# TRAGIC KNOWLEDGE IN POSTMODERN NOVELS

BY

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Abstract

TRAGIC KNOWLEDGE IN POSTMODERN NOVELS

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In this dissertation, I read postmodern novels through modern philosophies of tragedy. Skeptical thinkers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Walter Benjamin recuperate tragedy's premodern logic to contrast it to the progressive narratives of the Enlightenment. Distrusting the power of knowledge, they advocate ancient tragedy as an aesthetic weapon against it. The novelists of the late twentieth century continue this tradition in fictional form, I argue, by representing plots and protagonists who are determined by events that precede them. Prolepsis functions in these novels to create histories that function as a secular version of fate. With this temporal inversion, they invite their readers to identify ambivalently with protagonists who have no hope of a happy ending. They elicit difficult sympathies that resemble tragic *eleos* and *phobos*, and they put those affects to similar purposes as ancient tragedy did: to do the cultural work of a *polis* whose limits are in flux. With the hypothesis that the novel functions for the global community as tragedy did for the ancient city-state, I read novels that include Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral*, and Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

## Tragic Knowledge in Postmodern Novels

In his address to the United Nations two months after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, George Bush put the rhetoric of tragedy to its time-honored use: to push the limits of political community by eliciting an audience's pity and turning it to terror. "After tragedy, there is a time for sympathy and condolence," he declared, and that time has passed; the citizens of the world acted well, and his nation appreciated the sentiments. "But the time for action has arrived. Every nation has a stake in this cause. As we meet, the terrorists are planning more murder, perhaps in my country, perhaps in yours" (qtd. in Aita). Little consensus exists about the definition of "tragedy," but thinkers from Aristotle to Bush locate it here, in a spectacle of great human suffering that threatens to become greater. Tragedy, they concur, invites its spectators to feel sorrow for the sorrows of other people, and it tells them that they might be next. This threat inheres in the word from its first usage, even before it referred to events that exist outside the frame of fiction; as a literary genre, tragedy served the same rhetorical function as the president's speech to the U.N.[1] It reminded its spectators that nothing could protect them from the possibility of random terror, creating a collective experience that would pave the way for the *polis*. As it asked them to turn their feeling for others into fear for themselves, it diminished the differences between them in proportion to the fragility they shared.

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[1] The term was probably first applied to a "real-life event" by Otto of Freising in the twelfth century, as Terry Eagleton suggests in *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (13).

Bush's audience would not have found those directives easy to follow, nor would the Greeks who filled the theaters of ancient tragedy. Both crowds comprised new and contentious neighbors, who shared a common cause that was nebulous at best.[2] Tragic drama arose in Greece during the centuries when the ancient *polis* existed like the global community does today: as a debatable concept, but not yet as a regulating body. Tragedies were first performed in Greece around 534 A.D., in festivals that brought people from outlying areas to participate in the conviviality that the city-state could offer. But historians like Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet contend that the tragic theater did more than entertain the new citizens (181). By representing a spectacle of undeserved suffering within a fictional frame, it provided a vocabulary for the philosophical problems they faced when they founded their first legal system. When tragedy's audiences watched Antigone suffer for her father's crimes, they debated the limits of divine mercy, and by extension, the parameters of mortal law.[3] And the excessive quality of that suffering only compounded the drama's civilizing effects. With the representation of punishments that exceeded the crimes, tragedy commanded a sympathy that was bound to be collective, bringing even the most recalcitrant citizens firmly into the fold.

This experience of commonality is essential to Aristotle's definition of the genre, which exemplifies a theory of reading that prevails before and after modernity. Aristotle describes a tragedy as the sum total of the response it elicits, arguing that a drama is

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[2] In this argument, I build on existing surveys of previous moments when western culture revives the rhetoric of tragedy. Particularly useful is Timothy Reiss' *Tragedy and Truth*, which traces the ways in which tragedy serves to stabilize precarious political conditions in western culture. He reads Shakespeare in the context of the Thirty Years War and the German Romantics in terms of the nation's gradual unification, contending that "the periods in which tragedy has appeared have been notable for a profound reorganization of the political and social order" New Haven: Yale, UP, 1980 (282).

[3] Tragedy was "not only an art form," Vernant and Naquet suggest. "It [was] also a social institution that the city, by establishing competitions in tragedies, set alongside its political and legal institutions" (33).

tragic if it evokes both *eleos* and *phobos* from its audience (47).[4] A relationship rather than a text, tragedy is what happens between the suffering hero and his pitying, terrified audience. This ancient approach to reading finds parallels in postmodernity, when critics share Aristotle's belief that every text is integrally related to the people who read it. Assuming that every act of reading is jintrinsically political, and every text both reflects and reshapes the culture in which it appears, they contend that every reader is socially constructed and every reading is culturally bound. Aristotelian terms are updated in this echo of premodern logic, which assumes that the way we read is shaped by our identity, and our identities are shaped in turn by the texts we read. After modernity, as before, readers locate themselves at the intersection of their identity, their culture, and the text in question.

This theoretical similarity parallels a more tangible likeness between the premodern and postmodern periods: after modernity, the limits of community become as unclear as they were before it. Just as the ancients tried to imagine that they belonged to the newly formed *polis*, the constituents of the "global community" try to imagine that they belong to each other in some meaningful way. The citizens of distant nations use new technologies to learn a shared body of knowledge—to know the same celebrities and eat the same fast food—but the purposes to which they put that knowledge remain an

[4] Aristotle describes the emotions that tragedy elicits without saying exactly who experiences them: "Through pity (*eleos)* and fear (*phobos*), [tragedy] achieves the purgation of those emotions," (*P*, 6:49b). In this way, he conflates the audience's experience with the hero's and defines the genre by the closeness of that relationship. Critics have frequently read this passage in spatial terms, defining tragic pity as an emotional proximity between people. *Eleos*, G.M.A. Grube writes, is "a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it; an evil that one might expect to come upon himself or one of his friends, and when it seems near. Qtd. in Kaufmann (268).

open question.[5] The distance grows between realities that are coincident but mutually exclusive, and increasingly so: as one hemisphere endures violence on an unprecedented scale, the other witnesses it from a position of unprecedented safety. Tensions grow between worlds that are polarized but inextricable, with the stability of one economy resting on the instability of others. A vaguely defined *us* finds the time and technology to learn what happens to *them*; we learn to access the relevant data, but the experience it represents remains foreign. That noticeable absence of any universal truth provides the content for most postmodern theory, and challenges institutions like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, which work to establish a law that might be called "cosmopolitan." Both theoretical and juridical discourses witness the widening gap between what we know about each other and what we understand.

The postmodern novel negotiates that gap by incorporating two forms of tragedy's premodern logic. First, it constructs a dynamic between a protagonist who functions like a tragic hero in relation to a narrator who functions like his chorus, by failing to comprehend the suffering that he represents. Diegetic narrators like Art Speigelman's Artie, Toni Morrison's Denver, and Phillip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman appear in the novel as ordinary citizens who transcribe the consequences of the extraordinary circumstances that precede them. They serve a formal function like the tragic chorus' as Hegel describes it, providing a lens through which their spectators can

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[5] Bassam Tibi clarifies this point with reference to Jürgen Habermas' distinction between institutional and cultural modernity. Defining the former in the tangible evidence of scientific and technological developments, Habermas locates the latter in philosophical terms. Cultural modernity, he argues, is a collective faith in the ability of every individual to determine his fate himself. Referring to these two categories, Tibi articulates the ways that modernity is ambivalently received in "non-western cultures, where institutional *but not cultural modernity* can take structural root... Those who cite the wide spread of what I call 'Coca-Cola culture' are misled." As evidence, Tibi cites the response of the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammed to "naive questions by two German journalists writing for *Der Spiegel*." "Renowned for his contempt of the west," Tibi writes, Mohammed "answered rightly that 'when I eat a hamburger, I certainly do not change my values overnight" (24-25).

observe an experience that would otherwise remain fundamentally foreign.[6] This mitigating presence comes *after* the disaster much as the reader inevitably does: to look back, and try in vain to imagine how horrible it must have been. Readers identify with that effort and enter an imagined community of people we perceive to be "like us," and in that sense of commonality, we find consolation for our failures to sympathize with "them" when they suffer most.

This kind of identification depends on the presence of suffering that appears to be preordained. Novels of the late twentieth century represent plots that begin with disaster and unfold in its wake, using prolepsis to create a secular narrative of fate. Contemporary readers can only watch—as tragedy's audiences did—while these characters navigate through the ruins of their lives, ignorant of the knowledge we have: that they are determined by some prefatory event. Prolepsis makes this possible, enlightening the reader with the bus accident that will destroy the town of Russell Banks' *The Sweet Hereafter*; the assassination that will rock the nation of Don DeLillo's *Libra*; the infanticide of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the murder of *Jazz*; the murders of Jim Crace's *Being Dead* and Alice Seybold's *Lovely Bones*; the Holocaust of Art Speigelman's *Maus*, Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, and Martha Cooley's *The Archivist*; and the terrorist bombing of Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral*. The protagonists of these novels don't pursue a resolving enlightenment that seduces them like a grail; rather, they inherit a perplexing intelligence that torments them like an affliction. *What will happen next* becomes an inoperative question that is replaced by the

[6] Hegel writes that, "the chorus is not at all a moralist, disengaged like a spectator, a person reflecting on the thing purely from outside, in himself uninteresting and tedious, and introduced simply for the sake of his reflections. On the contrary, the chorus is the actual substance of the moral life and action of the heroes themselves" (1210-1211).

rhetorical *why did this have to happen*? The promise of an answer fades, and the empirical knowledge that is the currency of the modern novel becomes irrelevant to the task. The epistemology of tragedy resurfaces to fill that vacuum, supporting a philosophical tradition that wields the ancient genre against the Enlightenment's narratives of progress.

