The Possibility of a Christian Tragedy

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I

The nature of this subject almost demands that we concern ourselves, in large part, with definitions and distinctions, an invidious procedure. But in the hope of escaping the dead ends into which the usual approaches to tragedy seem always to lead, one is free also to adopt an inductive, exploratory method which resolutely avoids being committed to a definition. The reading of many tragedies undoubtedly spell Tragedy, but they will not define it for us. Nor is Aristotle a help, in the main. We will salvage three things of his for use later on: the tremendously fertile notion of an Action of which the concrete work of art is an imitation; pity and terror, which Aristotle did not define, but Stephen Dedalus did; and catharsis. Beyond these, I believe, with Macneile Dixon, that Aristotle, the ethicalian, makes mischief; he is a reductionist; the doctrine of hamartia "runs counter to the poets." At the outset, perhaps it would be best to set down some descriptive phrases, adjectival rather than nominative, the tragic rather than tragedy.

Here, then, are some phrases, or counters, which various artists have forged in the heat of the imaginative act: And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good. . . . And God looked upon the earth, and behold, it was corrupt. From the gods who sit in grandeur, grace comes somehow violent. With bitter drugs men purge out bitter bile. What message of disaster from that sweet-throated Zeus? The arrows of the Almighty are within me. Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! To what end is it for you? The day of the Lord is darkness, and not light. . . . Even very dark, and no brightness in it. . . . Woe to them that are at ease in Zion. Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission. It is a God. Created sick, could these diverse laws? Is hearts? As flies to wa their sport. Ripeness died young. Everyon thing. There is a w madness.

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It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Created sick, commanded to be sound; What meaneth Nature by these diverse laws? Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts? As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport. Ripe Grace is all. Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young. Everyone is responsible to all men for all men and everything. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness.

Here are some which various sensitive people have struck out in the heat of the imaginative response: Patterns of death in life. The spirit of inquiry meets the spirit of poetry. The search for the best be the worst. Salvation through action as suffering. The dead tragic hero is at last equal to the occasion. The freedom of the whole is the destiny of the part. A grasp of the majesty of the ungraspable. Piercing in the face of the enigmatic and afflicting. Tragedy is consummated when the dream of innocence is confronted by the fact of guilt, and acquiesces therein.

It is this last formula, concocted out of a phrase of Leslie Fiedler's, that seems to be applicable, in some fashion or other, to the greatest number and variety of situations or forms which invite scrutiny by a parative tragic sense of life. The "Dream" stands for all these characteristics and attitudes we are accustomed to applaud in the tragic hero at the beginning of his action: his vision of the good, his rebellion against his vision of evil, his pride, his drive, articulateness, resilience; championship; the aspiration, the forward leap; the yearning, the vision which inspires his protagonism; and the creativeness; the purposiveness of his response to what he finds enigmatic and afflicting; the thesis. It also includes that piety which binds him to the "Other" he is seeking. "Innocence" is inclusive of the urge to be free, to escape the inhibitions of mortality and mutability and evil, of finiteness and contingency and competition and waste and shame; to be one's own self, to fulfill one's potential, to be man par excellence, to be like God. The "confrontation" provides for action, conflict, tension, predicament, dilemma, antagonism; peripety; modification or qualification of purpose, tarnishing of the dream; suffering, the hard loss of personality and self-satisfaction, the antithesis (or hypothesis) bringing the action...
of the hero into a condition of being acted upon. The “fact” represents that amount of reality which is reached; anagnorisis, the tears of things, the human condition, the apple of knowledge. “Guilt” means failure, unworthiness, defeat, collapse, being a fool, a sinner, being a part, a prisoner; death. “Acquiescence” tries to include the relevant notions of perception, salvation, recognition, reconciliation, atonement; catharsis, exhaustion, calm, peace; Yea-saying; assent, Amen; being quiet in the face of the mystery brought to epiphany, the present deity; synthesis. This is the formula I should like to use for the action of which tragedies are imitations.

Then there are the effects, which may properly be used as an after-the-fact touchstone (to use Stephen Dedalus’ amplification of Aristotle): Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings, and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause. Or, to try a variation: Tragic pity is the only attitude which can satisfactorily confront “undeserved” (unexplainable) suffering; tragic terror is the only attitude which can satisfactorily confront “undeserved” (unexplainable) pressure. Note that the word is “terror,” not “fear” or “horror”: the former is too general, and slight the element of awe-fulness, the mysterious; the latter is on the slippery slope to the pathological.

To complete the dossier from which it is proposed to extract the tragic, there are two things: something I should like to call, with acknowledgments to Harry Levin, the “overplot.” Francis Fergusson tragedy really gets started when the hypothesis (which we can live with) is seen as an antithesis (which the tragic hero cannot live with). Thesis is distinguished from hypothesis in logic, from antithesis in rhetoric; synthesis, in grammar, is a figure by which a sentence is constructed according to the sense, in violation of strict syntax. There is no neat formula here, but some kind of handle useful for grasping parts of the tragic experience might be forged out of the terms.

But not, as is so often tried, as materials for a definition; to wit: Othello is a tragedy because audiences have always been shocked and have wept at Desdemona’s death; Satan is the hero of Paradise Lost because he was a hero to Shelley, and Shelley was a satanist; Falstaff’s “humanism” is the authentic note of Henry IV because humanists since Elizabeth I have established a glacial empathy with him. This is relativism, and confusing effects with causes; it blinds Roy Morrell’s otherwise well-focused paper on “The Psychology of Tragic Pleasure” (Essays in Criticism, V, 1956).

