the changing profession

The Tragic Critic after 9/11

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IN THE AUTUMN OF 2002, I GAVE A LECTURE ON MOURNING THE DEAD TO FINAL-YEAR UNDERGRADUATES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE studying the compulsory course on tragedy. The lecture covered the care devoted to the dead body in Sophocles's *Antigone* and Hamlet's reflections, over Ophelia's grave, on the "fine revolution" of the material corpse (5.1.82–83). But it also extended its range to include the then very recent excavation, for eight and a half months, at Ground Zero in search of the remains of the dead victims of the attack on the World Trade Center, and the simultaneous daily publication in the *New York Times* of "Portraits of Grief." These portraits, I maintained, fulfilled a similar function to tragic drama by refocusing attention on the individual life and by finding a narrative arc to each victim's story, like Aristotle's tragic plots, which must have "a beginning, a middle, and an end" (26). While the firefighters' digging equipment at Ground Zero searched in vain for the missing remains of about 1800 people and eventually hit bedrock, the newspaper reinvested each lost person with significance, finding a value and a pattern in the person's life.[1]

During my lecture a few students walked out. Later that day I saw, for a supervision (the traditional small-group tutorial in Cambridge), a couple of the students who had been in the audience, and so I asked them what they thought of the lecture and why they believed that some of their peers had left. "They walked out," they said, "because you should not talk about literature and real life in the same context. Tragedy on the stage is one thing; tragedy in the world is quite another." This response provoked one of the best discussions of that term's course. If this absolute divorce between literature and life was to be maintained, why did the playwrights in ancient Greece or early modern England write tragedies? If literature had no relevance to contemporary events, why did modern audiences still want to see performances of drama and certain ancient plays revived at particular times of crisis? Most important, why did highly intelligent students in their early twenties want to study and write about

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tragedy if it bore no relation to the world around them? This question produced the most telling response: they wrote essays about literature, they said, because they wanted to earn a good grade, which would lead to a First Class Honours degree and a stellar career.

I begin with this personal anecdote because it highlights most sharply the schism, which surfaces every now and then, between faculty members and students in terms of their attitude to literature, to study, and to the value of an education. This schism is featured in David Mamet's play *Oleanna*. The student wants her term's work to be raised a grade; the professor responds with the argument that grades are unimportant and that it is more useful to question and think and be provoked instead of worrying about the narrow aspirations of the higher education system. My anecdote highlights, too, the distinction between one school of criticism and another: the critical approach that wants to demarcate the literary from other spheres and the approach that views literature as part of a wider cultural, social system of understanding and patterning the world. The moral function of criticism, or the relation of ethics to literature, is at the heart of an age-old debate, one familiar to Plato, Johnson, Arnold, and Pater, but it is one that the topic of tragedy illumines most acutely and that studying tragedy compels us to ask again repeatedly.

The compulsory course Tragedy in the final year at Cambridge dates back to the earliest years of the English literature degree, which was established in the brave new world following the First World War, when old customs and particularly German-type philology were being discarded. In an era that was nevertheless still a little uncertain of the merits of studying literature in one's own language at a university, as opposed to what was believed to be the greater rigor of reading Latin and Greek, the tragedy paper was intended to be as demanding as a classics degree, expecting students to set the work of Shakespeare and later dramatists in the context of ancient Greek tragedy and European literature. But it was also designed to allow students access to the perceived aesthetic supremacy of the tragic genre as designated by Aristotle, because tragedy was considered to be the highest art form of which human beings were capable (Collini). In studying tragedy comparatively, from Aeschylus to the present (in 1926, when the course was started, the present would have meant Shaw's *Saint Joan*), the student would be encouraged to think about how different cultures had represented and attempted to explain suffering in a form that was believed to encapsulate the great, defiant, and arguably religious or philosophical spirit of humanity. I. A. Richards, who shaped the English course in the 1920s, maintained that tragedy was "still the form under which the mind may most clearly and freely contemplate the human situation, its issues unclouded, its possibilities revealed" (63).