Tragedy serves this purpose in the modern philosophical tradition. Counter-enlightenment thinkers as diverse as Simone Weil and Friedrich Nietzsche unite in support of the genre, which they use to refute their contemporaries' faith that the search for knowledge will lead the culture to happiness. Postmodern protagonists share Nietzsche's skepticism about a world in which "science is rushing irresistibly to its limits, where the optimism essential to its logic collapses." These fictional citizens of Prozac nation—like deconstructive literary critics—follow in the footsteps of the übermensch, who "finds himself staring into the ineffable. If he sees here, to his dismay, how logic twists around itself and finally bites itself in the tail, there dawns a new form of knowledge, tragic knowledge, which needs art as both protection and remedy, if we are to bear it" (74-75). Novels duly provide these consolations for their readers, who enter into one-sided intimacies with protagonists who have no corollary communion. From Toni Morrison's Sethe to Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe, our protagonists struggle in vain against the histories that contain them. Trapped in their culture like flies in a jar, they raise the rhetorical questions that Søren Kierkegaard attributes the heroes of tragedy: "Why has this befallen me? Why can it not be otherwise?" (149).

With those laments, these novels test the limits of the readerly response that Aristotle called *eleos*. Translators of the *Poetics* concede their inability to convey *eleos* in English: "pity" is the best they can do, and they admit that is not very good. Pity assumes a clear distinction between subject and object to describe how a lucky, happy person might feel towards his neighbor who is less so; *eleos*, as Walter Kauffman points out, is not "transitive in that sense" (10). It assumes that when one person is unhappy, his neighbor becomes unhappy, too, and it names a sympathy that is generalized, for the sorrows that befall us all (45).[7] Tragedy puts these intransitive effects to work for the newly minted polis, to remind every citizen of what he shares with the rest: merely mortal, he is necessarily subject to the whims of the gods (Vernant and Naquet, 156). He witnesses the spectacle of the hero's suffering with the knowledge that this could also happen to him, as Aristotle suggests, or to "one of his own" (*R*, 2.8).

*Eleos* names that affective glue that is essential to tragedy, and also to the ideal state as Plato describes it. "When any one of the citizens experiences any good or evil," Plato's Socrates decrees, "the whole State will make his case their own, and will either rejoice or sorrow with him" (2.374). Seeing good and evil as contingencies that descend from above like weather, the ancients did not believe that their fates were within their control. They bore that degree of contingency and the *phobos* it produced by creating political bonds that distributed the effects of their luck more evenly among them, ensuring that whatever good or evil befell one citizen would be shared by the rest. Tragedy represents that redistribution of fortune, securing the burgeoning polis as it

[7] As Kaufmann describes it, tragedy's audiences are, "moved by intense suffering, shaken by it to the point of sharing it, [even though] there is not necessarily anyone whom we pity or for whom we feel sorry. We do not remain aloof enough—nor is the suffering—strange as that may sound—so clearly localized in individuals for whom we might feel pity" (45-46).

reiterates the idea that fate is as unfathomable as it is inescapable (Vernant and Naquet, 78). It wields this knowledge to induce a *phobos* that is too terrible to be tolerated with the consolation of *eleos*, frightening its audiences with portraits of human vulnerability while it soothes them with reminders that they are vulnerable together.

"Pity" fails to name this collective spirit of tragedy, but the translators are not to blame: they have no vocabulary that is suited to the task, because modernity renders *eleos* obsolete. Modern logic—capitalist, empiricist, novelistic—extricates subjects from objects, dividing the good from the bad to distribute wealth accordingly. It insists that each citizen rises or falls strictly on the strength of his character, and it rejects the notion that fate is a commonly held property. Tragedy becomes illegible to modern readers who follow this logic, as Kierkegaard complains:

> Our age has lost all the substantial categories of family, state and race. It has to leave the individual entirely to himself, so that in a stricter sense he becomes his own creator. His guilt is therefore sin, his pain remorse. But the tragic is then done away with (148).

*Eleos* is lost on the age of Enlightenment. Modern readers are taught to perceive their similarities as citizens less than their differences as individuals, because they need their individual qualities to rationalize the success of some and the failure of others.

The novel arises in this context, to distinguish good characters from bad and distribute wealth accordingly. It represents citizens who are exemplary individuals—with whom every good reader can identify—and their antagonists, with whom no good reader could sympathize for long (Lukács, 76-68). In a novelistic world, talent and the ability to use it promise necessary protection against the consequences of random chance;

the genre wields logic against luck to ensure that justice will be done. It constructs its reader as a citizen who controls his own fate, invulnerable to the effects of his neighbors and his gods.

But the novel is not an epic, and the invulnerability that it represents is necessarily incomplete. No genre that aims for realism can represent a world without contingency, because no logic can lift what Benedict Anderson calls, "the everyday burden of fatality (above all, death, loss, and servitude)" (36). Within the novel as without, modern rationality can explain how cancer works, but it can't explain why people get it and die; it can explain why Serbs go to war more often than Swedes, but it can't explain why people go to war at all. Anderson suggests that the power of religion lay in its attempt to answer these kinds of unanswerable questions; in the attempt, if not the answer, religious institutions offered community for consolation. When their powers waned, they left behind a vacuum:

> The age of Enlightenment, of rational secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation (11).

When rational thinking has done all it can do, the nation emerges to do what it cannot. Or, as Anderson continues, "it is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny.

With Debray, we might say, 'Yes, it is quite accidental that I am born French; but after all, France is eternal'" (11-12). The concept of the nation enables the French citizen to imagine a community that sustains and survives him; as it separates the domestic *us* from the foreign *them*, it fuses the individual *I* with the national *we*. Constructing commonalities between people who will never meet, it reassures every citizen that his life story will serve a larger history, which will be read by his compatriots—a chorus who will be exactly like him, only more enlightened, because they will come later. This fantasy of a collective future enables the citizen to imagine his ideal reader: a sympathetic neighbor, who will look back upon him and take a share in his fate, providing a retrospective reason for the most inexplicable injustices he suffers.[8]

Tragedy's ancient audiences lacked that kind of shelter. They did not believe—as modern citizens and novel-readers would—that they could determine their fates by themselves; if they had, the genre's doomed heroes would have seemed foreign to them. At the end of the sixth century B.C., the Greeks were prepared to believe that the gods might throw their mortal fates to the winds, so they could imagine themselves in the story of a good life gone dramatically bad. Mythology had taught their ancestors to stave off disaster by submitting to superhuman powers, and democracy would advise their descendants to find happiness by working in the public good. But tragedy's audiences fell between these metaphysical safety nets; they could no longer trust the old grand narratives and they hadn't yet tried the new. Tragedy reflects this lack of trust generically, as the classicist Walter Nestle suggests: "tragedy is born when myth starts to be considered from the point of view of a citizen" (qtd. in Vernant and Naquet, 33).

[8] The future tense is important here. For this national logic to work, the citizen must assume that the events that are inexplicable in the present will make more sense retrospectively, to others in her community.

In this light, tragedy serves the sense-making purpose that Benedict Anderson attributes to the modern nation. Walter Kaufmann describes the cultural work of tragedy:

> It makes us see how countless agonies belong to one great pattern; our lives gain form; and the pattern transcends us. We are not singled out; we suddenly belong to a great fraternity that includes some of mankind's greatest heroes. The suffering we feel in seeing or reading a tragedy is thus not merely Hecuba's but pain of which we had some previous knowledge (82).

This description echoes the rationalizing function that Anderson attributes to the imagined community. Following Kaufmann and Anderson, tragedy and the nation-state serve a similar purpose: they rationalize the seemingly irrational forces that threaten individual autonomy by rendering individual acts as fragments of a larger story. This likeness supports Franco Moretti's argument that "the symbolic power of tragic form is inversely proportional to the real power of the state"; individuals need one or the other for consolation (252-253). That we do not necessarily need both is suggested in the contrast between modernity and postmodernity: modernity witnessed the rise of national power, as Anderson suggests, and the concurrent death of tragedy; postmodernity, in contrast, witnesses the state in decline, and the resurrection of tragic forms.

