbitrariness of a world without God cannot be tragic. I have already shown that God's absence is as necessary as divine presence in tragedy, but it is interesting to note the difference between Steiner and Levinas, for whom the Holocaust requires an increased affirmation of God's presence. While Steiner rightly sees in the Holocaust an extreme crisis in the meaning of

human life, Levinas emphasizes that this withdrawal of meaning is in fact a withdrawal of the Western concept of "knowing". Thus, life does not become profoundly meaningless, but meaningful in a manner which is not reducible to knowing. It is precisely this relation to meaning which I suggest is involved in tragic representation. Thus, critical interpretations which seek to define the meaning of representation ultimately reinscribe the privilege of "knowing" and subordinate tragedy to the unity of knowledge. The possibility of tragedy, both in terms of the ancient and the modern relies on the suspension of the absolute power of the category of knowledge.

Thus, I hope to have shown that contemporary theory aids in revealing the function of the ambiguity of tragedy and its resistance to the impositions of knowledge. The question which remains, however, is that of the extent to which even speaking of tragedy might be construed as participating in the category of knowledge. Certainly, my own work is caught up in the irresponsibility of trying to write responsibly about tragedy and suffering. Thus I have been unwilling and unable to risk categorizing which works are tragic and which are not. My discussion of modern drama has thus depended on the fact that it bears some relation to tragedy, although this perhaps limits the significance of the term "tragedy".

While Steiner's claim of "the death of tragedy" is not, as I have shown, made in an absolute way, it does seem to me that the debate about the term "tragedy" is ultimately futile. If "tragedy" itself cannot but be seen as a "said", what is essential must remain the "saying" behind it, whether considered from an ancient point of view or a modern one. The process of "mourning" for a tragic age implied

by Steiner's work may, to some degree, attest to a contemporary desire to make tragedy meaningful through its death as a form. The most important thing is that we not be like those "aesthetic pedants" described by Adorno who try too hard to define how art should work and thus empty its terms of their meaning.

In pursuing my thoughts on the deathlessness of tragedy, I will conclude by citing Giorgio Agamben's appropriately titled essay "Taking Leave of Tragedy". He asks of Elsa Morante:

> whether there was not an antitragic gleam in her, whether her tragedy was not in some ways an *antitragic tragedy* ... it is sometimes as if Elsa adhered so tenaciously to tragic fiction that it opened up a path beyond itself, toward something that is no longer tragic (132).

This passage is very much in accord with the notion of tragedy that I have been trying to present; it is precisely the tenacity of the tragic which breaks down all definition of what tragedy might be. Tragedy effaces itself as the saying effaces the said, through an inescapable responsibility which is present at every moment. The "antitragic tragedy" is perhaps the only responsible definition of tragedy.

Thus, when I speak of the irresponsibility of responsibility in tragedy, the irresponsibility of the notion of tragedy itself must be understood to be bound up in this. The fact that the meaning of tragedy cannot be summed up in a system of language must suggest the inadequacy of the term "tragedy" itself. To continue to speak of tragedy then, is an irresponsibility justified only by the fact that there is no more responsible way to speak. To speak of ancient tragedy as "antitragic tragedy" is perhaps another necessary

irresponsibility which emphasizes once again the irresponsibility of every universal category. Thus, to approach the ethics of tragedy in terms of the saying and the said requires an understanding that what we speak of as tragedy is meaningful only insofar as it is "anti-tragic tragedy". In this way it will be possible to "take leave of tragedy" without having to proclaim its death.

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