CHAPTER ONE

Tragedy and The Tragic Vision

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the foundation of all there lay only a wildly seething power which writhing with obscure passions produced everything that is great and everything that is insignificant, if a bottomless void never satiated lay hidden beneath all—what then would life be but despair?

Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling

Now of course the tragic is not the only vision projected by our serious literature and philosophy, nor is it necessarily the profoundest vision. But it is surely the most spectacular, and the most expressive of the crisis-mentality of our time. Consequently, it has won for those works obsessed with it the excited attention of our most stimulating critical minds. Perhaps in their excitement over the individual work they have neglected to define in general terms what this vision is—which is probably as it ought to be with the practicing critic. In any case there does not seem to be a systematic effort to say what is meant by the phrase and what, given this meaning, it has meant to recent writing.

It must be granted that, as with all terms of this kind, any meaning imposed upon it must be an arbitrary one that may or may not command agreement. But, agreed upon or not, it is valuable critically as it throws a consistently clear albeit diffuse light upon a broad enough and deep enough area in our literature. I propose here to create for the term a tentative definition that
I have found most illuminating of modern literature and the modern mind, and in the balance of this volume to use it to conduct exploratory operations on a certain few novels of the last hundred or so years in order to demonstrate its incisive powers. Since I have some idea about where I shall come out, I must admit that my explorations will have all too much direction to them and that consequently they will somewhat mislead us about the total reality of the works in the interest of showing the widespread relevance of my definition. By way of defense I can plead only that the definition was empirical in its origin and that it followed my probings into the individual novels rather than the other way round; in other words, that the meaning I am trying to create for the term is one that in my reading of these novels I feel that I have discovered.

It is surely needless to add that the act of enclosing a number of literary works within the limits of a given definition hardly passes any judgment upon works on either side of the boundary. For a work not to qualify as an example of the tragic vision is hardly a mark against it. Indeed, in the eyes of many, it may be quite the contrary. Of course, the meaning I want to establish for the tragic vision—indeed, any that would be worth very much—will be far more restrictive than the general lay usage of "tragedy" or "the tragic," which somehow broadens out to synonymity with catastrophe, the sorrowful, that which stems from or leads to "pessimism." But how, if we limit ourselves to technical literary definition, can we find for the tragic any meaning beyond that of Aristotle? The answer is, by moving from formalistic aesthetics to what I would term "thematics."  

Thus it becomes necessary first to determine the extent to which we want the meaning of "the tragic vision" entangled with that of "tragedy," surely a term well enough defined in our critical tradition. The most obvious difference I would mark between the two is also a crucial one: "tragedy" refers to an object's literary form, "the tragic vision" to a subject's psy-

1 This is a term to which considerable discussion is devoted in my final chapter.
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psychology, his view and version of reality. It is more than a difference between two extant approaches to the tragic. Rather, the second has usurped the very possibility of the first after having been born side by side with it. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the tragic vision was born inside tragedy, as a part of it: as a possession of the tragic hero, the vision was a reflection in the realm of thematics of the fully fashioned aesthetic totality which was tragedy. But fearful and even demoniac in its revelations, the vision needed the ultimate soothing power of the aesthetic form which contained it—of tragedy itself—in order to preserve for the world a sanity which the vision itself denied.

It is for these reasons that the reader who as a modern is obsessed with notions of the tragic ought in a way to find himself disappointed on turning for the first time to Aristotle’s celebrated definition in the Poetics. We have been so accustomed to doing this treatise deference—and rightfully so from a formalistic point of view—that we can no longer approach it freshly and feel the letdown that should be ours as we glance over its superficial formal prescriptions that are to pass as a description of so sacred and reverenced a literary genre. All this about magnitude and completeness and catharsis—are these to do justice to the profound complex of metaphysical and psychological forces which the tragic unleashes? Or so, at least, we ought as moderns to say superciliously. But probably we should have expected no more than this from the Poetics. Perhaps it was not for the Greek theoretical consciousness—even in as late a representative as Aristotle—to be as self-consciously aware of the disturbing implications of the tragic mentality as it was of the formal requirements which transcended, or rather absorbed, this mentality and restored order to the universe threatened by it.