This resurrection also reflects the advent of the empire in the postmodern sense. Defined as abstractly as "a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule,"[9] and as

[9] Cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: "Over the past several decades, as colonial regimes were overthrown and then precipitously after the Soviet barriers to the capitalist world market finally collapsed, we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges...

concretely as the American government,[10] empire requires new narrative forms for its representation, and tragedy is well suited to the task. It juxtaposes an appearance of normalcy with a lurking danger that will inevitably rupture it, creating an equilibrium between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the novelistic everyday and the poetic sublime. With this reconciliation of opposites, the tragic novel serves postmodern culture much as the art of ruins served modern Europe, according to Simon Schama. Schama writes that the rubble of the Roman Empire was not merely preserved throughout the age of Enlightenment; it was reproduced with frequency: "Artists like Piranesi and Hubert Robert supplied engravings and paintings of moss-draped Roman monuments overrun by beggars and goats. Landscapists would custom build moments for the parks of the Quality so they could stroll soberly through gardens of wistfulness"[11]. These elegies to fallen glory had more than aesthetic appeal, he continues. They represented reminders to the new imperialists that they were mortal, too. Not fleeing the thought, Schama writes, modern Europeans confronted this "antidote to hubris" ritually, cultivating their indifference to decay with the recognition that "such is the human condition. Get used to it."

This imperative is essential to tragedy, which turns the relatively benign narratives of the house of Oedipus into spectacles of the nobility writhing in mortal pain.[12] Schama prescribes a similar "antidote to hubris" for postmodern culture, and

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Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world." (xi-xii).

[10] Cf. John Gray, among others.

[11] *www.nytimes.com*, September 15, 2002.

[12] With this revision, tragedy provided occasions for its audiences to feel what Germans would call *schaudenfreude*: the bitter satisfactions that ordinary people feel when they see great things topple. In the logic of the Greeks, this feeling finds expression as *phthonos*, which is translated as "a mixture of envy and religious distrust for anyone who rose too high or was too successful. Acting on that emotion, the pre-Socratic Greeks ostracized citizens annually, removing any one who threatened to overpower the rest.

particularly for America, which he concedes is unlikely to hear it. America, he argues, "was created expressly as the rejection" of death:

> Ruins had nothing to say to a culture so deeply invested in freshness. Even now, those wanting to preserve Civil War battlefields like Chancellorsville as a place of meditation are up against developers for whom golf courses and front lawns whisper the great American mantra of 'move on.' Only at ground zero has the instinct to build over been checked by a comparably powerful yearning for a place of lament.

This characterization has the ring of Tocquevillian truth, but even in its own terms, the tidy opposition it constructs between remembering and forgetting is too simple. It denies the subtlety with which remembering and forgetting can coincide, as theorists since Adorno and DeMan suggest that they often do. That is, it denies the possibility of memorials that help us to forget, and of noticeable omissions that signify remembrance.

The recognition of these possibilities pervades novels published at the end of the twentieth century. As the postmodern condition becomes no longer new, novels use prolepsis to reflect the culture's dawning knowledge that danger lies under even the most seemingly impenetrable peace. They juxtapose a superficial progression, in which daily life seems to go on unscathed, with a hidden violence that halts that progression in advance. In making this argument about the form of the novel, I hope to contribute to the "Darwinian history of literature" that Franco Moretti describes, "where forms fight one another, are selected by their context, evolve and disappear like natural species" (56). Tragedy becomes ubiquitous in the literature of the late twentieth century, I argue,

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Such ostracism was practiced without recourse to the otherwise well-established democratic institutions, as if to purge the citizens of their anti-social urges at the same time as it rid the city of people who might pose a threat to its order (Vernant and Naquet, 134-136).

because the conditions of globalization give it a new utility: to provide the readers of the new empire with an experience like that of an eighteenth-century Frenchman in "the parks of Quality." That is, the device of prolepsis locks peace and violence together in a paradox, through which readers can experience dailiness *coincidentally* with its disruption. This coincidence parallels that between postmodernity's inextricable opposites, creating the aesthetic experience that Bruce Robbins calls "the sweatshop sublime[13]". A novel like Don DeLillo's *Libra* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* contrasts a placid landscape with the brutality that will invisibly erode it, bringing together two alternative realities: one that seems destined for privilege and the other that seems destined for doom. It places these opposites on a collision course that tests the limits of comprehension, as the sublime has done since Kant gave the aesthetic a name. Inviting the reader to identify with a protagonist like Spiegelman's Artie, who treads lightly through the ruins of a life, they create an aesthetic experience much like that of a Frenchman who strolls "soberly through gardens of wistfulness." [14]

In the four chapters that comprise my dissertation, I examine the literary forms that produce that strolling sensation, and the historical context in which it becomes desirable. In Chapter One, I argue that tragedy suits western needs after World War II with a reading of *The Reader* by the German author Bernhard Schlink. The novel puts the legacy of the European Enlightenment on trial by questioning the limits of individual agency in the context of a guilt that is collective. Narrated by a lawyer in postwar

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[13] To contemplate something as mundane as a tea kettle, as Bruce Robbins writes, "and suddenly realize, first, that one is the beneficiary of an unimaginably vast and complex social whole, and second... that this means benefiting from the daily labor of the kettle- and electricity-producing workers, much of it unpleasant and underremunerated, is not entirely outside everyday experience" (84).

[14] Writing with uncharacteristic poetry, Kant defines the sublime as "that in comparison with which all else is small" (*CJ*, 97). That description provides the basis for postmodern aesthetic theories like Jean-Francois Lyotard's and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe's, which I discuss in Chapter Three. I quote only Robbins here because his description is the most relevant to my argument as well as the most succinct.

Germany, *The Reader* represents his effort to identify with each of the characters in the story he tells, and it formally invites its reader to follow suit. This is not an easy task for either narrator or reader, as the characters are often unsympathetic and fundamentally at odds with each other; they include Jewish victims of concentration camps and a Nazi guard who sent them there. As the narrator strives to reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable perspectives within a coherent narrative form, he fuses formal and political concerns to compel his reader to consider: Who is too bad to receive the novel's identification, and who is good enough to extend it? If the executioners are now many and willing—if the power of the enlightened subject has dispersed into an amorphous mass—who exactly is guilty, and of what?

With these questions, Schlink represents a model of agency that is as shaky as the Greeks'. Testing the causality between one's identity and one's fate—between being good (*hexis*), doing good (*praxis*) and living a good life (*eudaimonia*)—he suggests that tragic knowledge has as much currency in our age as it did in Aristotle's. [15] Once again, the power of man thinking has diminished, and no other model of action has emerged to take its place. Postmodern protagonists are stripped of moral agency, so they are unable to trust that being good will make them happy. In this insecure moment after enlightenment, they raise the specter of tragedy as Martha Nussbaum describes it: "the great tragic plots [explore] the gap between our goodness and our good living, between what we are (our character, intentions aspirations, values) and how humanly well we manage to live" (*FG*, 318-319).

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[15] Martha Nussbaum cogently discusses tragedy's dependence on this causality in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1986 (382).

In the next two chapters, I reframe these considerations in a context that is specifically American. Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) uses the civil unrest of the 1960s to echo tragic concerns in postmodern form, to ask why bad things happen to good people, and alternatively, whether even the best people could ever accurately be called good. Roth traces the benign beginnings of an act of political terrorism to contrast the extraordinary violence of the bombing with the ordinary virtue of the terrorist's suburban family. The novel's *fabula* recounts a stock narrative of downfall: a local hero grows up to have a daughter who blows the local post office to bits, destroying the seemingly indestructible placidity of her family and their world. The *sjuzet* constructs that narrative in an inverted order, starting with the static image that the Marquis de Sade calls "a portrait of evil triumphant," and working backwards to recount the narrative from which that portrait emerges (124).

In Chapter Three, I examine the device of prolepsis more formally, comparing *Libra* with *Beloved* to consider the tragic effects of postmodernity's historical novels. These novels allude to histories that their readers already know, constructing the aesthetic opposite to the irrational exuberance that fueled the American economy of the 1990s: their counter-enlightenment form depends on the terrible loss that has always already happened. This temporal inversion afflicts postmodern protagonists with histories that are too powerful to stay in the past, where they belong; these protagonists are predetermined, shadowed by violence that precedes their narratives. As such, they become like the speaker of Anne Carson's "Glass Essay," who is always able to "feel that other day running under this one, like an old videotape" (17).

This metaphor—of a videotape in which a prior set of images shadows a later, half-covering one—provides an apt description of this cultural phenomenon. Fusing narrative and visual vocabularies, it suggests a moment that precedes another in time as well as space, the former "lurking under" the latter to remain palpable despite its relative invisibility. And in fact, this trope is repeated variously in the visual art of the period, from the suburban creepiness of Gregory Crewdson's photographs to the blurred horror of Gerhard Richter's paintings. Despite the apparent differences of form and content, these two artists—like DeLillo and Morrison— create art from the difference between one benign subject that we see and another cancerous one that we know to be there. Crewdson's turns the hypernormalcy of the American suburbs into a habitat for strangeness, with a nod to David Lynch and a wink at class analysis, while Richter covers the violent history of the Bader-Meinhof gang with a smear of paint, rendering a violent national history under a painterly blur. From this logic emerge two contradictory theses that are entwined in a paradox: normalcy is unbreakable, but it is already broken; life ends on a massive scale and then it goes on, almost as if nothing happened.

I reframe these national fictions in a global context in Chapter Four, considering the possibility of a *polis* that is cosmopolitan. Examining Plato's contention that the ideal state depends on its citizen's capacity for *eleos*, I question the applicability of that contention to the global community. I phrase these political and philosophical questions in literary terms by reading Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* as a recuperation of a Platonic ideal of citizenship in a postmodern context. That context is explicitly surreal: the novel unfolds in a city that is an anachronism, a premodern polis misplaced in a

postmodern age; with this misplacement, it asks how much consolation nations can provide in a global community, and how much sympathy narrative could ever inspire.