2 James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ch. V. (Signet Books No. 664), p. 159.

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falls it the "anagoge"; a vision, apprehended more through the emotions and music and the protagonist's pietas than through mind, that tragedy is an "affair with the gods;" that it is concerned more with Man and God than with man and man; that the attempt "to make the heavens more just" involves the risk (as Empson puts it) of finding that the gods are fools, too. This is very helpful in ruling out of our discussion the whole recalcitrant business of modern, naturalistic claims to tragedy—from Ibsen on down. It provides for the largeness, the emancipation of the spirit, the "swing towards greatness," amplitude, which helps make man's suffering meaningful and worthwhile, and generates the terror. And it provides an object for that dynamic affiliation, composed of fear and love, which I have called "piety." It is akin to the pietas of Aeneas, but has a larger object of reverence. We see it in Abraham; in Job, who calls it his Integrity, and who denounces his wife as a fool when she tells him to curse God; in Prometheus, when he insists on a closer walk with Zeus even though he hates him—he is not lukewarm, like the chorus; in Electra and Antigone, willing to be goddess-like, even if they are to share the fate of Niobe; in Iô and Cassandra, who make the god's heart hot with love, to their own shattering destruction; in Oedipus, spiritual child of Good Luck and brother to the years, who, when Jocasta exults: "The oracles are dead, hurrah!" answers sorrowfully, "The oracles are dead, alas"; in Lear and Cordelia and Kent, who preserve the inviolateness of the holy cords, even at the risk of finding out that the gods too are old, and foolish, whose pleasures are horrible, who pour a deadly incense upon our sacrifices; in Venus—preyed-upon Phèdre, who dies to purify her bloodthirsty divinity; in Ahab, who holds fast to his "patriotism," even though his country is hell-seeming rather than the heaven of Father Mapple with its transcendent delight; in Ike McCaslin, who learns to share responsibility for what God "Himself had done in order to live with Himself in His lonely and paramount heaven." The word is an early form of pity; it connotes compassion; with-feeling; empathy; sympathy; the affective, anti-Cartesian criterion for fullness of being. I feel, therefore I am; a source of energy

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2 William Empson, "Fool in Lear," Sewanee Review, LVII (1949), 178-412; this is also a chapter of The Structure of Complex Words (New York, 1951).
3 Ferguson, The Idea of a Theater; and William F. Lynch, S.J., "Confusion in our Theater," Trough, XXVI (1951), 342-60, make the case against the naturalists in a way quite satisfactory to me.
transcending the intellectual, an irrational bond; a yearning to feed the Other with one's own life-blood: the pious and pitiful pelican. "It is with fiction as with religion," says Melville; "it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie." 10 The Mass for the Dead everywhere softens the dread of "that day" with the rewards of piety: quia pius es.

And finally, a distinction, made by Harold Watts,11 between the comic and the tragic on the basis of the circular versus the linear: comedy promises a return to the familiar; tragedy is exigent—the choice opted for looks to the future, but in the dark; a leap into the unknown, the unpredictable, the irrecoverable.

You will have noticed one quality running through all these approximations: that of dualism, ambiguity. This is important, as a check, from the side of form; for we find the dialectic rhythm, the oscillatory dance one does on the horns of a dilemma: agons; strophe, antistrophe, epode; purpose, passion, perception; withdrawal and return; peripety and anagnorisis; thesis, antithesis, synthesis: almost invariably as the incarnation, the objective correlative, of the idea. Man, in the tragic view, is an amphibian. His amphibiousness lays him open to both possibilities and dangers. He can refuse the gambit, and go back into the organic, astigmatic fish-world; or he can grow lungs from gills and legs from fins and binocular vision, and gradually evolve toward what he has the capacity for being, thus, even though it be a long, arduous, homesick process, avoiding the distortions of Father Lynch's Gnostic fish-out-of-water;12 or he can try to grow up too fast, and in his radical effort suffocate, or be crippled for life, or go blind with overmuch sunlight. The first of these alternatives is outside our subject; the second can stand for a religious view of man's nature and destiny; the third for a tragic view.

II

In the interests of economy of presentation, I should like, in the following exploration of the common ground which I think religion and tragedy cover, to use the Old Testament as exemplar for all

12 "Theology and the Imagination," Thought, XXIX (1954), 68.
"Western" non-Christian religious manifestations, for one thing because it provides us with literary documents, artistic forms. I hope to make it do duty for the "religious instinct," for "the numinous," for myth and ritual, for the still imperfectly assimilated fact that Greek tragedies grew out of Dionysian rites and Eleusinian mysteries, for all post-Renaissance, homeless and orphaned mystics, up to and including the Jungians and Koestler's "oceanic feeling." All this is said under correction, and craving such special dispensations as ignoring the fact that the Scriptures were inspired, that their profound truth is in their typology, and that there are elements of the un-tragic therein—the lyrical parts, the proverbs and wisdom literature, etc. The failure to distinguish between the Old Testament and the New testaments, I think, the whole controversy arising out of Daiches Raphael's BBC talk on "Tragedy and Religion," and his lumping them together as "the religion of the Bible" is in itself fatal to his purpose. I will try here, first, a rather special and "literary" interpretation of Genesis.

St. John tells us, in the preambule to his Gospel, that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." He goes on to say that "All things were made by Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made." And he reates further, that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us"; that the sublime result of this incarnation and this indwelling was that "as many as received Him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God.

This masterpiece of compression we may call history, if we like; but it is on a scale larger than any we are accustomed to, for it includes time, aforertime, and aftertime: it is not only history, but prehistory and eschatology. It stems from a philosophy of history which is appropriate to the New Covenant which, in Christ's words, is not only New but Everlasting, for the central fact of this story is the intersection of eternity and time, the Word made flesh, and in it the temporal condition of man is viewed under the aspect of eternity. Consequently, it is the Gospel, Good News, Glad Tidings of Great Joy, which shall be to all the people. The Christian life is to be full of paradoxes, but without irony. The Cross is the central symbol, yet this is sweet.