The cathartic principle itself, in maintaining that pity and fear are not merely to be aroused but to be purged, is evidence of the need in tragedy to have dissonance exploded, leaving only the serenity of harmony behind. As has often been noted, the peace of cosmic reconciliation is most explicitly insisted upon in the concluding portion of the Oresteia—the sublime Eumenides—
or in the magnificent end of Oedipus' story at Colonus. Here is the restorative spirit of superhuman purgation at its most refined. Even in the less exceptional tragedies which do not conclude in such thorough and profound tranquillity—in those, that is, which end more “tragically” in the lay sense—there is often the touch of transcendent grace which saves the cosmos for us in the midst of the irrevocable devastation of human resources. It may, on rare and splendid occasions, be the pure shining thing of Lear; it may more often be little more than the matter-of-fact re-establishment of political order—an order, however, that reflects and is sanctioned by the cosmic order—which may be one of the reasons that it is so helpful to have tragedy concern itself with the fortunes of ruling princes.

But even if there were none of these, so long as tragedy remained a defined literary form, the fearsome chaotic necessities of the tragic vision would have to surrender finally to the higher unity which contained them. It is perhaps in this sense that we can speak of the formally sustained literary work ultimately coming to terms with itself. And from the standpoint of the audience—or at least the trained and sophisticated audience—even if there were no thematic elements of release for the passions aroused by the tragic performers, the disciplining and restricting demands upon aesthetic contemplation made by the rounded aesthetic whole would effect the catharsis demanded by Aristotle. The purging of dangerously aroused emotions, following as it does upon the satisfaction, the soothing grace, bestowed upon wayward materials by aesthetic completeness, uses form to overcome the threat of these materials and, consequently, these emotions. This roundedness, this completeness, carrying “aesthetic distance” with it as it brings us the assurances of form, presents us its formal order as a token, a security—something given in hand—to guarantee the cosmic order beyond the turbulence it has conquered. Thus it is that the cathartic principle is ultimately a purely formalistic one, even as tragedy, despite its foreboding rumblings, can remain a force for affirmation through its formal powers alone. Thus it is too that in the
Poetics Aristotle rightly limits himself to formal considerations, leaving to later and less solvent generations the thematic implications of the vision which, so long as it is aesthetically framed in tragedy, is denied in its very assertion.

It is finally Hegel who, after many centuries during which no radically new approaches are made to tragedy—or at least none that are relevant to my interests here—takes up the task of explaining tragedy and catharsis in the thematic terms that Aristotle could afford to take for granted. Although it must be conceded that Hegel's analysis is clearly indebted to his metaphysics and his general philosophic method and although he does not concern himself with purely formal considerations, it is just this notion of reconciliation, of a final uniting or reuniting, that he emphasizes as the conclusive power of tragedy. His insistence on the absoluteness, the wholeness, the indivisibility of what A. C. Bradley translates as "the ethical substance" is clue to Hegel's attempt to create a metaphysical equivalent for the unity of the Greek world—the unity which, translated into form, allowed tragedy to overcome the heretical defiance of its hero.

For Hegel the hamartia that defines the tragic hero always arises from his exclusive identification with a single moral claim, a claim which, however just within its own sphere, is, from the view of a total morality—that is, the ethical substance—merely partial, a too-assertive particular. Thus the hero's vision is necessarily destructive of the unity of the moral world, threatening with its monomaniac tendencies to produce an anarchy of unsupported metonymic leaps. And in defense of its absolute claims, the ethical substance must justly assert its oneness by ensuring the defeat of the hero whose nature it is, "at once his greatness and his doom, that he knows no shrinking or half-heartedness, but identifies himself wholly with the power

that moves him, and will admit the justification of no other power.”

But this assertion of the ultimate unity of the moral order is what for Hegel leaves Greek tragedy with a final affirmation that transcends the carnage, “an aspect of reconciliation” that authoritatively seals the moral universe for even the most harshly devastated of its sacrificial victims, the bearers of the tragic vision. Here is a significant attempt to account thematically for the cathartic principle, to bring tragedy—for all its deadly turbulence—to the very threshold of a Wordsworthian “tranquil restoration.” And who is to say that this restoration is not part of what may seem to be implied by the Aristotelian concept of dénouement—a falling action which does not usually stop with the hero’s final destruction but leads to a quiet beyond the grave: to a resettling of things in acceptance of this destruction?