Its protagonist is a world-class pianist who is simultaneously omniscient and ignorant of the people around him, creating a demand for sympathy that always exceeds the supply. In his unreliable narration, other people appear as a shapeless mass of sufferers, telling stories that are consistently sad. They vie for the protagonist's attentions and, by extension, the reader's, representing their city as a lump of troubled humanity, and raising ancient questions: Does global citizenship preclude membership in a more particular community—and do humans seek too much consolation from art, or does art give too little to us?

*The Unconsoled* demonstrates its worthiness of the rubric "postmodern" by answering these questions only with other questions. Its ambiguity, however, does not derive from its plot, which is deceptively simple. The novel begins when Ryder arrives in the unnamed town, which is vaguely European and self-consciously insular, to give a piano recital. His greatest desire is to go practice, but he is perpetually thwarted by the demands of an itinerary that is incredibly full, and, even worse, unknown to him. He remembers neither making it nor seeing it, and strangely, he never asks to do so, choosing instead to inhabit passively a narrative in which he is never where he is supposed to be. The novel chronicles his sense of perpetual lateness, and the inevitability with which he disappoints the community that receives him.

This teleological structure is undermined, however, in the antitheses upon which it turns. Its protagonist is simultaneously a saint who can absolve all human suffering and a prima donna interested only in himself, and his extraordinary ability to ignore other

people is unhindered—and possibly exacerbated—by his artistic genius. Utterly unable to understand what anyone else is feeling, he staggers through the world, hurting virtually everyone who crosses his path. His unreliable narration leaves the reader caught between two possibilities: the protagonist is either profoundly unsympathetic because of the lack of sympathy he shows to the citizens of the town, or he is the polar opposite, deserving of every sympathy because nobody sympathizes with him. In this ambiguity, the novel questions the limits of political community, asking how *eleos* could work on a global scale.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Tragic Pity in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*

"Let pity then, be a certain pain occasioned by an apparently destructive evil or pain's occurring to one who does not deserve it, which the pitier might expect to suffer himself or that one of his own would, and this whenever it should seem near at hand."

Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* (2.8)

Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* puts the legacy of the Enlightenment on trial, questioning the limits of individual agency in the context of a guilt that is collective. It is narrated by a lawyer in postwar Germany who struggles to identify with each of the characters in the story he tells. This is not an easy task, as his characters are fundamentally at odds with each other; they include Jewish victims of concentration camps and a Nazi guard who sent them there. As the narrator strives reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable perspectives within a coherent narrative form, he fuses formal and political concerns. He invites his reader to consider: Who is too bad to receive the novel's identification, and who is good enough to extend it? If the executioners are now many and willing—if the power of the enlightened subject has dispersed into an amorphous mass—who exactly is guilty, and of what?

A German bestseller and a favorite of Anglo-American critics, *The Reader* is divided into two parts[16]. The first half reads like a memoir, using a retrospective first

[16] The novel drew praise from many quarters outside of Germany, drawing praise from critics as diverse as George Steiner (who wrote that, "the reviewer's sole and privileged function is to say as loudly as he is

person to narrate a fifteen-year old boy's troubled affair with an older woman. The woman, Hanna, is imperious, enigmatic, and cruel; the narrator, Michael Berg, is lovesick and submissive. He comes to her apartment after school, wracked with love and lust, which she disciplines by demanding that he read to her. Desperate to please, he reads canonically: Eichendorff, Tolstoy, Rilke and Benn. 'You have such a nice voice, kid," she says, "I'd rather listen to you than read it myself" (42).

These idylls of reading, however, are sharply punctuated by scenes of abuse. Hanna beats Michael with a belt when he goes to the store and she fails to see the explanatory note he left behind. After the beating, he crawls meekly back in bed to finish the book. As the affair becomes entrenched in its sado-masochistic dynamics, its unhappy ending seems increasingly inevitable. The reader serves as the witness to that degeneration and the pain that it causes, serving as a source of sympathy, which the narrator elicits and refuses by turns. Michael Berg invites the reader's compassion with the suffering he endures, but he also frustrates that response by refusing to act on his own behalf. Instead of acting—as any humane witness would wish that he would— to end his suffering, he acts to make it last. He prostrates himself before Hanna's escalating violence, assuming a self-destructive stance that puts his reader in a protective one. He appeals to his reader's sympathies when he is at his lowest, eliciting a compensatory defense when he refuses to defend himself.

The affair ends with the first half of the novel, when Michael goes to Hanna's apartment and finds her gone. Her departure, he thinks, is his punishment: ashamed, he pretended not to know her when she came to the pool where he swam with his friends.

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able, 'Read this' and 'Read it again'") and Oprah Winfrey (who made millions for the author when she chose *The Reader* for her book club).

This snub was treasonous, he confesses to his implied reader, and he deserved to be punished. As if anticipating an objection, he concedes that, "disavowal is an unusual form of betrayal...From the outside it is impossible to tell if you are disowning someone or simply exercising discretion... But you, who are doing the disowning, you know what you're doing" (74).

This confession of a guilt that would be illegible to anyone but the confessor functions as Paul DeMan suggests that all apologetic discourse does: the act of truth-telling is a good in itself that exonerates the confessor, rendering the confession itself redundant. "There is never enough guilt around," DeMan writes, "to match the text-machine's infinite power to excuse" (299).[17] Like every speech act, De Man continues, apology produces "an excess of cognition" that contradicts its expressed intent. Revealing that its speaker is the (good) kind of person who confesses his (bad) behavior, apology discloses more knowledge than it can control. With that excess knowledge, it testifies to its speaker's virtue even as it explicitly confesses his vice.

Apologetic language, according to DeMan, inevitably fails in its ostensible purpose: to disclose the right amount of knowledge, which represents the speaker's innocence and his guilt in their true proportions. More specifically, apology fails because it always reveals more than it can control. However, at the same time as it represents excesses of virtue and knowledge, it also represents an insufficiency of both. An apology "can never hope to know the process of its own production (the only thing worth

[17] Many critics have read this essay, titled "Excuses (Confessions)", much as Michael Berg reads Hanna's silences, as an obscure recognition of his collaboration with the Nazi Party. By this reading, DeMan seems to suggest—as Michael Berg suggests on Hanna's behalf— that he will not apologize because apology is an inherently ineffective speech act, exonerating the guilty speaker without making any reparation to the injured listener.

knowing)," DeMan maintains. "Just as the text can never stop apologizing for the suppression of guilt that it performs, there can never be enough knowledge available to account for the delusion of knowing." (299-300). Apology fosters this delusion with the knowledge it leaves behind, the remainder it can't control. This remainder is endemic to language in general, DeMan suggests, and apology is simply a limit case. Because of the primacy it gives to disclosure, apology has a privileged relationship to knowledge, and it epitomizes language's failures of mimesis. Words, DeMan insists, will fail, as long as people use them to represent the truth.

*The Reader* raises the same questions as DeMan: it asks how far language can go towards the goal of enlightenment. And also like DeMan, the novel raises that question in terms of apology, which it puts to a practical test in narrative. Testifying to language's inadequacy to its public and private tasks, the novel hinges on two unspoken apologies. The first half of the novel concludes with the apology that Michael Berg shares with his reader but not with Hanna, and the second ends with the apology he imagines her making in silence. Berg records the effects of these undone speech acts in his self-flagellating narrative. He performatively puts himself in the right by exaggerating his wrong; then he takes that performance one step farther by refusing to admit evidence in his defense. By withholding the argument that would help his case, he invites the reader to interject it in his defense, to object: he was young, she was cruel, and of course he wanted to be with his friends; any teenager would. He defends himself by making no defense. Recounting the suffering that he willingly endures, he portrays his martyrdom and positions his reader in a compensatory role. He offers a narrative of cruelty to elicit kindness in return, inviting the reader's sympathy with his refusal to sympathize with himself.

That personal narrative assumes political import in the second half of the novel, which begins years later. Michael Berg grows up and goes to law school, where he attends a trial of Nazi war criminals and discovers that his first lover is among the accused. Hanna sits in a group of women who are charged with two crimes: the first is selecting women to send to Auschwitz, and the second is refusing to unlock the doors of a burning building to release the Jewish people who burned to death inside. With this revelation, Michael Berg's memoir of an abusive relationship retrospectively becomes—by his logic—a memoir of collaboration. "If I was not guilty of betraying a criminal," he reasons, "then I was guilty of having loved a criminal...[and] not only had I loved her, I had chosen her" (170).

Michael Berg watches Hanna's courtroom drama, and his identification is divided between the criminal and her victims. The trial reveals that Hanna selected Jewish girls in the camps to read to her, just as he did—and after a month or two, she sent her readers to Auschwitz. At this revelation, Hanna indicates for the first time that she knows the narrator is in the courtroom; "she just looked at me," he recalls. "Her face didn't ask for anything, beg for anything, assure me of anything or promise anything. It simply presented itself. I saw how tense and exhausted she was" (117). Because she doesn't ask for his sympathy or forgiveness, he gives both, taking on her case as he imagines her experience: "[Hanna] sat as if frozen. It must have hurt to sit that way" (100).