While Richards's view of tragedy might have been notably aesthetic and insular, considering the form "extraordinarily stable" because of its "balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" (217–18), the tragedy course, with its emphasis on the human situation, encouraged a reengagement with the world, since combined with close attention to particular texts and the comparative analysis with European literature was a serious consideration of various theoretical ideas of the tragic: death, redemption or damnation, justice, citizenship, sin, love, faith, and significance. In this environment, F. R. Leavis was expounding his argument concerning the moral force of literature, the notion that, famously, poetry at its best was "capable of ministering to life" and that the task of literary criticism was nothing less than to have an "important bearing on the prospects of literary culture (that is, of humane culture generally)" (292, 33). Tragedy, for Leavis, was particularly able to achieve its moral feeling because of its "exalting effect," the fact that it could inspire

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readers and viewers with a "sense of enhanced vitality," and because it could rise above the personal and inner feelings of the writer or protagonist with an engagement with larger "concrete experiences," establishing "a kind of profound impersonality in which experience matters, not because it is mine . . . but because it is what it is" (135, 130).

Indeed it is possible to trace a great Cambridge tradition of writing on tragedy, emerging out of the teaching of the course, from Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy*, through the work of Terry Eagleton (Williams's student) such as *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, to Adrian Poole (*Tragedy: Shakespeare*; *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*) and Ato Quayson (*Calibrations*).[2] The chief characteristic of the tradition has been, as Williams put it, to explore "the connections . . . between event and experience and idea" (9), to delineate the "relations and connections" between "'tragedy' and tragedy," which the "formal separation hides" (15), a separation that is itself enforced by an academic institutional "system" (14). Writing within an institution, these Cambridge scholars have nevertheless attempted to think "half inside and half outside such a system," to be willing to attend to "structures of feeling" in both canonical texts and the world around them (14, 18).[3] For example, Quayson read the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa through the "intersection of the scholarly and the everyday":

> This is not so much to suggest that real-life suffering is infinitely amenable to aestheticization, but rather to link the seriousness and rigor with which literary tragedy is often dealt—its aesthetic, emotional, philosophical, ethical, and formal intensities—to an engagement with a specific event or set of events in the world. (59)

My background as a classicist, like Poole's, drew me initially to the subject of tragedy as a scholar and teacher. I had benefited as an undergraduate from Simon Goldhill's explosive lectures on the *Oresteia* in the mid-1980s, in which Goldhill blew apart the orthodoxies of classical criticism with the introduction of literary theory that was scarcely recognized or accepted in the analysis of ancient Greek literature at the time. I was indebted also to the groundbreaking anthropological turn in the analysis of ancient Greek tragedy represented by Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet and by René Girard and later to Poole's deeply humane response to both the Greeks and Shakespeare. But the full ethical demands of literary study, which the focus on tragedy raises most acutely, for some reason did not press themselves on me when I began teaching at Cambridge in the mid-1990s. This was the decade of the Bosnian conflict, during which the worst genocide in the heart of Europe since the Second World War took place in Srebenica in July 1995 under the watch of the United Nations peacekeepers. Exasperated by Western indifference and complacency, the young playwright Sarah Kane blew apart the wall separating the war from British domestic life in her controversial play *Blasted*, which premiered at London's Royal Court Theatre six months before Srebenica. Meanwhile, Slavoj Žižek, a philosopher who mixed together Hegel and Hitchcock, Lacan and *La Traviata* in a heady highbrow, lowbrow concoction, emerged from the chaos of the Balkans and enjoyed rock-star status in intellectual circles by the late 1990s, reinserting the possibility of the radical revolutionary act into postmodern thinking.

But somehow these events, while resonating at some deep level as a riposte to the post–Cold War theory of Francis Fukuyama that we were witnessing the "end of history," did not appear to radically disturb or shape the idea of literature or literary response at the time. Despite the fact that James Natchwey's harrowing photo book, *Inferno*, which structures his documentation of suffering into nine countries like Dante's nine circles of Hell, actually covers the decade of the 1990s

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and so reveals conflicts, man-made famines, and massacres around the globe that we have forgotten, the common belief now is that the 1990s, the era of Bill Clinton and John Major, was a decade of relative peace and consensus. In literary circles we were living through a time "after theory" but arguably before anything else happened (Eagleton, *After Theory*). The British Association of Romantic Studies conference in 1999, for example, was remarkable for its lack of dissent among delegates. Although discussing a period in which writers were radically opposed to one another and even fought duels or went to prison over the debate about the role of the poet, the freedom of the writer, and the relation between literature and wider society,[4] the scholars were in complete agreement with one another, all passion apparently spent.