Of course it is this final inhibition of the tragic vision, this imposition of formal and moral order upon that which threatens it, that allows these dramas to be properly called classical in the best sense. And when the embracing frame is lost, the romantic tragic vision bursts forth unencumbered—often in merely melodramatic splendor—in no longer reconcilable defiance of traditional aesthetic as well as ethical order. Thus it may seem that Hegel, in assuming the virtues of the Greek world to be those of his own philosophic construct, is hardly representative of the self-conscious modernism that has dominated the last century and a half of our psychological history; the modernism that is characterized by fragmentation rather than by the ever-uniting synthesis which Hegel tried valiantly, if vainly, to impose upon it as its salvation. Can his or can any all-resolving “ethical substance” have validity for us as an absolute and claim our allegiance accordingly? Can it now claim the all-commanding universality that justly, though ruthlessly, imposes itself on the subversive tragic hero in its midst? Or is the tragic hero, as modern, fulfilling a proper human function and even a proper human obligation in standing with his integrity as an individual

\[8^3\] Bradley, p. 72.
outside the universal? Which is another way of suggesting that whatever universals we may be left with do not deserve the obedience of the most daring of us. Hegel created a system whose universals, like those of the Greek world or even of the Elizabethan world as we find it reflected in Shakespeare, have a metaphysical sanction; whose social and political institutions have a cosmic sanction. How accurate an account is this of the shabby, Babbitt-like arbitrary things that must—if anything does—pass with our world as universals, given our secularized, hand-to-mouth versions of the claims of religion, of politics, of social morality? Surely the absolute is not to be found immanently within such as these. Justice, then, has passed from the universal to the rebellious individual; accordingly, our appropriate spokesman on matters relating the individual to the universal and the absolute is not the anachronistic system builder, Hegel, but that heterodox and unprofessional wrecker of the Hegelian universe, Soren Kierkegaard.

Faith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, is not subordinate but superior—yet in such a way, be it observed, that it is the particular individual who, after he has been subordinated as the particular to the universal, now through the universal becomes the individual who as the particular is superior to the universal, for the fact that the individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute.4

At what is for Kierkegaard the most crucial moment of man’s existence—the moment of the leap to faith—the absolute is attainable only through the individual, the particular, the purely personal. It is denied to the universal. Here, unhappily enough perhaps, is the answer of modernism’s “isolato” to the Hegelian attempt to restore the union of men within a congenial universe that sanctioned, indeed commanded, and fixed its divine blessing

upon, this union. For Kierkegaard, the ultimate act—the act of faith—cannot be mediated, since only universals can mediate. Consequently, the paradox of faith is "inaccessible to thought" and cannot be verbally communicated, both thought and language—like reason, on which they largely depend—necessarily expressing universals. Further, it is the inaccessibility of faith to mediation that makes the Abraham who intended to sacrifice Isaac either a murderer or a "true knight of faith"—in my terminology, either a tragic visionary or a religious visionary—but not the sacrificer of his individual self to the universal expressed in moral law. The latter individual would be the highest form of ethical man but, for Kierkegaard, something less than either visionary. And Kierkegaard's Abraham, whichever visionary he may be, repudiates the universal. Thus the "immediacy" of either the tragic or the religious vision eliminates the universal as a possible resting place for the errant, as a possible justification of what he has so privately dared to will. And we can never be sure which of the two visions he carries. Indeed, now beyond reason, how can he himself claim certainty? For the religious vision would be too easy for Kierkegaard if one could know its authenticity.

The categories which Kierkegaard can help us impose provide our insecure world with alternatives to the way of Greek tragedy as it is interpreted by Nietzsche as well as by Hegel. While Nietzsche is, like Kierkegaard, an unhappy epitome of modern man, an alienated creature who is close to being himself a tragic visionary, he is like Hegel in wistfully finding and admiring in early tragedy the elements of reconciliation that give order to elements of chaotic conflict. Nietzsche sees united in tragedy the Apollonian and Dionysian motives, appropriately named by him for their respective gods: the one the dreamlike, sublime, and gracefully measured order of the light principle, in

6 In light of the shriveling of the tragic concept in the modern world and the reduction of a total view to the psychology of the protagonist, I believe that this protagonist is now more appropriately designated "tragic visionary" than he is "tragic hero."
the highest sense the civilizing principle; the other the primordial, orgiastic release of the natural principle—the "underground" reality probably related to Jung's "racial unconscious" or to Freud's "id"—the barbarizing principle. Nietzsche sees these motives as akin to the forces represented by the creative and yet restrained Olympians and by the chaos-producing Titans, except, of course, that instead of the unreconcilable warfare between Olympians and Titans there is in Greek culture a perfect blending of the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians... out of the original Titan thearchy of terror the Olympian thearchy of joy gradually evolved through the Apollonian impulse towards beauty... How else could this people, so sensitive, so vehement in its desires, so singularly constituted for suffering, how could they have endured existence, if it had not been revealed to them in their gods, surrounded with a higher glory?