His identification with Hanna is highly conflicted, tempering sympathy with judgment. He desperately wants to see her as a sympathetic character, but equally desperately, he wants to see her take responsibility for her actions. This kind of

identification serves as a model for his implied reader, from whom he elicits an equally ambivalent response. Explicitly, he urges his reader to sympathize with him as he suffers, but he undermines that call for sympathy with continuous reminders that his suffering is his fault. He enacts this ethic of reading in his narration of Hanna's story, and he elicits it from his reader in his narration of his own. Identifying with a protagonist who passively submits to a fate that treats her poorly, he encourages his reader to follow suit.

Hanna behaves as self-destructively in the second half of the novel as Michael does in the first. Virtually prosecuting herself in court, she offers no defense against the prosecution's case, and she remains silent as the other defendants capitalize on her impending doom to free themselves. They portray her as the instigator who should absorb the culpability of the group, and she seems determined to accept that role. She annoys the judge with impolitic objections and bizarre contradictions; she resists the introduction of written testimony, and her own spoken testimony differs drastically from one she signed in a written document.

Hanna's seemingly irrational courtroom strategy defies the logic of due process that her narrator has sworn to uphold. By refusing to tell her side of the story, she flouts the rules of an adversarial legal system, in which each side posits its case and the judge arbitrates between the two, negotiating their competing and irreconcilable bids for sympathy. Michael Berg organizes his life around these narrative conventions, and he cannot fathom Hanna's failure to adhere to them. A lawyer by profession, he is trained in a narrative of progressive enlightenment, which balances two agonistic claims against each other to find the truth and ensure that justice is served. Hanna thwarts this narrative

model by keeping her story to herself, limiting the court's ability to know the truth, and consequently, its ability to issue a fair verdict. She seems unbothered by the increasing inevitability of injustice, and her passivity frustrates his efforts at understanding. "It was as if "she had no sense of context," he marvels, "[no sense] of the rules of the game, of the formulas by which her statements and those of the others were toted up into guilt and innocence, conviction and acquittal" (110).

The form of Hanna's rebellion is unintelligible to her narrator, who lives and works under the assumption that everybody naturally seeks her own fair treatment in the world. The product of an Enlightenment culture, Michael Berg shares Aristotle's faith that "there is pretty much an objective at which everybody aims, both each in private and all together, both in pursuit and in avoidance. And this, to put it in a nutshell, is happiness and its elements" (*R*, 1.5.1). Here, Aristotle articulates the assumption that Michael Berg makes: that the only conceivable goal of narrative is happiness, and the only way to attain it is to seek the truth.

In this passage, Aristotle writes a narrative theory. He names the thing that people want (happiness) and describes the process by which they imagine getting it (discovering a truth that eludes them). This theory has great currency in contemporary literary criticism, thanks to Peter Brooks, who updates Aristotle by fusing him with Freud in his widely influential *Reading for the Plot*. Plot, Brooks argues, is what compels readers to turn the pages of books; it is "the logic and dynamic of narrative, and narrative itself a form of understanding and explanation" (6-7). Using a Freudian model of desire as a grand narrative, Brooks suggests that every novel works through a system of desires and repressions to pursue the enlightenment that promises to come in its final pages. This

theory has been roundly—and rightly—criticized by feminists and queer theorists who have disputed its universality. Some novels, they suggest, do not adhere to its phallus-shaped model, which works towards the climax that promises to come in the end.

*The Reader* poses similar problems of literary form in explicitly historical terms. It contrasts two opposing epistemologies in Hanna and Michael Berg: Berg tries to follow an Aristotelian model in his life and his writing, and he is continually frustrated by Hanna's divergence from it. Directed towards goals that are invisible if not undesirable to others, Hanna resists his efforts to make sense of her. She and her story are inscrutable to him, so they are impossible for him to write. The novel documents his effort to do so anyway— to imagine her feelings, and with them, to rationalize the narrative he doesn't understand.

Peter Brooks' theory of narrative desire describes Michael Berg's faith in knowledge, but Freud's theory of the death drive describes it even better. Reflecting psychoanalysis' Berg-like effort to find logic in seemingly illogical narratives, the death drive aims to explain narratives like Hanna's: those that pursue an object that seems patently undesirable. When confronted with the possibility that a patient might actively want to die— that is, that a negative *telos* might exist for some people as an object of desire— Freud initially discounted it, just as Aristotle, Peter Brooks and Michael Berg did. He described the death drive as a deviation from the pleasure principle— an aberration from sense to nonsense.

With this argument, Freud addresses the same problem as *The Reader* does: he tries to explain the logic behind a narrative that drives in a seemingly illogical direction.

Like Michael Berg, Freud faces the possibility that one person might be truly unintelligible to others, and like Michael Berg, he bridges that theoretical gap with an imaginative leap. Berg achieves it through the strength of his identification with Hanna, which enables him to imagine how she might feel, even when her feelings are demonstrated in ways that are opaque at best. Freud is similarly speculative in his conception of the death drive. He imagines it as a desire like any other, existing independently, in search of a goal that makes sense by its own logic. The primal need of the subject, he suggests, is not life but agency. With this thesis, he argues that "we have no longer to reckon with the organism's puzzling determination (so hard to fit into any context) to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only its own fashion" (*BPP*, 87).[18] The death drive, Freud suggests, is not a general desire for death, but something more specific: it is the desire to determine one's ending oneself.

To elaborate Freud's theory of the death drive, Jacques Lacan turns to ancient tragedy. He reads Antigone as a character who "pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such" (282-283). Her death drive is inextricable from her criminality, he writes; as Antigone "incarnates that desire, she chooses to be purely and simply the guardian of the being of the criminal as such. The drama valorizes her for the purity of that stance, suggesting that Antigone is the only member of the house of Oedipus who can bear the consequences of its crimes. She absorbs the death drive that remains latent in her family and her polis; she keeps the citizens safe by holding their criminality in herself, whom she dutifully destroys.

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[7] See Chapter Four for a more extensive discussion of the fort-da game as it pertains to narrative in general and tragedy in particular.

Lacan suggests that the audience recognizes the debt it owes to the tragic hero, so it divides its identification between her and her non-heroic family. Representing the citizenry within the play, the family articulates the non-heroic desire that the hero should simply live. Ismene gives voice to the unspoken wishes of a sympathetic audience when she urges her sister, Antigone, to avert tragedy and behave like an obedient citizen. This scene elicits a divided reaction from audiences who know that Ismene's fears are well founded, but at the same time, admire Antigone's strength in the face of them. With this divided reaction, Lacan suggests, ordinary citizens assume a portion of the hero's affect: they experience pity and terror for Antigone because she feels neither one for herself (257-258). This compensatory gesture enables the audience to share vicariously in the experience of heroism within the safety of the theater.

Lacan joins other critics of tragedy in raising concerns about this division of labor, suggesting that audiences suffer ill effects when they watch other people suffer more than they deserve. The danger of that sight, according to Lacan, is the excessive pity it inspires. A responsible ethic of reading must restrict the amount of pity that it allows, he argues, or else it will pave the way for martyrdom. "And only the martyrs know neither pity nor fear. Believe me, the day when the martyrs are victorious will be the day of universal conflagration. The play is calculated to demonstrate that fact."

*The Reader* represents a similarly cautionary tale, but it phrases the threat of "universal conflagration" in more tangible terms. The tragedy to which it refers is one of masses, not families or houses; on that massive level, it elicits the response that Lacan attributes to tragedy. Michael Berg reads Hanna's case like a Lacanian audience reads tragedy: he experiences pity and terror for the heroine because she shows no signs that

she feels either for herself. At the same time, he elicits an identical response from his reader, inviting a sympathetic defense every time that he fails to make one for himself

Following this logic, identification can be understood as the way in which a reader aligns himself with a fictional person—the way that the reader sides with her—against an equally fictional adversity. But what do novels do to invite or force this kind of alignment? They construct obstacles that stand between the sympathetic characters they represent and the happinesses that those protagonists desire; they define their protagonists by the kinds of obstacles they face, and in turn, by the kind of identification they elicit. Michael Berg, for example, elicits a peculiarly postmodern reaction as he strives to overcome a peculiarly postmodern obstacle: to overcome the intrinsic incoherence of his narrative. He narrates his effort to tell a story that makes sense even when his protagonist's behavior defies rational explanation. To accomplish this goal, he tries to create a new *logos* that will work where the old one doesn't. He does so through his identification, which enables him to create an interior life for Hanna that lends meaning to her action. He imagines the experience she doesn't share, investing her actions with motives and emotions that justify her behavior to some degree. And this justification does more than simply interpret the reality he sees; it changes that reality, bringing Hanna closer to him. By making Hanna's behavior intelligible within his logic, he staves off the fear that tragedy raises: the possibility that there are people in the polis who truly do not make sense to the rest of us, people who belong to "them" not "us".