But on 11 September 2001, two planes flew into the World Trade Center, and everything changed. As many have pointed out, the events of 9/11, following the initial shock and confusion, produced a cultural rupture (see, e.g., Banita). The safe boundary wall between Western insular complacency and the wider world of war and injustice for which the West bears much responsibility, the wall broken by Kane six years earlier, was destroyed in the most public and dramatic way possible. The event also heralded a new culture of ethical criticism, prompted by the rupture and uncertainty.[5] The result, as Martha Nussbaum has argued, was the "good work of compassion," as Americans made "real to themselves the sufferings of so many people whom they never would have otherwise have thought about" ("Compassion" 190). In realizing the precarious nature of their nation, which previously had seemed impregnable and supremely powerful, Americans were newly able to appreciate the vulnerability of others and thus could develop, according to Judith Butler, a "fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (22). We could, Butler said, "imagin[e] community" differently (27).

Yet alongside the newly awakened compassion, 9/11 ushered in an era of fear and intolerance, when the boundary between us and them was delineated more sharply. According to Žižek, the experience was not the surprise or shock, as the common consensus would have it; rather, after decades of being offered paranoid fantasies of catastrophe and threat in the cinema, Americans were "libidinally invested" in an event that seemed to justify long-established ideological responses, like increased bombing abroad and heightened security measures at home (18). The discourse of the war on terror reached for ideological terms much older than Butler's "common human vulnerability" (30): *hero*, *sacrifice*, *crusade*, *good and evil*.

From a British perspective, the events of September 2001 did not constitute quite such a ground-shifting change from peaceful security to a newly vulnerable openness to the world. One of my earliest memories, when I was growing up in London as a child in the 1970s, is carrying out an evacuation drill at my primary school after a credible bomb warning, while just twenty-five miles away in Guildford two pubs were blown up. We internalized the name IRA as a source of fear alongside other typical infantile terrors like wolves and witches. Bombings punctuated our lives as we grew up, from Hyde Park in 1982 to Manchester in 1992 to the street where I lived, Camden High Street, in 1993, and we accepted a degree of surveillance as the price of security, the "ring of steel" established in the 1990s around the City of London. There was, always, growing up in Britain in the late twentieth century, a latent sense of anxiety, of fragility. Yet it is true that the attacks on the World Trade Center intensified our uncertainty and the need to reassess our relation with the world, our priorities and commitments—partly because of the sheer scale of the attacks, the number of casualties in a single atrocity that was, as Mayor Giuliani put it, "more than any of us can bear." So for a few months the

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feeling was that *nous sommes tous Américains*. Along with New Yorkers, I read "Portraits of Grief" in the *New York Times* online in order to give substance to the compassion I yearned to feel. But our uncertainty after 9/11 was radically different from what it had been before, because of the deterritorialized nature of the terror. Unlike the Irish Republican Army, the perpetrators of 9/11 did not issue warnings a few minutes before the attacks, did not claim responsibility immediately afterward, and did not have a clear set of demands or an identifiable base. Their terror was amorphous, ubiquitous, rhizomatic, everywhere and nowhere, as slippery and indefatigable as the mythical hydra. Soon Tony Blair was following George W. Bush in declaring war on this hydra, sending British troops to Afghanistan and then Iraq, to establish "freedom" everywhere. His speech at the Labour Party conference in October 2001, announced the global reach of this reordering of the world:

> So I believe this is a fight for freedom. And I want to make it a fight for justice too. . . .
>
> The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of North Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause.
>
> This is a moment to seize. The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.

Like many literary critics, I could not shut myself away in the library, attending to my footnotes while the kaleidoscope was being shaken and the world was being reordered. It felt irresponsible and not a little grotesque to lecture on the destruction of Troy in Euripides's *The Trojan Women* or on the messianic quest of Ibsen's *Brand* and not refer to the contemporary bombing of Baghdad or Operation Iraqi Freedom. When everything was in flux and the easy, abstract use of words adopted by politicians—*freedom*, *regime change*, *collateral damage*, *rendition*—masked a gritty reality, it seemed important to reengage with the material world, to explore how physical, political reality shapes our imaginations and conversely how our rhetoric and collective beliefs order the ground beneath us as well as the world around us. So I went to New York and followed the trucks from Manhattan to Fresh Kills, Staten Island, and I interviewed the New York Sanitation Department to learn the politics of waste in the five boroughs, in order to flesh out my sense of the politics and poetics of the emotional wasting and resolving at the heart of America (Wallace, *Digging* 145–51). And I traveled to Israel/Palestine to meet with archaeologists and writers on all points along the political spectrum, from Jewish settlers (from Maine) in the occupied territory above Nablus to Palestinian professors in Ramallah, to learn more about how biblical texts are supposedly grounded in archaeology and archaeological remains are dated by reference to the Bible, in an interdependency as stable as a house of cards, both archaeology and the Bible being used to justify the facts on the ground and the (extending) borders of the nation (Wallace, "Shifting"). Literary criticism, like archaeological interpretation, it seemed to me, could play a vital role in reading a situation in a more nuanced, complex way and thus in resisting the simplification and distortions that political discourse and popular belief dictated. An attention to what I termed a "poetics of depth" (*Digging* 16), grounded in the particular as well as in a sophisticated sense of how meaning is generated through language and ideology, which literary study should equip the scholar to practice, appeared to offer one important intervention in the all too hasty rush to war and the dizzying world of political spin.