Thus the Apollonian can so transform Dionysian terror "that lamentation itself becomes a song of praise."

Here is another thematic rendering of the principle of catharsis. But in order to make the formula work properly, both motives have to be maintained and maintained in equal strength. The Dionysian must be there for the Apollonian to transform, so that Apollonian radiance can retain its brilliance only by continually illuminating the Dionysian abyss. But it is an abyss which must not be denied, indeed must be acknowledged for what it is. Without the Dionysian, the Apollonian would seem to reflect a shallow, unearned optimism, a misreading of life that leaves the inescapable terror out of it. Thus Nietzsche can scorn the bland interpretations of "the serious and

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significant idea of Greek cheerfulness": "no matter where we turn at the present time we encounter the false notion that this cheerfulness results from a state of unendangered comfort." For the Apollonian cannot sustain itself in isolation; it can exist only in counterposition to the Dionysian. Otherwise it becomes perverted—as Nietzsche tells us it was perverted through Euripides—into the merely "Socratic," that moralistic denier of the Dionysian and consequently the destroyer of tragedy.

But what if we should find the Dionysian without the Apollonian? Here we would have life unalleviated, endlessly and unendurably dangerous, finally destructive and self-destructive—in short, the demoniacal. In effect it would be like tragedy without that moment in which the play comes round and the cosmos is saved and returned to us intact. It would be, in other words, the tragic vision wandering free of its capacious home in tragedy. The therapy produced by catharsis, which allowed the subversive elements to be healthily exposed and aesthetically overcome, would no longer be available. And the alienated members, now unchallenged, would be free to turn inward upon themselves to nourish their indignation in the dark underground. Nietzsche himself has told us:

The tradition is undisputed that Greek tragedy in its earliest form had for its sole theme the sufferings of Dionysus, and that for a long time the only stage-hero was simply Dionysus himself. . . . until Euripides, Dionysus never once ceased to be the tragic hero . . . in fact all the celebrated figures of the Greek Stage—Prometheus, Oedipus, etc.—are but masks of this original hero, Dionysus.

But picture a world into which Dionysus cannot be reabsorbed by way of the Apollonian with its final assertion of Greek "cheerfulness" and aesthetic form, a world in which the Apollonian and Dionysian—long since torn asunder—must live in a lasting separation that causes each to pervert its nature, the Apollonian becoming the superficial worship of happiness and the Dionysian the abandoned worship of demonism. Our modern
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The tragic vision is the Dionysian vision still, except that the visionary is now utterly lost, since there is no cosmic order to allow a return to the world for him who has dared stray beyond.

The Kierkegaardian spirit would rather characterize the tragic vision as "despair," perhaps finally much the same thing. It is despair which for Kierkegaard is both the most wretched and the most hopeful stage of man's sub-Christian existence. With some interpolation and considerable simplification on my part, the phenomenological pattern one may draw from Kierkegaard for the tragic visionary may be seen as something like the following sketch. A man lives his day-to-day existence below the religious level, either "aesthetically," as an amoral or sub-moral hedonist, or "ethically," by easily subscribing, consciously or unconsciously, but for the most part automatically, to that hierarchy of moral values which enables him comfortably to function. If he is a self-conscious moralist, he is concerned with the discovery of order in apparent disorder; concerned, that is, with universal principles, but principles that are discoverable in and referable to the world of human relations.

While the ethical level is certainly an advance over the mindless complacency in the midst of an unperceived chaos found on Kierkegaard's "aesthetic" level, nevertheless this

In the interest of accuracy it must be acknowledged that Kierkegaard himself explicitly defines what he calls the tragic hero very differently from the way I am attributing to his view here. In Fear and Trembling he specifically claims that "the tragic hero still remains within the ethical." He sees the tragic hero as allowing himself to be embraced by the universal, his most cherished interests to be sacrificed to it. Perhaps here, as in so many other instances, Kierkegaard finds himself borrowing from the very Hegelianism he is bent on destroying. I believe that, as part of his dissatisfaction with the aesthetic in general, he never took this matter of the tragic as seriously as he might have taken it, that he never realized the revolutionary treatment of it that is promised by his other philosophic claims. It is thus, I hope, in the Kierkegaardian spirit, that I use Kierkegaard to support my own claims about the tragic though they run counter to his own occasional declarations.