[Note: Inserted comment from darkness at Noon (Penguin Signet No. 671), pp. 181-85. Koestler is, of course, citing Freud.

a Printed in The Listener, 2 Sept. 1955, pp. 36-61. Commenting letters follow in the issues of 9, 23, and 30 Sept., and Raphael replies in the issues of 16 Sept. and 14 Oct.]
this burden light; men are provided with the Way, the Truth, Life. Our Father has established for us mansions in our home, heaven is our destination. We are to lift up our hearts, for the faithful life to be changed, not taken away; there is no place for fear, no time for tragedy.

All this was possible because St. John was given ("vouchsafed the traditional and more precise word, with its overtones of comfort knowledge and assurance about God’s nature and His love, outside the world and time: for example, that there was society as well being from the beginning, for the Word was with God, and was in God too. But no such overarching framework was made available to writers of the Old Testament. Its opening words are identical with those of the Evangelist, but, whereas St. John’s Gospel describes state of being, “In the beginning was . . . ,” Genesis announces happening: “In the beginning God created the heaven and earth.” God is there, to be sure, and His abiding existence and presence and Lordship are to be the central fact of this history, but His nature as God is given, although not as Triune. He does, and He commands, and for this historian creation is the true beginning, for then was time as well as the world. These two dimensions form the arena man; and his life will consequently demand mobility and tenacious upon space, and urgency and endurance in his days.

Let us return, then, to the beginning,” and submit ourselves the story of creation from this general point of view. We might that the “action” is: To bring the world and man into being, as know them. Immediately we are confronted with actuality and ence, with the word “good,” and in very short order with knowledge of good and evil, commandments, sorrow, fear, sin, de But I would dwell on a point of ambiguity which comes thro more in the “literary” way than explicitly; a dualism which is pre from the beginning. Creation is the action, but it requires, seeming for its fulfillment, multiplication; and this involves that form of action—separation, divisiveness—which is normally felt to be destruct As C. S. Lewis puts it, “Evil is fissiparous, and could never i thousand eternities find any way to arrest its own reproduction. I could, it would be no longer evil; for Form and Limit belong to good.” This buttresses his ingenious argument for God’s esser mercifulness in creating a fixed Hell; but here we may feel somet of the drama and “danger” of creation, in which God permits

\[\text{\textit{The Pilgrim’s Regress} (New York, 1944), p. 233.}\]
because of the greater good to which evil is attached, for He allows the
fissiparous process up to the point at which He desires to set His
limits. Great and noble things are possible, in this universe, but they
are not achieved pusillanimously or without “risk.”

Order presupposes unification of multiplicity, order and positiveness somehow presuppose synthesis and connection. To be sure, Light was created, and it was good; but immediately thereafter it was divided from the darkness. And the waters were divided from the waters, and the dry land was divided from the water, and the day was divided from the night. And the river in Eden parted into four heads. And Adam was made out of the dust of the ground, and he was put aside and above the rest of creation, to subdue it and have dominion over it, and it was to him for meat; and there was no creature fitting for Adam; and to make up this deficiency God separated a part from Adam himself; and the mystic union which resulted from this fission was henceforward to be maintained at the expense of a man’s leaving his father and his mother. So, in the very beginning and creative elan there seems to be built in forebodings of what we call, for want of a better expression, “metaphysical evil”—separateness, competition, finitude. And yet, God saw that the results were good, and indeed at last very good, and blessed.

I do not want to run this approach into the ground; perhaps we may leave it here with some such formulation as this: To have a world imitative of the simple perfection of God one must have multiplicity and diversity of goods. Various evils and contraries will be found in it and, therefore, physical evils will exist. From the very outset, in a creative act there are elements of destruction and danger and hardship; but somehow at the end there is life abundantly, and blessedness, and rest. And this is a view of things in which the tragic sense of life can flourish.

On the sixth day of creation, “God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” And by the time of Noah, “God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt. For all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.” Evil had somehow intruded into the creation, and it had come through the best of God’s creatures, and through his distinguishing excellency of intellect and will whereby he was made in the image and likeness of God. *Corruptio optimi est prius misera,* and the goods of creation themselves were apparently ambiguous—they were at least potentially dangerous, because of their very goodness. There was knowledge, for instance, tied in mysteriously with
death: the fruit of the tree was good for food, and pleasant to the eyes, and to be desired to make one wise; so man looked and desired and ate: and was cursed. Let us put ourselves again for a moment into the context of Genesis, and try to feel the impact of this perilous good knowledge. Unfortunately, its shock is largely absorbed in our English translations, because our language alone seems to have discarded a basic distinction between two kinds of knowledge: the distinction maintained by the words 

Unfortunately, its shock is largely absorbed in our English translations, because our language alone seems to have discarded a basic distinction between two kinds of knowledge: the distinction maintained by the words **scire**, **connaître**, **wissen** and **kennen**, **scire** and **cognoscere**. Milton undoubtedly felt the force of this dichotomy running through the prototypes of his story of the Fall, and he does his best to supply the deficiencies of English by using "knowledge" as a basic metaphor throughout his poem. He explores all its tributary meanings, he lays down provisional distinctions, such as that between discursive and intuitive reasoning, and calls on all the resources of word play and assonance to express the simultaneously different and alike nature of the two, when he has Raphael counsel Adam to use his intelligence to be lowly wise, or himself comments that Adam and Eve will be happiest if they "know to know no more." Very simply, it is the difference between knowing about something, knowing that it is so, at a distance; and knowing it by contact, by experience, through immediate and intimate acquaintance. We know that fire is hot, and stings and consumes; when we touch a "glowing coal, we are acquainted with fire: the burnt child will recognize the hot stove with his fingers.

Now, the first chapters of Genesis are pervaded by this double-edged-ness of the nature of knowledge, as a glance at the Vulgate will show. I cannot claim that the distinction is maintained consistently, either therein or in the originals from which the Vulgate was translated; but I rather welcome this fact than am distressed by it, for I am looking for a feeling, the proper characteristic of which is spontaneity. The Vulgate uses the verb **scire**, or some derivative of it, to talk about God's knowing, and the phrase **lignum scientiae boni et mali** for the receptacle of the inclusive and composite thing itself. The serpent, of course, lied: he had said that men would become as gods, knowing (sciencies) good and evil. By extension, we might perhaps say that Adam and Eve knew about (sciebant) the tree, because God told them about it; but they knew it with knowledge and experi-

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in (cognoverunt) indeed, when they looked, and touched, and tasted.