But it was primarily studying, teaching, and writing about tragedy that seemed to contribute most to an understanding about how literary study might be related to—and could bring pressure to bear on—this world that

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was being reordered around us. Tragic dramas carry in them a strong ethical demand to bear witness and yet also a self-conscious critique of the pitfalls of spectacle and the potential spuriousness and futility of Aristotle's pity and fear. They reveal a strong belief in the efficacy and moral value of sacrifice—a term used ubiquitously in the contemporary war on terror—and yet also the calculations and false logic of equivalence and exchange that sacrifice requires. They open up the gaps between belief and skepticism, between moral, political purpose and meaninglessness. And they bring back, with ambivalent effect, the central place of emotion in our literary, philosophical, and political lives. As Nussbaum continues to demonstrate, the role of our feelings as the foundation of good ethics has been underestimated, and they can often be best delineated and explored in tragic drama (*Upheavals* 350–53, 408–09, 425–33 and *Political Emotions* 257–313). But tragedy also reveals the dangers of the passions, the fickleness, the disingenuousness. And it deals as much in fear as it does in pity. In our collective imagining, what is the place of fear, an emotion that is often neglected in contemporary literary and philosophical analysis?[6] It is important for fear or terror to be "seen clearly and whole, and if necessary, redescribed or resituated," by critics sharpened by the discipline, independent questioning, and passionate engagement of literary, cultural analysis (Harpham 157). Indeed, in the connections and fissures between Williams's "event and experience and idea" constituted by tragedy (9), the ambiguous relation is evident between the individual and wider society. This relation is under pressure today in our mediated world, affected by the degree to which any action that has not already turned into a spectacle gains purchase on our imaginations and feelings.

Consider Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, which encapsulates so many of these contemporary dilemmas and contradictions. Conscious of but rejecting the grand "yoke-strap of compulsion" of Aeschylus's version (218), Euripides's Agamemnon blames his sacrifice of his daughter on the demands of the army, an unruly ὀχλος,("ochlos" 'crowd'; my trans.) unseen but much invoked and arbitrarily willful in its claims, including what Agamemnon calls its "mad desire" to rush to war.[7] After trying to persuade her father poignantly to alter his decision, Iphigenia changes course and goes to her death after the most powerfully articulated example of Panhellenic ideology, designed to bring the fractured society together: "It is right that the Greeks should rule barbarians . . . and not barbarians Greeks. For they are slaves and we are free" (1400–01). This is after Agamemnon has repeatedly stated that his actions are compelled by the army or, in his words, that we "are slaves to the common people" 'τῷ τ'ὄχλῳ δουλεύομεν' (450). Maybe freedom just is not free. Even after the messenger brings news of Iphigenia's miraculous rescue by divine intervention, Clytemnestra is skeptical, uncertain by this stage about the trustworthiness of words, corrupted as they have become by plots and ideological rhetoric. She is also disillusioned by the gods, whose orders can be reversed at a whim and whose names are used to justify many brutal acts:

> O my child, which of the gods has stolen you?
> By what name can I call you? How can I be sure
> that this story has not been made up to console me
> so that I can lay to rest
> my cruel grief over you? (lines 1615–18)

"A story made up to console me" 'τούσδε μάτην μύθους,' when literally translated, means "a myth created in vain" or, here, a "random or idle story." Thus the play explores the contrary dynamics of desire and compulsion, belief, disbelief, and a confusion that criticism, sharpened by its attention to similar dynamics in contemporary culture, can attend to and illuminate. But most important is the chorus in this play. Unlike other Greek