Whenever I use this term in the very special way of Kierkegaard I shall set it in quotation marks. Where it appears without them, it is being
ethic level, because it sees values—and the order constructed in terms of values—as immanent rather than as transcendent, must itself remain pragmatic in its dictates for action. The orderly and abstract principles, bounded by the uses of this world and resting on rationality, much resist the paradox or absurdity which for Kierkegaard characterizes the immediacy and subjectivity of Christian consciousness. Thus finally common-sense pragmatism must inhere in the ethic level. And our ethical man, assuming the validity of his abstract and universal principles inasmuch as they are conducive to order, can make decisions cleanly, can act in accordance with these principles—as if they were the absolute—since they blink the possible existence of a true moral dilemma characterized by endless ambiguity. This is the farthest reach of Hegelian man.

But our man can undergo a cosmic "shock": he can one day, to use Kafka's metaphor, wake up and find himself irrevocably arrested "without having done anything wrong." Or an Ahab,

used in its common sense that pertains primarily to works of art and to our proper and limited responses to them as art.

It is here, in his insistence that religion has dimensions beyond morality, that Kierkegaard strikes at the roots of naturalistic humanism which would identify the two. Of course one may claim that Kierkegaard rather overdoes their separation since for him, it seems, the one (religion) can begin only where the other (morality) leaves off. I must, however, make it clear that, whenever speaking here of Kierkegaard's concept of religion, I mean only his version of Christianity. It must be conceded that in many places he refers to a pre-Christian, almost naturalistic religion, one in which the absolute is still immanent in the universal and which, consequently, still falls within the ethical. But if this stoical kind of religion can produce "the knight of infinite resignation," in its security it of course cannot begin to reach toward "the true knight of faith," who is rather a product of the loneliness and daring, the absurdity and subjectivity of Christian consciousness. It is only his notion of Christianity—defiant as it is of the ethical—to which Kierkegaard attributes absolute value, so that, to simplify matters, I have felt justified in speaking of it informally as his notion of religion in general, to the neglect of his other, inferior kind of religion.
living until then by the proper laws of seamanship, can one day lose his leg to the leviathan; a Lord Jim, living until then by a schoolboy’s code of honor, can one day be paralyzed into inaction and be made to play the coward’s role. Melville’s Pierre, having dedicated himself at all costs to absolute righteousness, can discover in his righteousness a lust that has led to incest; Conrad’s Kurtz, having dedicated himself through altruism to a missionary zeal, can discover in his zeal a worship of self and of gold that has led to blood sacrifice. Perhaps this shattering seizure is precisely what ethical man has had coming for assuming, as fallible individual, his identification with an ethical absolute. For the ethical is, by definition, the universal. And, however well meaning, the individual may very well be doomed to pervert the absolute he claims to represent, since he comes to it as individual and particular, and thus as unsanctioned.

In any case, with the shock our man is jarred loose. For “aesthetic” man the oblivious evasions of hedonic existence will of course no longer do. And ethical man, confronted by a moral contradiction which resists the elimination of either pole as well as the synthesis of both, finds suddenly that the neatly ordered and easily enacted worldly rights and wrongs of his ethical assumptions are utterly inadequate to the data of his moral experience. Unless he yields to “infinite resignation” by blindly, if courageously, sacrificing himself to the implacable demands of ethical absoluteness—thus at all costs still remaining Hegelian man—he must deny its authority forever. And then, hopelessly adrift from his or any other moorings, he can float into willlessness and thus abdicate from tragic heroism, or he can surge toward the demoniac. If his rebellion has rendered him unfit for society and its necessary universals—its laws—it is because, at whatever price, he has seen beyond them. If his end, as tragic, must be condemned even as it is pitied by the trim categories of

10 This is in effect Kierkegaard’s own definition of the tragic hero. He allows him to go no further; and this admission on my part indicates how far beyond him I have without authorization moved using his tools.
worldly morality, he may, prideful as he is, take further pride in the fact that he has defiantly looked upon those insoluble cosmic antinomies which have dictated his fall.