Michael Berg vacillates between sympathy and judgment, qualifying the one with the other. Those two affects limit each other in his reading of her case, just as pity and

terror do in Aristotle's reading of tragedy[19]. As Berg imagines Hanna's unspoken testimony, he interprets her silences to fabricate the confessions and the apologies that she withholds. "Say it Hanna," he urges in a voice that is inaudible in the courtroom but unchallenged in the novel. "Say you wanted to make their last month bearable. That was the reason for choosing the delicate and the weak. That there was no other reason, and could not be" (TK). Testifying to both her innocence and her guilt, he builds her defense out of nothing, using his legal expertise in the service of narrative craft. As he becomes an author, he turns the accused into a sympathetic character after the fact, but his voice is unauthorized to enter the courtroom, so it languishes in the audience, and in the unofficial history he writes. That testimony is never made in the "real" world the novel represents; Hanna's lawyer did not ask her for it, "and she did not speak of her own accord." If submitted, it would doubtlessly be disputed, but because it is withheld, it appears as a hidden truth.

Extending more sympathy to Hanna than any less implicated reader would, he reads her case overzealously, discovering hidden motives to justify the sympathy he feels against his better judgment. Sympathy exceeds reason in this model of identification, which stands in contrast to that of the modern novel. Protagonists like Fielding's Tom Jones or Richardson's Pamela elicit the reader's identification precisely to the degree that they are sympathetic; the reader follows them through all of their adventures, hoping they will turn out well and fearing that they will not. For these novels to maintain their reader's interest in the plot, they must retain their approval on moral grounds. To the degree that a reader becomes alienated from a modern protagonist's moral sphere, she loses narrative desire.

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[19] See Chapter Two for a more extensive discussion of this passage from *The Poetics*.

Michael Berg models a much more conflicted kind of identification with the protagonist he represents. His identification with Hanna extends too far, undermining the argument he makes on behalf of rational thought. He sympathizes with her even as he represents her in an unsympathetic light; he recounts her mercilessness towards others, and then insists that she deserves mercy in return. By protesting too much, he draws the reader's identification away from his protagonist and shifts it to himself instead. He elicits the reader's sympathy because he is too zealous a reader—he finds good intentions and remorse in a story where those qualities are illegible. And just as he is sympathetic by virtue of his reading habits, Hanna is unsympathetic because of hers: she repels the reader's identification because she is unable to read between the lines of other people. She responds to her surroundings bizarrely, as if she is missing an important piece of the psychological stuff that makes people human—the piece that would enable her to assimilate the knowledge she has into an awareness of other people. She knows the facts of other people's lives, but she shows no sign that she imagines how those experiences might make them feel.

Michael Berg compensates for his heroine's inability to read people by fulfilling in excess the role of the sympathetic reader. Watching Hanna, he imagines how she feels, and his imagination provides the novel's only window on her interior life. The reader never hears Hanna's side of the story except through his mediation, and the court never hears it at all. It hears only one side of the case, rendering its verdict inevitably unjust. The official history of the war—as it is represented in the novel— is egregiously incomplete, and Michael Berg functions to guide the reader away from it. Calling attention to the gaps in the court's narration of history, he fills them in with fiction. He

serves the court not as a lawyer but as a witness, offering testimony that is disbarred from the courtroom and absent from the official history it writes.

His story appears only in the novel, where he posits it as truth. The court's faulty narration functions as a foil for the "real" history he sees behind it. Like an undercover reporter who has privileged access to an untold story, he casts his narrative against the foil of false conceptions that are widely held. A staple of postmodern cultures, this narrative form appears most crudely in journalistic efforts to uncover the true story behind a common lie. It recapitulates the Enlightenment's archetypal form—seeking truth against all obstacles—only with more ironic content. In this case, the "lie" is the "truth" as it is commonly, wrongly believed. The terms reverse ad infinitum, demonstrating postmodern theory in mundane terms. It testifies to the multiplicity of truth, and with that, the duplicity of even the most common knowledge.

The novel creates this narrative effect of uncovering with the secret knowledge that Michael Berg possesses. Knowing Hanna as he does, he realizes something that nobody else in the courtroom does: that she will sign any written document in order to conceal her inability to read it. Her self-incriminations are a smokescreen, covering her shame with the appearance of evil. From this point, the novel risks becoming the simplest allegory of reading: The Shoah is the event that can't be written, and Hanna is the perpetrator who can't read it. Both inscrutable and illiterate, Hanna is a criminal because she is cruel; she is cruel because she can't sympathize, and she can't sympathize because she can't read. Taken literally, this reasoning throws a red herring into the history it writes. Hanna's decision to work in a concentration camp rather than be exposed as a non-reader provides a sensational psychological study—but it is an

anomaly, and on the face of it, it does little to explain why real Germans did what they really did.

*The Reader* represents Michael Berg's futile effort to solve this historical enigma. He confronts it on both personal and political terms and is torn by his conflicting desires in both respects. As a citizen, he wants to see Hanna punished for the crimes she has committed against humanity, and as an ex-lover, he wants to see her punished for the crimes she has committed against him. But as a reader of the courtroom drama, he reflexively identifies with Hanna as its protagonist, questioning the limits and causes of her guilt.

The narrative form of the trial highlights these problems of identification, as Hannah Arendt observed in her account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann. A courtroom drama, Arendt suggests, necessarily puts the accused at the center of the story:

> A trial resembles a play in that both begin and end with the doer, not the victim. In the center of a trial can only be the one who did—in this respect, he is like the hero in the play—and if he suffers, he must suffer for what he has done, not for what he has caused others to suffer (9).

Arendt argued that Eichmann's prosecutors made a crucial mistake when they neglected to consider this fact of narrative form. They privileged historically merited sympathy over legally necessary judgment, and they chronicled the plight of the victims in detail. With this narrative decision, she wrote, they aimed to "bring before the court all the facts of Jewish suffering (which of course were never in dispute) and then look for evidence which in one way or another would connect Eichmann with what happened" (6). Testifying to

"the tragedy of Jewry as a whole," the prosecution validated the experiences of the audience as Arendt describes it. The room "was filled with 'survivors,'" Arendt writes, "with middle-aged and elderly people, immigrants from Europe, like myself, who knew by heart all there was to know, and who were in no mood to learn any lessons and certainly did not need this trial to draw their own conclusions" (8).

Unmoved by the promise of new knowledge, the survivors attend the trial for reasons unrelated to enlightenment. They come to hear the story they know retold, to identify with their past selves, and to pay witness to Eichmann's inability to follow suit. They knew from the start they would never identify with him; they came to hear their story read to him rather than the reverse, and the trial, Arendt suggests, satisfied this need too well.

Arendt was roundly criticized for her insistence on attending to the agents of the crimes rather than the victims; she was perceived as unsympathetic to the people who suffered under the Nazi regime, including herself.[20] In her defense, Arendt argued that the Jewish people wouldn't be helped by another account of the story they already knew, and *The Reader* implicitly corroborates this argument. Through Michael Berg's identification, the narrative continually forces its lens away from cruelty's victims to represent its agents instead. Michael Berg dramatizes the attention he pays to the accused at the exclusion of the victims, just as Arendt's narration of Eichmann's trial does. And like Arendt's, Berg's attention is divided because he is directly implicated in the narrative he tells. Aligned with the victims, though not a victim himself, he brings the only kind of justice that a writer can: by distributing sympathy and censure accordingly in the identification he elicits.

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[20] For illustrations of this argument, see Lionel Abel's article in the *Partisan Review* and Judge Michael Musmanno's review in the *New York Times Book Review.*

But this justice is questionable at best. Michael Berg bemoans the ineffectiveness of a vision that is always fractured: "I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it," he recalls,

> But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. But even as I wanted to understand Hanna, failing to understand her meant betraying her all over again. I could not resolve this (157).

With his divided sympathies, Berg represents an ethical problem that shapes every narrative of the war. Among postwar historiographers, there are two general schools of thought. On one side, functionalists narrate the Shoah as evidence of human frailty. Ronald Reagan adopted this logic with characteristic facility. During a trip to Germany to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war, he explained his decision to visit a cemetery at Bitburg, where S.S. soldiers were buried. "Those young men are victims of Nazism also," he declared, "even though they were fighting in German uniform, drafted into service to carry out the hateful wishes of the Nazis. They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps". Powerless under the spell of "an evil that victimized the whole world", Reagan said, the S.S. were passive cogs who found themselves working an evil machine (qtd. in La Capra, 96). By isolating the Germans' agency in the body of the Führer, the president simultaneously disowned the Nazis' crimes and sympathized with the people who committed them.

Historiographers use the word "functionalist" to describe people who narrate the story as Reagan does, downplaying or disregarding anti-Semitism as a motive. In contrast to

"intentionalists," who ask why one group of people acted to destroy another, functionalists ask why humanity acted to destroy itself. As the Israeli historian Dan Diner writes,

> what is principally at stake in such controversial questions of historiography are problems of intention and decision within the Nazi-German agencies—concerned with the Jews on the one hand, or the circumstances behind the perpetrated crimes on the other (308).

These contrasting epistemologies are suited to contrasting narrative forms. Intentionalists maintain that every German made an active decision to do as he or she did, so if that decision was to kill, there must have been a reason for the killing. This model is novelistic, built on the Enlightenment's promise that every individual possesses the ability to shape her own narrative through the rational decisions she makes. Functionalists disagree, stressing the degree to which each German citizen was subject to external forces whose size and power exceeded him. This model is tragic, fostering identification with other people even when they commit acts of terrible violence and crimes against the state.