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tragedies, where the chorus is made up of the citizens of the city where the play is set, this chorus belongs neither to Aulis nor to Argos, from where Agamemnon and his army have sailed; the members of the chorus are travelers too, having come over from Chalcis, on the island of Euboia, out of curiosity to see this huge army camped on the shore. They are in effect tourists, drawn to the spectacle, finding pleasure in viewing the ships and the celebrity warriors (lines 233–34) and shaping our response, yet no more invested in the action than the audience of the play, able to watch, pity, and fear for as long as they wish and then to depart. If any readers wonder what the relevance is of literature to the world, or, to coin Susan Sontag's comment about photography, if they complain that dramas merely "miniaturize experience, transform history into spectacle" and that "as much as they create sympathy, [they] cut sympathy, distance the emotions" (110), they need only be pointed to the chorus of *Iphigenia in Aulis* to discover that all these scruples and objections were raised, most intelligently and movingly, long before them.

According to Grégoire Chamayou, a French philosopher, the war on terror has ushered in the perfect weapon for its peculiar business, and conversely the nature of that war has been determined by the latest military advances. Just as Hannah Arendt argued that technology determined the capacity for thought, terror, and political formation, noting the effect of the nuclear bomb on ideas of violence (6), so Chamayou claims that drones have fundamentally altered both the nature and concept of conflict and terror and the West's notion of responsibility. While warfare since Vietnam might be properly described as asymmetrical, a marked imbalance of technology and force between one side and the other, drone warfare, in which pilots operate unmanned aerial vehicles from a base in Nevada and shoot targets twelve thousand miles away, should be described as unilateral, in which the analogy is one of animal hunting rather than traditional battle. There are, Chamayou points out, no boundaries to drone warfare, either geographically or temporally, which makes it well matched to the nebulous definition of *terror*: "The scenario that looms before us is one of infinite violence, with no possible exit; the paradox of untouchable power waging interminable wars toward perpetual war" (72). The remote pilot is the untouchable victor day after day, choosing which target will be erased, but Chamayou argues that the pilot deals with the burden of that power by inculcating an environment of victimhood, trauma, and psychological damage. Tragic responsibility takes the form not of concern for the enemy casualties of the drone bombings or the innocent civilians on the ground caught in the collateral damage but rather of care for the self. Modern warfare, in which there is global surveillance, paradoxically results in a national blindness, in the narrowing of understanding because of the lack of reciprocity.

If criticism should be calibrated to the wider political environment, as I have been suggesting, then what does the future hold in the light of Chamayou's anatomization of warfare, terror, and the changing notion of virtue and the burden of responsibility? On the one hand, it may be that we, as literary critics, will become more and more like those drone pilots, each in his or her metaphoric bunker, looking at the gray desert of the text on our screen and virtually targeting our object of the day. Disconnected from the world as it continues to be reordered, we will be part of a system in which there is nothing to resist or dissent from, recording and counting publications achieved and grants gained like kills. On the other hand, it may be that, sharpened by our attention to literary texts, philosophical debate, political theory, and visual culture and the performative arts, we will be able to think critically about the connections between events, experiences, and

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ideas of the world around us—and think just as critically about the disconnections. We will then become not drone critics but active, engaged, dissenting, compassionate, and tragically aware critics in the future.

Notes

1. My lecture was developed and subsequently published (Wallace, "'We'").

2. Another work that might be said to come out of the Cambridge tragedy tradition is John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy*, although it is concerned more with the comparative aspect of the topic than with the strictly ethical or political. I would place my *Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* in the Cambridge tradition.

3. The comparative, transhistorical Cambridge tradition of scholarship on tragedy, with its strong ethical commitments, marks it out sharply from alternative critical currents in more historicist Oxford, for example, or in the United States. For examples of this alternative tradition, which reenforces Williams's "formal separation," see Reiss; Bushnell.

4. John Scott, the editor of the *London Magazine*, fought a duel with John Gibson Lockhart's substitute, Jonathan Henry Christie, in 1821, over Lockhart's harsh reviews of Keats's poetry. Leigh Hunt, the editor of *The Examiner* from 1813 to 1815, was imprisoned for his article about the prince regent.

5. For the moral effect of that shock, see Nussbaum, "Compassion": "terror has this good thing about it. It makes us sit up and notice" (205).

6. Nussbaum recently turned her attention most usefully to fear (*New Religious Intolerance*).

7. *Iphigenia in Aulis*, line 1264: μέμηνε δ'ἀφροδίτη τις Ἑλλήνων στρατῳ ("memene d'aphrodite tis Hellenon strato" 'A certain erotic frenzy maddens the Greek army'; my trans.).

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