Someone like Conrad's Marlow, however—the sensible even if sensitive man—must, at whatever cost to his pride and his vision, finally rest in the ethical level, however sympathetic he may be to those who have renounced it to move into the realm of the tragic. Who is to say whether it is out of a "failure of nerve" or out of a special strength flowing from a profoundly tranquil vision, hardly known to us since the Greeks, that he has resisted the unmitigated tragic? It depends, very likely, on whether our view is Kierkegaard's or that of a less austere, less Protestant authority; on whether ours is the tragic vision or the classic vision.

On the other hand, our excommunicated ethical man, realizing the complete futility of human existence, cannot find a relationship with anything beyond it. His permanent forsaking of the universal seems to forbid it. This, the essence of the tragic vision, is "the sickness unto death," despair. It is the stage induced by the shock; the stage which, beyond the "aesthetic" and the ethical, yet falls short of Kierkegaard's version of the Christian. An advance over the first two, it is yet much more treacherous and, if one remains in it continually, far more miserable. If one can attain a break-through—a bravely irrational one unmediated by universals—he can reach the glories of transcendence; if he fails, he must live in the contemplation of nothingness. Or, to put it more specifically, at best he can become a Kierkegaard, if we grant that Kierkegaard ever, or for very long, accomplished the leap of faith; if not, he must remain in the torments of the Zarathustrian Nietzsche or of a more consistent Heidegger who constantly and unblinkingly dares encounter the nothingness that has capriciously hurled him into momentary existence. But he can never again rest in the self-deceptions of our John Deweys: those of our insistent naturalists who, for all the hardheadedness of their religious disbelief, are
yet naively optimistic believers in a structured social morality and in social progress. These are, from the Kierkegaardian standpoint, the men of little heart; those who, evading the atheist's existential obligation to confront nothingness and its frighteningly empty consequences, construct elaborate rational structures based on nothing else: who whistle in the dark as if all were light.

One may prefer to say that it represents a supreme act of human courage to create meaningful communal structures of value on a substructure of acknowledged nothingness. Perhaps, as humanists say, man's creating God is a more sublime act than God's creating man. Perhaps. But the honest existentialist—anxious to confront his ontological status—would see the naturalist's structure in the void as an evasive act of bravado, not a closing act of bravery.

In the Kierkegaardian universe, then, there are two authentic visions—those I have termed the tragic and the religious—that can be earned through crisis by being forged in what Dostoevsky spoke of as the "great furnace of doubt." The other I have referred to is in this sense an illusory one. For the cheerfully naturalistic vision, which, pampering its security, denies itself nothing despite the fearsome implications of its own metaphysical denials, which existentially shirks the void it must rationally insist upon, is a pre-crisis vision, an illusion of ethical man demanded by his comfort, but one the stricken man can no longer afford. Like Kurtz, the tragic visionary may at the critical moment search within and find himself "hollow at the core," but only because he has suddenly been seized from without by the hollowness of his moral universe, whose structure and meaning have until then sustained him. What the shock reveals to its victim—the existential absurdity of the moral life—explodes the meaning of the moral life, its immanent god and ground. And there can be no post-crisis meaning and god except in defiance of reason, in acknowledgment of the impossibly paradoxical nature of moral existence. But this is to go beyond the despair that defines the tragic visionary and to make the leap to the tran-
scendent subjectivity of the only kind of religious vision that the Kierkegaardian Protestant world leaves to the stricken.¹¹

On the other hand, the tragic visionary, in taking the alternative of defiance and seizing upon nothingness, is alone bold enough to take the existential consequences of his godlessness; and he takes them with pride, the very *hybris* that, in its sinfulness, moved him to godlessness rather than to transcendence. But he does not, like the naturalist, try to play both sides of the street to earn the prize of an ungrounded something: a world philosophically negated which is somehow made to yield the existential ease that would come if there were a meaning and purpose to be grasped. Sick of his pre-crisis delusion, the tragic visionary is God's angry man who will take only the real thing. He will refuse any longer to fool himself with the comfortable communal halfway houses of good works as a substitute for