But a change takes place immediately after the act of eating. *Causa cognovissent se esse nudos* says the Vulgate, "When they knew they were naked," they hid themselves. Before, they had been able to observe the fact that they had no fur like the animals, and "they were not ashamed," but now their eyes were opened, and they knew—felt, indeed, were intimate with, had become accomplices of—their nakedness, and they knew it to their shame and passion and fear. And God asked, "Who told you that you were naked?" There is no answer, because nobody told them so, they merely knew it, in the flesh.

"How in the world can knowledge be bad?" rhetorically asks Satan, the rationalist. "Depends on what you mean by knowledge," ruefully replies post-lapsarian Adam. "It seems that there are more things in heaven and earth, counsellor, than are defined in your dialectic."

And so man let evil into God's good world, by what was essentially the first step in a tragic career: pride, dissatisfaction with the status quo, an urge to get above himself, in a word, to be like unto God, to have dominion over all things as God has. The trouble was, of course, that man's creativeness is godlike in its initial phase; but man does not have the braking power with respect to the effect of his choice: his free will can loose but it cannot bind, and once he has started the wheels turning he cannot stop them. So man suffered the immediate divisive results of his contamination with evil: enmity, hostility, curses; he hid himself from the presence of the Lord God, and he was sent forth and driven out from the garden, and disjoined from the tree of life by a flaming sword.

Now indeed the burning question was, After such knowledge, what salvation? Although hints are given, that sorrow and thorns and sweat and death are to be the medicinal penalty, the promise is oracular and cloudy; and the at-one-ment which alone can finally defeat the powers of darkness, which are evil, is to be achieved only in the fullness of time. But here and now the beginnings are made, the journey is started. There is to be nothing automatic about it. God's spirit will strive with man, and it will at times grieve Him at His heart; the people will build Babels and golden calves, and their original one-ness will have to be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth. But little by little a man, a tribe, a people, a race are Chosen and Covenanted to start carving God's kingdom from the corrupted world.

Another image illustrates the inextricability of the good and evil in this covenant relationship: the cloud and the bow. God will indeed
bring clouds over the earth—the gathering wracks of deluge—but the rainbow will henceforward be seen therein. And the mystery of it is that the bow is not only in, or against, the cloud, but of the cloud; the very color and form and beauty of it could not exist without the destructive wateriness and the impending and precipitant imminence of its darkness.

I submit here, as a kind of hypothesis, that two conditions, among others, are necessary for a tragic view, and that both are present in the Old Testament: in the background, but impinging on the actuality of events, and somehow affected or invoked by earthly events, there is the inscrutability of God; in the foreground there is plenty of what may be called "actual" or "moral" evil. Now, lacking a sense of the former, the story would lose its power, and degenerate into a kind of ethicism; lacking the latter, the story escapes from the human realm, and becomes an abstract intellectual speculation. What I have called the actuality of events normally falls in the second sphere: and, for most modern sensibilities moral evil means "man's inhumanity to man."

In the Old Testament the materials are often, to be sure, those of competition between men: Cain slew Abel, Jacob defrauded Esau, David coveted Uriah's wife: but the important aspect of these actions is that they are not only evil or dangerous, but sinful. God is the Lord; unrighteousness is lèse-majesté. What counts is how a man acts in the eyes of the Lord. God is good, He is all-powerful, He is all-wise—but He is inscrutable. No sin is a little thing, because of God's greatness. And it is here that the Hebrews, unlike their contemporaries, took the step that allows their history to be seen tragically: Having abandoned God they caused their own penalty and woe. Therefore, Moses followed the promulgation of the Commandments with an insistence on the inscrutability of the fear and the love of the Lord, "that it may be well with us all the days of our life." The world man inhabits, and must move and act in, is a moral universe. Man cannot escape his responsibility therein, for he is a free agent. His great glory, and his great peril, lie in the fact that he has been called, chosen, elected; he must also acknowledge the election, respond to the vocation, he too must choose to be chosen. "Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God . . . The Lord our God is one Lord . . . Thou shalt love thy Lord thy God with thy whole heart . . . The Lord thy God hath chosen thee, to be his peculiar people . . . the Lord [is] joined unto you . . . because the Lord hath loved you . . . the Lord thy God is in the midst of thee, a God mighty and terrible." Man must act on his
Fallen man had the limitations of his nature and of his fall; yet God chose man to be his agent in the world, to conquer it (as it were) for Him from the powers of darkness, to bring it into the realms of light. And, to come down from the ideal to the immediate, God chose certain men to take possession of and to hold, for Him, that land and those ways of life which should be his City, his citadel, in the midst of the corrupted world. I cannot deal with the mystery of God's love for man, nor of His seeming "dependence" upon man once man had been given free will: what this concept can do for us here is to light up man's role in this relationship—that somehow he was chosen to be God's champion; and that it was this destiny which endowed him with grandeur and immense potentialities, and at the same time laid on him an almost intolerable burden. We said that the great advance of the Hebrews over other early peoples was in their recognition that this is pre-eminently a moral universe, in the concept of "ethical monotheism." But God can at least be approached, spoken to, remonstrated with, by those like Job who have the courage; some modus vivendi can be worked out, even if not understood. Salvation in this context has to be worked out, not thought out: the protagonists were presented with the task not merely of understanding, but of living with God and their destiny: it is a tragic, not a philosophic, question. The Creation and the Fall have been the prologue to the play; now the struggle begins: down on earth, the struggle for the realization of the God-like in man.