*The Reader* does not reconcile this polarized logic, but it does make several gestures in that direction, lending itself to three readings which are all ambivalently functionalist. The first suggests that Hanna was the victim of a highly stratified culture that emphasized the power of knowledge so strongly that not having any was more shameful than anything else. This reading gains support from Hanna's covetousness of the knowledge that the narrator and his bourgeois family possess; that knowledge is, in typical postmodern fashion, metonymically represented in their ability to read. By this account, *The Reader* is an Oprah-ization of history, locating the source of the Nazis'

crimes in the impoverishment of their psyches. It suggests that Hanna had low self-esteem because she was illiterate and she acted immorally because she had low self-esteem; and while illiteracy was far from rampant in Nazi Germany, low self-esteem is often proposed as a national diagnosis. By this reading, *The Reader* suggests that Nazis and the people who loved them are sympathetic characters whose weaknesses made them easy prey for a very bad influence.

The second possible reading is that when Hanna became a guard in Auschwitz, she made a misguided attempt to fulfill the promise she inherits from the age of Enlightenment—the promise that her fate is her own. The narrator argues for this analysis in a protest to his implied reader,

> "No, Hanna had not decided in favor of crime. She decided against a promotion at [the department store] and fell into her job as a guard... And no, at the trial she did not weigh exposure as an illiterate against exposure as a criminal... She accepted she would be called to account, and she simply did not wish to endure further exposure. She was not pursuing her own interests, but fighting for her own truth, her own justice. Because she always had to dissimulate somewhat, and could never be completely candid, it was a pitiful truth and a pitiful justice, but it was hers, and the struggle for it was her struggle" (134).

By this reading, Hanna's destructive acts are a desperate attempt to determine her fate herself. She prefers to choose murder and self-destruction than not to choose at all: without the power to represent herself in writing, the job in the camps is the job she can get and silence is the closest she can get to the truth, so she takes the job and remains

silent. She takes the job at Auschwitz so that she can be exposed for something she *does* rather than wait passively to be exposed for something she *is*. In this way, she perversely fulfills the Enlightenment promise that her fate is within her control.

This reading turns Hanna into a Germanic Antigone, who assumes the mantle of tragedy when she asserts her will in a narrative that won't allow it[21]. With no hope of a successful quest, she metaphorically falls on her sword—but her sword is not a metaphor; it is a weapon of mass destruction. Enacting an ancient doom with a modern arsenal, she lives out a narrative that is a stereotypically postmodern pastiche. She plays Antigone recklessly, taking multitudes down with her as she throws herself on a pyre built for other people.

The third possible reading is that Hanna's illiteracy represents her failure to learn what novels can teach. From George Eliot to the philosopher Richard Rorty, advocates of the novel maintain that the genre is uniquely qualified to help its readers learn to sympathize with one another. The novel, Rorty writes, teaches readers to "see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them'." This ability "is not discovered by reflection," he continues:

> It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, 'They do not feel it as *we* would,' or 'There must always be suffering, so why not let *them* suffer?" (xvi).

[21] The concept of the will, which is so central to the grand narratives of the European Enlightenment and to the form of the novel, is non-existent in ancient Greece. As Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet write, "Greek has no term that corresponds with our idea of will" (60).

Here, Rorty testifies to the importance of literary identification in the assumptions he makes. Without comment, he puts fictional experiences on the same plane as real ones, suggesting that as readers learn to identify with fictional characters, we learn how to imagine that their experiences are real. And when we become very good at extending our sympathy across that aesthetic divide, we learn to bridge more difficult gaps, where the cost to us is greater: we sympathize with other people who are just as real as we are.

Hanna is readable as proof of Rorty's argument. Unsympathetic to others in the extreme, she epitomizes the non-reader who can't imagine what it would be like to be somebody other than herself. She is like Adolf Eichmann as Hannah Arendt described him: "the decisive flaw in his character was his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other person's point of view" (48). Because of this inability, Arendt maintains, Eichmann could conceive of the work he did for Hitler as competent political administration— just as Hanna considered working in Auschwitz a pragmatic career move.

Within the novel, this incapacity for sympathy elicits a compensatory capacity from the reader. Rorty outlines this formal device in an essay on Nabokov, where he argues that it is Humbert Humbert's cruelty that formally invites his readers to be kind. "We are more likely to notice the joys or suffering of one person," Rorty explains, "if our attention is directed to it by the surprising indifference of another person" (165). In this way, Hanna's obliviousness to the suffering she causes serves as a signpost, guiding the reader to identify with her victims because she can't. Her cruelty works upon the reader

homeopathically, as tragedy was once thought to do: it introduces a small bit of vice into the polis to purge vice in greater amounts[22].

One of the clichéd trademarks of postmodern narratives is a refusal to believe in the existence of a singular Truth, favoring multiple truths instead, and *The Reader* executes that refusal thoroughly. It works through formal and material contrasts that present no possibility of reconciliation. Hanna and Michael Berg represent two contrasting narrative models: one in which the individual is wholly responsible for herself and one in which her history diminishes her agency. That epistemological opposition provides the framework for the more material differences between functionalist and intentionalist ways of writing the history of the war—and those historiographical categories mirror the generic distinctions between tragedy and the novel. *The Reader* testifies to the irreconcilability of those narrative forms and the epistemologies they represent.

To mourn the stories that get lost between those opposing pairs, the novel alludes to an alternative history in the silences it creates. Hanna never shares her true story with the court, which in turn makes Michael Berg unable to share it with the reader. And he compounds the problem with his overly sympathetic habits of reading. Biased towards her innocence, he judges her leniently; he feels implicated in her guilt and besides, he wants to believe that the woman he once loved is lovable. And although he makes both of these biases explicit to his reader, the reader has little ability to read outside of them.

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[22] See Chapter Four for a more extensive examination of this argument, which is made most cogently by Jonathan Lear (167-191).

His unreliability is inseparable from his story, which renders a history in which no objective truth is available.

His untrustworthiness as a narrator is, somewhat paradoxically, also what makes him a ready recipient of the reader's sympathy. It is in the moments when his story fails to rationally cohere that he makes the most direct appeal for his reader's identification. He allows his reader to see more deeply into his character than he does when he attributes motives to Hanna that are not reflected in her actions. In these moments, the reader knows things about him to which he is blind; his account becomes plainly subjective, and his character becomes legible in the distortions he makes. In contrast, when his narrative presents itself as a perfect mimesis of the reality it represents, his subjectivity disappears, and the history he writes seems true.

In other words, the dramatized narrator owes his existence to mimetic error. His character appears in the novel only when the story he tells is contradicted by a more objective reality, which in turn only appears when he evokes it. When he imagines implausible explanations for Hanna's actions, he emerges as a sympathetic character in his own right; when his explanations are perfectly reasonable, they seem to be intrinsic to the narrative he records, and he disappears as a figure within it. Thus it is only his fallibility that makes him appear as a character with whom the reader might identify—just it is only a tragic hero's error that makes him appear as a plausible human being. In both cases, their distance from perfection makes them visible as characters who are worthy of sympathy.

The dramatized narrator gains sympathy from his reader and authority over his characters by standing at a distance from the story he tells. This distance is readable as a

feature both of moral content and of narrative form, as Wayne C. Booth suggests. Booth describes the dramatized narrator as a character who is sympathetic to the degree that he is fallible, and he is fallible to the degree that he allows the reader to inhabit his point of view. "Generally speaking," Booth suggests, "the deeper our plunge [into the narrator's perspective], the more unreliability we will accept without a loss of sympathy." Within the field of narrative and novel theory, he continues with a tone of lament, "the whole question of how inside views and moral sympathy interrelate has been seriously neglected" (151).

Booth is right that "inside views and moral sympathy" are not common terms among theorists of the novel, but they are bread and butter for theorists of tragedy. The ancient genre hinges on the problems of "inside views" in their most extreme relation to "moral sympathy": its heroes are doomed to the worst possible fates because they are chronically short sighted, and therefore, somewhat bad. Martha Nussbaum emphasizes this feature of tragedy in her reading of *Agamemnon*, which suggests that the hero's only hope is to see through eyes that see differently from his own. Agamemnon could have behaved more nobly under his straitened circumstances, Martha Nussbaum writes, but he

> would have to allow himself to really *see* his daughter, to see not just the sacrificial goat that he allows himself to see, but all that the Chorus sees: the trailing yellow robes, the look of accusation in the silent eyes. He would have to let himself remember, as they remember, her sweet voice, her loving presence at his table (*FG*, 42-43).

Because he is too tightly locked into his own subject position, Agamemnon can't gather the information he needs. He can't see his family and his people properly, so he can't

imagine what they are feeling. Without that knowledge, he can't begin to weigh the conflicting claims it makes upon his loyalty. And while his drama would inevitably end in some degree of tragedy, Nussbaum rightly suggests, it is his blindness to that inevitability that sets his tragedy in motion.

This blindness is typical of tragic heroes. Nussbaum uses Eteocles as another example, suggesting that if the hero were to avert his worst possible fate, he would have to "continue with a vivid imagining of both sides of the dilemma". He would imagine

> the doom of a city enslaved to an alien enemy; and he would have to let himself see, as a part of this, the tragedy of war-stricken *families*, so vividly depicted by the Chorus, to his annoyance and displeasure. He would also have to allow himself to think of what it means to have grown up with this brother Polynieces, to have shared with him not only birth, wealth, power, but also the heavy awareness of a father-brother's crime, the seed sown in his mother's holy furrow, and when that came to light, the weight of a father-brother's curse (*FG*, 42-43).