¹¹ Although this issue may not seem germane to a discussion of the tragic vision, it is worth adding—in order to expose another favorite illusion of our naturalistic and anti-existential tradition—that the religious vision described here cannot in fairness be reduced to any so-called “failure of nerve.” This phrase the Kierkegaardian would reserve for the ethical man who flees the impact of the shock, for the naturalist himself. The shock may indeed cause our nerves to quake, but they fail only with the failure of our inner strength to manage, from the depths of despair, the awesome leap that makes “the true knight of faith”—no easy accomplishment and hardly a soothing one. The earned religious vision must not be cheapened. It is a vision that runs quite counter to that implied by the Philistine claim that there were “no atheists on Bataan.” No matter how devout the final protestations of these doomed souls, these protestations were all simply too comforting in their urgency, from the Kierkegaardian point of view, to have a claim to religious authenticity. Thus Kierkegaard comments on people who want to make an easy, escapist thing of faith:

... these caricatures of faith are part and parcel of life's wretchedness, and the infinite resignation has already consigned them to infinite contempt. ... They would suck worldly wisdom out of the paradox. Perhaps one or another may succeed in that, for our age is not willing to stop with faith, with its miracle of turning water into wine, it goes further, it turns wine into water. (*Fear and Trembling*, p. 50)
the absolute dedication of a religious faith which his inherited skepticism, issuing its curse, has denied him.

Of course, from a less severely Protestant point of view, other "authentic" visions would be sanctioned. One that concerned me earlier is what I called the classic vision, a vision that is of the world without being crass, that is universal and conducive to order without optimistically thinning moral reality as the superficially ethical man would. This vision is the all-embracing one of an older world and an older order. It is what I have tried to talk about in discussing the formal and thematic triumph of tragedy over the errant tragic vision it contained within it. It is as if the security of the older order wanted to test the profundity of its assurances, its capacity to account for the whole of human experience, and thus bred within itself the tragic vision as its agent provocateur. And by having the rebellion incarnate in the tragic visionary finally succumb to a higher order which absorbs but never denies the "destructive element," by purifying itself through the cathartic principle, tragedy is asserting the argument a fortiori for the affirmation of its humanistic and yet superhumanistic values. Consequently, it can witness all that befalls its hero without sharing in his disavowal of the meaning of our moral life; without denying, with him, the sensibleness of the universe and of life despite the explosive terrors they can hold in store.

But human possibilities, reduced as they are by disintegrations within the world that produced a Kierkegaard as its spokesman, no longer can reach to so inclusive a vision. If the only appeal to universals, to order, is pre-religious as well as pre-tragic, then the path of the religious visionary is as solitary as the tragic visionary's. And the ethical once shattered, there is no higher return to community—although, of course, for the less daring there may always be a retreat. The tragic vision remains what it was, but it can no longer be made through tragedy to yield to an order and a shared religious vision. The ultimately absorbent power of tragedy, symbolic of the earned affirmation of universals, is gone, with the result that the solitary visionary is left
unchallenged, except by the threats of uncomprehending and unsympathizing destruction at the hands of aroused ethical righteousness, the arm of social practicality. This is hardly the all-deserving antagonist the tragic vision once had, nor is it one that can command a satisfying aesthetic completeness any more than it can a moral-religious unity. Instead, in the Kierkegaardian universe, we now find for the aware and authentic existent an unresolvable disjunctive: either the way of nothingness or the way of transcendence, but both equally the way of utter solitude. The universals which must damn him have been left behind.

It is perhaps for these reasons that recent literature expressing an earned religious vision is hard to come by. For this kind of religious vision is primarily characterized by the fact that it cannot be shared. Equally subjective, the tragic as the demoniac vision can at least be dramatized by being contrasted to the ethical with which it is at war and which, in defense of society, must seek to punish it—for good reasons and for bad. We can be shown the ambiguous nature of the values at stake in this struggle: the need for the insights provided by the tragic to advance our understanding beyond the unaccommodating caution of social necessity as institutionalized in the ethical, and yet the need to strike out at the visionary, to cling to the props society provides, at whatever cost to insight, since, man being a social animal, his struggle through daily drudgeries is a crucial and ordering activity that must not be threatened.