And it seemed to come to pass, at various times. God said to Satan,
the heavenly prosecuting attorney, "Hast thou seen my servant Job? There is none like him on the earth, a man perfect and upright, one that feareth God and avoideth evil." Ah, but prove it, says the Adversary—let me work on him, "and he will blaspheme Thee to Thy face." God allows the evil to hit, and, from Job's point of view at least, tragedy results.

It is, of course, in Job that we come closest to a complete tragic action, and it is uncompromisingly grounded in religion; it is about religion. All Job's physical and material evils are correlatives to his vision of spiritual evil: he knows that his Defender liveth, his piety is strong and ardent, the spirit of God is in his nostrils, and yet the arrows of the Almighty are within him. God keeps away and will not answer him. Job is God's champion, against the essentially impious comforters as well as against Satan; he is as much concerned with theodicy as is Prometheus or as Aeschylus himself. His purpose is to cry out loud and long, and not be silenced; his passion is to argue down his comforters, at the imminent danger of sinning by mere vehemence with his mouth; and he actually succeeds in talking God down out of His heaven, he hears the voice from the whirlwind. His perception is a grasp of the majesty and power and wisdom of his God, and that it transcends our ideas of righteousness and justice and retribution. And he subsides under the terms of the action: "How shall I answer Thee? I lay my hand upon my mouth ... I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, But now, mine eye hath seen Thee; Therefore, I repudiate ... And repent o dust and ashes."

It has been, from start to finish, an affair with God; whatever questions are raised about the secret cause remain secret. God comes down, the theology of suffering is begun to be manifested but there is no incarnation and no sacrament. The rectitude of Job's life has been vindicated. Job has made his point, and has been equal to his occasion; but it will all have to be done over again by every man for himself. This is good Tragedy.

Ecclesiastes is another matter. Here is a vision of evil, powerfully and comprehensively stated: everything cancels out; God seems to hide Himself from us, keeping from us the solution to the problem. He has tried it all, says the Preacher, on the basis of what God has endowed us with, and nothing avails, the pit awaits all alike. He sees both the possibility of evil and the actuality of moral evil—and he sees the connection between them. Job's God is, he knows, all-powerful and all-wise, but what good does the knowledge do him?
There is nothing availing unto salvation—all is vanity, that is, momentary. Ecclesiastes is near the end of the great Hebrew 'psalmody,' someone has described his threnody as "The Second-Century Blues"; and he was certainly tainted with pessimism. But his tragic vision of evil is undiluted, uncompromised. Melville calls him "true," because he has more of sorrow than joy in him, like the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe." This may fall short of tragedy, but it is centrally and powerfully tragic.

Tragedy and "religion," then, are not incompatible—indeed, they both insistently concern themselves with man's urge and desire to become god-like, with the fact of the numinous; both feed on piety; both ultimately find the key to all problems in the question of immortality; both come to terms with death.

But, there is religion, and there is Christianity. And the central point of this paper is that there is a radical and immitigable difference as well as distinction between Christianity and all other religions, past, present, or possible. I need do no more than state it baldly: Christ was and is God; He became man, instituted the sacraments, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and reopened the gates of heaven. This act was unique and will remain inimitable. The consequences of recognizing it as such are very great, for our purposes. For example: The "neo-realistic" Protestant theologians—the Niebuhrs, Calhoun, Bennett, even Barth—going back to Kierkegaard, keep insisting on the essential "discontinuity between the...highest human goodness...and the goodness of God" on God's will and sovereignty as paramount; that the resolution of these discrepancies and incompatibilities is forever history; that, while sin can be forgiven, guilt cannot; that man cannot make himself pure in the eyes of the most holy; that, since man exists simultaneously in time and eternity, since "what existence requires on the one level is forbidden by existence on the other," human life is possible only as existence in tragedy, fear and trembling, dread, anxiety, despair, the absurd. It is interesting to note that Reinhold Niebuhr,

19 Mary Dick, Chapter XCVI.
whose book of "sermonic essays" Beyond Tragedy has a wistful chapter on "Christianity and Tragedy," derives nine-tenths of his illustrative material from the Old Testament.

But how easily is this impressive tragic doctrine undercut! Jaspers, Brunner, Daniélou, Graham have merely to point out that Our Lord's death was "the crucial point of time, the act of reconciliation with God," that "history is not a closed circle, but a straight line"; the believer has a present: "charity is of the same nature as eternity, which is the true present"; that "humanity is substantially saved . . . the irreversible character of salvation . . . Christian Hope is the awaiting of entrance into the joy of an already acquired peace." It is the greater of evils, but it is a moral, not an ontological, disorder. Josef Pieper, raising the interesting question of the "negative" element in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, ends by pointing out that, although "truth and unknowability belong together," Aquinas denies the intrinsic unknowability of something real. Maritain has done the same thing for many quasi-tragic aspects of Aquinas' thought—"metaphysical evil," knowledge by connaturality, existentialism, etc.—and the proto-realism of St. Thomas' theology always can serenely resolve the gloom of the "neo-realistic" theology. The hope-structure of epistemology, Pieper calls it; and "hope is closer to the Yes! than to the No!" Perhaps this is enough to indicate the theoretical consequences of taking the reality of the incarnation seriously.

There is no intention here of slighting the sincerity and importance of the Neo-realist theologians, even though Guardini can amusingly account for the "theology of crisis" as the product, "not of Christian severity, but only Nordic exasperation." Their insights show that

New York, 1937.

Karl Jaspers, Tragedy is Not Enough (Boston, 1952), trans. K. W. Deutsch (chapter of Von der Wahrheit).


"The 'Negative' Element in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas," Cross Currents, IV (Fall 1953), 46-56.


Romano Guardini, "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," Cross Currents, III (Fall 1952), 64.