To sustain a balance and, consequently, an aesthetic tension between these antagonists, the author must resist identifying himself too thoroughly either with the tragic visionary or with the representative of the ethical. If he becomes one with his ethical man, he must dismiss the tragic realm too summarily, without granting its power—however costly—of revealing the full density of moral experience and the shallowness of the reasonable order it has been forced to cast off. And he must sell the vision short as vision, however quick he is to see it as tragic, or anyway as doomed, if not as at worst merely execrable or at
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best pathetic. Or if, on the other hand, the author becomes one with his tragic visionary, he so cuts himself off from man's communal need that, in surrendering to moral chaos, he surrenders also the only possibility left him to impose aesthetic form. Further, he shows himself to be too sure of the vision to acknowledge it as really tragic, however quick he is—in contrast to our too ethical author—to grant its value as a vision. Only within the balance, and the mutual qualifications it provides, can the vision be maintained both as tragic and as a vision worthy of our concern and our wonder. Thus, at the one extreme, in Heart of Darkness, for example, Conrad, through his alter ego Marlow, rejects Kurtz—indeed is utterly offended by the man—only in continual acknowledgment that his rebellion against decency, however odious, renders him in some way superior even to Marlow. And, at the other extreme, close as Gide comes to embracing the reckless passions of his hero in The Immoralist, the classical artist in him maintains enough distance to reveal to us honestly, and even with some condemnation, their destructive and self-destructive consequences.

Even with the ethical and the tragic held in such balance, however, the ethical may seem finally to be treated superciliously and even as at least half blind to what really is going on. And since the tragic is from the ethical standpoint so dangerously evil, there would seem to be a need for some level beyond the ethical from which the tragic visionary would be judged absolutely—a level which would include his insight and with it soar beyond a parochial pragmatism, but one which would have passed beyond the rage of rebellion to a final, perhaps otherworldly affirmation. But this is to call once again for what we no longer have—for the transformations that only tragedy can perform. For how are we now to distinguish outwardly between the religious and the tragic, between the angelic and the demoniac, when both equally transgress the ethical and the universal? As Kierkegaard in such brilliant detail asks, how shall we tell the Abraham among us from the self-deceived, maddened infanticide? To stop short of the religious insight is of course to
rest in demonism; yet to leap to the religious vision, itself a perilous undertaking, is not to deny the temporal and, of course, the dramatic validity of the tragic. In neither instance is a retreat to the ethical possible. And the balance of necessities between the tragic and the ethical must continue as the primary mode of dramatic conflict, with the inherent weaknesses of each—the moral failing of the one and the visionary failing of the other—poised against each other to create the unresolvable tension that must now replace tragedy's more sublime catharsis as the principle of aesthetic control.

By now I hope I have clarified the sense in which I have been speaking of the unrelieved tragic vision as a modern vision, which is to claim also that it is a Protestant vision and, in an obvious sense, a romantic vision. Further, in its seizing upon the particular and its denial of any totality it is an heretical vision; and in its defiance of all rational moral order it is a demoniac vision. Finally, in a very special sense it is a casuistic vision; and it is this characteristic, perhaps, that makes it especially accessible to literary portrayal. The tragic vision, a product of crisis and of shock, is an expression of man only in an extreme situation, never in a normal or routine one. Literature dealing with it frequently dwells on the exceptional man; and when it does choose a normal man it does so only to convert him, by way of the extremity he lives through, into the exceptional man. The tragic vision is, by my definition, a vision of extreme cases, a distillate of the rebellion, the godlessness which, once induced by crisis, purifies itself by rejecting all palliatives. And the tragic visionary, by the stark austerity of his ontological position and of his dramatic position in the fable, is the extremist who—despite his rich intermingling with the stuff of experience—finds himself transformed from character to parable.

The literary obsession with extremity, with the exceptional, may represent an attempt at realism ultimately more sincere and more authentic than the cultivation of the norm, of what Lionel Trilling celebrates as "the common routine." If one wishes to assume the Kierkegaardian version of the human predicament,
he will insist that it does and that at all times it has represented
the only authentic attempt at realism. Even without Kierkegaard-
ian psychoanalysis, however, we must admit that, at least in our
time, driven as it is by crises and "arrests" and blind as it is to the
healing power and saving grace of tragedy, the tragic has come,
however unfortunately, to loom as a necessary vision and—or
so it seems to the sadder of us—as one that can be neither reduced
nor absorbed. Or is it, perhaps, that the Kierkegaardian version
is right and that our world has itself become the tragic visionary,
in its unbelief using self-destructive crises to force itself finally
to confront the absurdities of earthly reality—those which have
always been there lurking beneath for the visionary who would
dare give up all to read them? Which is to ask, fearfully and
even unwillingly, whether we have not been beguiled by
aesthetic satisfactions and whether the utterly stripped tragic
vision may not after all be less illusory than the fullness which
shines through tragedy.