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...tragedy and Christianity are allies in combating rationalism and the Power of Positive Thinking and Mr. Brooks Atkinson's feeling of betrayal by The Living Room. But I cannot find that the tragic theologians have a radical and consistent theoretical foundation. Max Scheler makes what I think is a profound distinction, between moral, or "guilty" guilt, which "is based on the act of choice," and "tragic or unguilty guilt, which is based on the sphere of choice." Under the Christian dispensation, the guiltiness of the "sphere" has already been atoned for, purged away—all now is in the realm of moral guilt, which provides for "objectively guiltless possibilities." On the other hand, "the tragic hero 'becomes guilty' while doing a guiltless thing . . . he 'falls into guilt.'"

What else, then? The doctrine of sin and grace (prevenient grace, sufficient though not always efficacious grace, etc.) I will just mention, trusting that its implications will be apparent. What of the Calvinistic doctrine that man is radically incapable of being loved by God, because he is so impure, so guilty, so vitiated by Original Sin—"Earth ails from the prime foundation"? The answer is in one of our most frequent prayers: "... that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ"; or, as Dom Aelred Graham puts it, "God does not treat his children as if they were lovable in His sight: He makes them so by infusing His own regenerative love into them." "Theology and ethics depend, not on God's nature or truth or essence, but on His sovereignty." Dante had said much the same thing: In la sua volontate è nostra pace; it is a bond of the will, of love, not of "thinking that makes it so." Any number of the Mass prayers pierce through the supposed dilemma: the Preface for the Mass for the Dead; the Offertory prayer with mirabiliter followed by mirabilites; the "dies nostros in tua pace disponas." What of the blood of martyrs, the Communion of Saints, the treasury of Christ's merits?

What of the Sacraments—Incarnation on a human scale—God's coming down, and staying down, accommodating Himself to us, effecting the tragically supposed impossible marriage of the spirit and the flesh?

What of God within our breasts, grace in our bowels, but grace not violent, not arrowy as in Job; no distorted Io’s or shattered Cassandra’s? What of the whole edifice of morals, based upon the Natural Law, which the Christian mystery allows to be built up? And of the fascinating concept of Hopkins and Father Lynch, of Christ the Athlete? The “Christic” grappling with the actual, using man-ness as the path through the finite into the infinite, even staring down death, certainly does defeat the evasions of both Manichean naturalism and Cartesian angelism. But in spite of Father Lynch’s recognition of the exigency of death, he has complete confidence that not only Christ the Tiger Himself can make the muscular leap, but even the least of us, by bringing through analogy this athleticism into the daily human imaginative act, can walk the path on the boundary between the two worlds. In Father Lynch’s scheme, the voice is often the voice of Tragedy, but the hands (or feet) are those of Epic.

But I think the point can best be made by contrasting, with our exemplary Old Testament, what I take, under correction, to be the rare and distinguishing mark of Christianity. We cited Genesis and Ecclesiastes, early and late phases of the Hebrew vision (and it has been said that Ecclesiastes is a “meditation on the undeveloped implications of Genesis”); what does St. Paul say? First, and easiest: “By a man came death, and by a man the resurrection of the dead. And as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.” Actually, this is enough; but to some it perhaps lacks a middle term, a recognition of the in-between-time, the anguished cry of Ecclesiastes, “All is vanity, all go down alike into the pit.” But Paul knows about death and vanity too: “If there be no resurrection from the dead, and if Christ be not risen again, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. . . . For you are yet in your sins. . . . But now Christ is risen from the dead. . . . And the enemy death shall be destroyed last. . . .” That which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die first. . . . And when this mortal hath put on immortality, . . . O death, where is thy sting? Therefore, be ye steadfast and unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. . . . But all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Christ; and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.” All is vanity—yes, all would be


—Laurence Michel
Since my purpose has been to set up a discussion of the possibility of a Christian tragedy, I shall conclude with only a tentative classification of things that have been called that, by various people. But there remain a few more distinctions, within which I think a discussion of the actual should contain itself. First, we should recognize that while a study of the times, the Zeitgeist, can often explain the absence of fully articulated tragedy (one thinks immediately of the end of the Roman Empire, the middle ages, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the first quarter, at least, of the twentieth), it can do little, confidently, to account for the efflorescence when it does come. Secondly, we should recognize two possible though not equally cogent interpretations of "Christian tragedy": (1) tragedy written since the beginning of the Christian era; (2) tragedy about Christianity. The latter will come closest, I believe, to fulfilling the "possibility," only to find itself at the last minute undercut by the latent impossibilities we have described. The former is what causes all kinds of confused and inconsequent criticism. Mr. Auden states the position well: that the authors of this "Christian tragedy"—specifically, Shakespeare and Melville—"do not necessarily believe in the dogmas, but their conception of man's nature is, historically, derived from them." One can see what a proliferation and dilution this leads to: people immediately start talking of "the tragedy of" this or that: Auden, who does better with the "religious hero" in The Enchafed Flood, opts for "Christian tragedy" as "the tragedy of possibility," as opposed to Greek which is "the tragedy of necessity." We find Henri Peyre identifying Phèdre as "the tragedy of passion," in the same volume with Reichardt's "Ibsen, the tragedy of idealism" and Louis Martz's "The saint as tragic hero." Mark Harris goes so far as to call for a "tragedy of determinism." In another connection I have found it necessary to question "the poss-

2) Tragic Themes in Western Literature, ed. Cleanth Brooks (Yale University Press, 1953).
priety of such terms as ‘political tragedy’ in distilling out of various kinds of serious literature that which will distinguish the genuinely ‘tragic’ from something else. The terms have a kind of understandability, along with such other formulations as the Tragedy of Revenge, the Tragedy of Blood, Domestic Tragedy, Heroic Tragedy, what might be called Monk’s Tale Tragedy, even [in desperation] Shakespearean Tragedy and something called ‘the Jonsonian variety’; we should add, I suppose, a possible Problem Tragedy—Comical-Historical-Pastoral Tragedy. But these are dangerous in that their common assumption of the noun, the very name of the thing itself, so dilutes or distorts that thing by the multiplicity of the adjectives it is made to support, that the important business of ascertaining—and ultimately, properly responding to—the underlying form and essence of tragedy is obstructed rather than fostered.” The term ‘Christian Tragedy,’ then, used as the starting point for this sort of thing, leads also to all manner of Coleridgean, Bradleyan, or parsonical misconceptions about Shakespeare, is a misnomer, and does not grapple with the Tragic properly so-called. Mr. Leech has, I think, effectively answered those who try to make too much of the formal, lip-service, automatic adherence to “the Christian scheme, the medieval and Tudor concepts of social order” found in Elizabethan drama: “The human inconstancy of attitude can explain . . . why tragedy, though a Christian in its implications, may be written by Christians and may please a predominantly Christian audience. For most men religious opinions are not equally powerful on every day of the year or the week. We know what amounts to nothing of Shakespeare’s or Webster’s religious views, but we know that our thoughts are not directed to God and His purposes when we have come to the end of reading Othello or The Duchess of Malfi.” He could have added Macbeth, Hamlet, and King Lear. And, mutatis mutandis, this will serve for such other putative “tragedies in the Christian context” as the work of Ibsen, Conrad, Hardy, O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams.

What, then, are some of the data we have to deal with? The story of Christ’s passion? He suffered, sweat blood, felt the sense of heaven’s desertion, died, and descended into hell. But He was the Victim, He

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35 “Yardsticks for Tragedy,” Essays in Criticism, V (1955), 84-5. I have attempted to apply some of the implications of this essay in “Shakespearean Tragedy: Critique of Humanism from the Inside,” Massachusetts Review (Summer 1961), 635-50; and “Hamlet: Superman, Sub-Christian,” Centennial Review, VI (1962), 230-44.

did it willingly, He descended in triumph and rose in glory, and He knew He was going to, all the time. Anyone who watches a representation of the Passion has got the perception ahead of time. There is no tragedy, nor can there begin to be.

Are there other serious treatments of man’s plight and his destiny, under the Christian aegis? Boethius gets consolation and satisfaction from philosophy, imagining that he pierces the mystery of predestination and free will. Dante writes a comedy. Chaucer, who translated Boethius, has his Monk tell pedantically and indiscriminately the “tragedies” of Lucifer, Adam, Samson, Hercules, Nero, Ugolino of Pisa, and Croesus, but they only annoy the merry company of pilgrims. “for litel hevynes Iseight enough to muche folk, I gesse,” and the Nun’s Priest restores equanimity and mirth with the tale of Chauntecleer. Everyman feels the pressure of God’s agent, Death, and the pathos of the failure of things under the sun, but the angel waits for him on the other side of the little door; and he is even accompanied by his Good Deeds: no discontinuity here! Spenser, ground by the fact of Mutabilitie (another name for mortality), works it out, at the end of his moral epic, in a neat punning paradox: “O that great Sabbath God, grant me that Sabbath’s sight.” That is, Thou art both God of hosts and God of peace; even though I cannot understand how, I shall take it on faith, through the mystical, poetic at-one-ment of Thy Name. Marlowe’s Faustus? Greatly planned, perhaps, as Goethe said; but it disintegrates under the incompatibility of the ingredients. Romeo and Juliet is not a tragedy, it is an opera, an aria, a perfect Liebestod two hundred years before Wagner.

Milton is tragedy superseded and overwhelmed by Calvinism and epic; O felix culpa! Samson: autobiography, Greek, Old Testament, heroically finishing a life heroic—nothing is here for tears; spasmically tragic, anything but Christian. Corneille: curious combination of gloire and martyrdom—Christian, but not tragic. Racine is another matter, nor do I believe that the humanistic attempt to discount his ingrained Jansenism has been successful. Insofar as Gnosticism, Manichaeism, Calvinism, Jansenism are religions, they do indeed provide a powerful support for tragedy, and Richards would be right in saying that “tragedy is only possible to a mind which is for the moment apocalyptic or Manichaean” if he restricted it to the initial moment. And, when Racine wrote religious tragedies per se, on commission, he went back to the Old Testament, and the powerful typological Christ-figures in...

[Note: The text is partially obscured and difficult to read.]
Athalie are tragic because they can see the future only darkly, like Eliot's Simeon.

Dostoevsky certainly plunged into the depths of a tragic world, investigated the dilemma of guilt and atonement under the aspect of crime and punishment, knew that wisdom comes only through suffering, plumbed the abyss of the divided heart and soul of modern man; and he presented a vision of social evil which had to be seen ultimately as "the religious question," the question of God and the devil and immortality, and an equally forceful vision of the claims of Sodom and the Madonna on human nature. He makes us go through what he himself called a "powerful negation." He brings to bear on the tragic problem the insights of Zossima, who knows about weeping and about the seed dying and about everybody being responsible for everybody else and everything; and that though all men are Karamazov (with its baseness), all men too are brothers, under the fatherhood of God. But again, it is unsatisfactory: Sonia's Lazarus-solution intrigues Raskolnikov, but does not convince him, at least "not in this story"; Zossima dies out of his book, and Alyosha's own story, deferred to another time, never gets told; the other brother still fail to go the tragic distance.

Dostoevsky's tragic-religious insights were strongly based on the Book of Job, which he read when eight years old and never forgot. His Christianity was curiously tied up with pan-Slavic Russian messianism, and the Orthodox Russian monk; Guardini has shown that, even if we take the Christ-figure of the "Grand Inquisitor" legend as Dostoevsky's instead of Ivan Karamazov's (which is temerarious, at best), it is strangely different from the Christ the rest of the Western world knows.86 Berdyaev and de Lubac, both Christians, tragedy-lovers and Dostoevsky-ites, end by telling us to beware of lingering too long in this apocalyptic whirlpool.89

87 Nicholas Berdyaev, Dostoievsky (New York, 1934), pp. 220-24; Henri de Lubac, The Drama of Atheist Humanism (London, 1949), pp. 208ff. Martin Jarret-Kerr, C.R. (Studies in Literature and Belief, New York, 1954) touches, with tantalizing unevenness, upon our subject; he is especially good on Dostoevsky. He can recognize (speaking of Calderón) that "the Christian hero has the card of immortality and beatitude with which he can trump the last tricks of his opponents, Paganism and Death... what seems to be agony is unreal because it is willed, not undergone—the victim remains in control." Exactly, but in the next paragraph he presents us, summarily, with what is apparently the opposite deduction. "Briefly: only in a world where real tragedy is possible is redemption also possible. Perhaps the reverse is also true: only in a world where redemption—and therefore damnation too—is possible, is tragedy also possible. Thus it is not true that there can be no genuine Christian tragic drama (one
The Possibility of a Christian Tragedy

What of the American Puritans? Hawthorne's figures are reincarnations of Satan, Adam, and Eve; Dimmesdale fears and loves Jehovah, not Christ; and he and Hester "have ransomed [themselves] with all [their] woes." Melville's was the dark and true tragic vision, and eminent enough about the "evil-ness of God" to stir a controversy which is still raging; but Ahab does oscillate from the orphic to the sultanic and madly breaks himself to pieces, like Macbeth. Father Mapple, who has the right answer, deriving "top-gallant delight" from his ability to recognize Christ the savior in the story of Jonah, appears briefly, and ineffectually, at the beginning of the story. The Quakers bow out of the action. Job, Ecclesiastes, King Ahab, Queequeg's Ramadan idol, the feend Fedallah; the great Leviathan himself—these are the gods and prophets who steer the tragic ship to its destruction. And at the end who are left? Rachel, weeping her loss, and finding some sort of consolation in the salvation of the outcast of Genesis, Ishmael.

Faulkner works out his torturous scheme of expiation through what Claude-Edmonde Magny calls an "inverse theology," and his world is the world before the Incarnation—the temple violated—without the prophecy of the Messiah. His highest reach is a Stoical, pre-Christian endurance, a forlorn hope that man "will prevail" (over what, we are not told, nor unto what); and a topsy-turvy un-incarnation which can only be called a Fable.

Mr. Martin has made out a case for Shaw's Saint Joan and Eliot's Becket as tragic-hero saints—but he, too, is unsatisfactory, because he avoids the question, What is a saint, and the destructive implications, for tragedy, of martyrdom. The Shavian saint is nothing but the perennial Shavian heroine, who is exceptional (in this case) because she takes religious manifestations seriously—no more. There is really more of a genuine idea of the tragic in the epilogue and, of course, the preface, than in the play. Eliot, as usual, tries to get in everything at once: Greek chorus and furies, Everyman dialogue, the renaissance, the present day. Again, as usual, his protagonist is split: it is the chorus who, illegitimately, undergo the tragic "action." the saint is not a tragic...
It is instructive of Eliot's honorable failure to make Christianity and tragedy go together that the Greek play with most affinities to *Murder in the Cathedral* is *Oedipus at Colonus*, the exceptional, end-of-life play; his other attempt, *The Cocktail Party*, takes as exemplar *Alcestis*, Euripides' tragedy. *The Family Reunion* is a self-confessed failure to make anything out of Aeschylus' *Orestes* and his Furies. Christianity is intransigent to tragedy; tragedy bucks and balks under Christianity.

Finally, what of those radical gropers, as often as not converts to Catholicism, who boldly investigate the thing itself under the aegis of the tragic sense: Graham Greene, Mauriac, Bloy, Bernanos? I must remain tentative about this latest development. Is a genuine Christian tragedy possible for the saint of the dark night of the soul? Can Bernanos be a "pessimistic Catholic," as Hatzfeld calls him, without falling over into Jansenism? Perhaps, but on the whole it is doubtful.

Greene hit his highest point with *The Heart of the Matter*: an amazing feat of balancing the "two holocausts of Scobie"—of fear and damnation—up to the very end. And maybe it will stand, a tour de force, on its vanishing point. But the signs of imbalance are there already. Scobie's pity is so radically exigent as to appear inhuman, diseased, an obsession, and to drown out the tragic terror. And Greene has since gone on into what might almost be called a fascination with the pathology of sin. Historically, it is reminiscent of Shakespeare's probing the fringes, the frontiers, of tragedy in *Antony*, *Troilus*, *Timon*. He purged himself of it, and wrote the "final plays." But tragedy after him collapsed into the Jacobean nightmare.

This brings us up to date and the moment for summarizing my position. Profound ambiguity in the presence of evil; human life as a predicament; standing under judgment; assurances called into question—these things generate the tragic frame of mind, the tragic sense of life. For the religious person, the problem of evil, which is the root of tragedy, becomes the conviction of sin; the tension, the qualm, the psychomachia, the agonizing, all result from "the dream of innocence confronted by the fact of guilt." Thus tragedy can get a start in a religious vision of human life, and of the cosmos, which is "Jewish" or Manichean. But Christians believe in the efficacy of the Incarnation

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43 Much of this paragraph was printed in a communication by the author to *The Commonweal*, 17 July 1953, 370-71.
and the Resurrection and the Redemption: that the hegemony of the devil was destroyed once and for all. The Gordian tragic knot has been cut. Sin remains, although the devastating effect of Original Sin has been removed, and each man must work out his salvation with diligence, if not in fear and trembling; but his life is no longer in the proper sense a predicament or a dilemma. In whatever theological, philosophical, cultural, or pragmatic terms Christian optimism expresses itself, it is grounded in enthusiasm not for the natural powers of man but for the supernatural fact of redemption. At the root of the question of living in a vale of tears, then, there is a basic incompatibility between the tragic and the Christian view. And nothing has yet come forward which can be called, without cavil, both Christian and Tragedy at the same time.