A hero's unwillingness to see all of these things is understandable, and in the course of political life, it is often even desirable. A hero is a king or a noble by definition; he is known for his achievements, by his ability to succeed and act decisively on the people's behalf. That ability would be jeopardized by the kind of all-seeing vision that Nussbaum describes. As Friedrich Nietzsche suggests: "true understanding, insight into the terrible truth, outweighs every motive for action, for Hamlet and the Dionysiac man are alike" (39).

If Nietzsche was right that a surplus of knowledge makes one passive, then heroes cannot have it, and Agamemnon fends against it well. He fixes his vision solidly in his own body, refusing to imagine his daughter's experience or even to recall his own past, when he knew her "loving presence at the table." In this way, he truly sees only one of the two claims upon his loyalty, and with this limited vision, he is able to take action that is short sighted but resolute.

At the heart of tragic drama, then, is a character who cannot manage to understand what he knows. Readings of the genre can be categorized by the meaning they make of that surplus knowledge, which critics interpret alternately as a boon and a curse. On one hand, critics like Friedrich Nietzsche advocate "tragic knowledge," for its awareness of powers that exceed the individual, rendering him inevitably inert. On the other, modern critics from T.S. Eliot to Mikhail Bakhtin reject the nihilism and breast beating of the genre, preferring the mellower pleasures of poetry and novel instead.[23] Those preferences are typically treated as characteristic of the age of Enlightenment, whose belief in the inviolability of the self is incompatible with tragedy. Tragedy depends upon the unenlightened understanding that every individual is integrally related to others; although "the individual moved freely" in the ancient world, Søren Kierkegaard writes,

> he still depended on substantial categories, on state, family, and destiny. This category of the substantial is the authentically fatalistic element in Greek tragedy, and its true peculiarity. The hero's downfall is not the outcome simply of his own action, it is also a suffering" (148).

[23] In his essay, "Hamlet," Eliot argues that Shakespeare's drama is essentially flawed because the pain it represents is implausible, that the tragic hero is, in effect, overreacting. Arguing a similar point from a more theoretical stance, Bakhtin argues in his *Dialogic Imagination* that tragedy is ill-suited to modernity because it is not "a developing genre," but one that is closed and retrospective.

Unable to determine his own fate, as a novelistic protagonist would do through his capacity for enlightenment, the ancient citizen must suffer the fate that befalls him.

These contrasts between tragedy and enlightenment regain currency at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Describing the postmodern condition as a "crisis of knowledge," theorists lament enlightenment's diminishing effects on individual agency. They disagree on the details but agree on Jean-Francois Lyotard's general argument that "knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'use-value'" (5).[24] From Jameson's analysis of global capital to Foucault's theory of panopticonic power, they name secular forces that work like ancient gods, limiting every person's control over his own fate. And from Habermas' ideal speech acts to Rorty's liberal hope, they try to reinterpret the knowledge they have, making agency more accessible within it.

In this light, Martha Nussbaum's reading of ancient tragedy provides a useful postmodern theory. Nussbaum acknowledges the truth in Nietzschean nihilism, conceding that a hero who possesses the "truthful imaginative seeing" that she prescribes risks falling into "agonizing indecision." If he were to know the truth of the other characters' experiences, as the Chorus does, his own part would be more difficult to play. However, Nussbaum represents a middle way, advocating tragic knowledge without the nihilist's belief in the terribleness of truth. Greater insight gives the hero a more complex choice to make, she suggests, but it also provides his greatest hope for a moderately happy ending.

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[24] Peter Sloterdijk concurs in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, where he writes that, "no one believes anymore that today's learning solves tomorrow's 'problems,' it is almost certain rather that it causes them" (xxix).

The hero can only avoid disaster, Nussbaum suggests, by recognizing the truth that he knows but can't face: that some degree of tragedy is inevitable. Beginning from that premise, she maintains, the hero could choose the lesser evil and find the happiest ending that is available to him. "The correct perception of a conflict need not entail indecision," she writes, "since there can be such conflicts even when the claims are not evenly balanced" (*FG*, 43). The Chorus understands this, and so it urges the hero to learn to live with the problems he can't solve. But the hero cannot reconcile himself to that limited view. He imagines that his narrative works like a bildungsroman, that he will face difficult obstacles and learn to hurdle them, gaining greater understanding that will lead him to a happy ending. He engages in an agonistic struggle against the world instead of a conciliatory effort to live in it.

This false optimism gives shape to tragic drama and seals its hero's doom. His *hamartia*[25] is his unwillingness to recognize his genre for what it is— to concede that his narrative is not a bildungsroman, but a tragedy. The hero would make "a proper response" to his dilemma, Nussbaum suggests, if he "would begin with the acknowledgement that this is not simply a hard case of discovering truth; it is a case where the agent will have to do wrong" (*FG*, 42). To respond properly, the hero would have to believe the Chorus' reports from the sidelines, where they stand at an objective vantage, seeing everything. The Chorus knows that Agamemnon's daughter was wounded by her father's indifference, and that he will live to regret it (40). It knows that his drama is a tragedy, because its hero's options are much more limited than he realizes,

[25] The Greek *hamartia* is alternately translated as "error," "sin," "failure," and "flaw".

and his hope of a happy ending is deluded[26]. With that knowledge, the Chorus extends its sympathy generously, assimilating all of the characters' experiences under the principle that anyone who shares the stage with a hero will either die or live to mourn another loss. Nussbaum suggests that we identify with this sympathetic spectator who is embodied in the Chorus, "standing in for each one of us, having a single imagination, a single set of feelings." Taken as a single character, the Chorus then is the model reader, "a responsive 'individual' acting out the complex reaction to dilemma which Eteocles fails to give" (*FG*, 40).

Tragedy affords two contrasting visions of the drama it represents through this contrast: the Chorus' is objective and passive while the hero's is subjective and active. With two mutually exclusive categories, the genre suggests that sight exists by virtue of its passivity, and action exists by virtue of its blindness. If the hero were to see the truth that he misses, he would stop trying to hurdle the obstacles he faces and try to live with them instead; if he could imagine his drama from the point of view of his enemies, he would know that no truth will set him free from them, and he would stop trying to find one. But without that capacity for imagination, he pits himself against the world, adhering to the questing narrative model that that leads novelistic protagonists to enlightenment and tragic heroes to doom. He looks but doesn't see, rendering himself able to act quickly, but unable to act well.

[26] The modern novel, in contrast, is traditionally understood as a representation of its protagonist's acquisition of this piece of knowledge. "The inner form of the novel," George Lukács writes, requires that the hero find out through experience that "a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest that life has to offer." (80).

Hanna and Michael Berg represent these tragic dichotomies within the form of the novel. Michael Berg functions as the Chorus, seeing much and acting little. Like a chorus, he represents the ordinary citizen at a trial of national significance, and like a chorus, he controls the reader's experience of the drama he represents. He expresses regret for the cruelty that his protagonist inflicts against the state and its constituents; he mitigates on her behalf when she suffers the cruelty of others. "The tragic technique exploits a polarity between two of its elements," write Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet:

> On the one hand the chorus, an anonymous and collective being whose role is to express, through its fears, hopes, and judgments, the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community; on the other the individualized figure whose action forms the center of the drama and who is seen as a hero from another age, always more or less alien to the ordinary condition of a citizen (24).

The chorus stands at the margins of the stage, seeing everything and representing that transcendent vision to its audience. The dramatized narrator serves a similar function, seeing with eyes that are relatively transcendent but also explicitly subjective—submitting the narrative of his hero's suffering along with an apology for her blindness.

Michael Berg also exemplifies the Chorus' inability to act. When he graduates from law school, he finds himself unable to do the work he has been trained to do. "I didn't see myself in any of the roles I had seen lawyers play at Hanna's trial," he reflects.

> Prosecution seemed to me as grotesque a simplification as defense, and judging was the most grotesque oversimplification of all...That did not leave many legal careers, and I don't know what I would have done if a

> professor of legal history had not offered me a research job. Gertrud said it was an evasion, an escape from the challenges and the responsibilities of life, and she was right. I escaped and was relieved that I could do so. (179-180)

Unfit for action, the dramatized narrator represents the tragedy that other people perform. His job is to read about other people's histories, to conduct research, which he represents not as a gradual progress towards enlightenment, but rather, as a futile effort to understand what will never be understood. "For a long time I believed there was progress in the history of law," he recalls,

> a development towards greater beauty and truth, rationality and humanity, despite terrible setbacks and retreats. Once it became clear to me that this belief was a chimera, I began playing with a different image of the course of legal history. In this one it still has a purpose, but the goal it finally attains, after countless disruptions, confusions, and delusions, is the beginning, its own original starting point, which once reached must be set off from again (181).

In contrast to a narrative of progressive enlightenment, Michael Berg represents his life's work with a circular narrative form. In it, he pursues not enlightenment but a reminder of enlightenment's absence, and he sees no contradiction in that quest. He recalls that he "reread The *Odyssey* around that time," and he revises his initial interpretation of the epic as a teleological form. "It is not the story of homecoming," he argues.

> How could the Greeks, who knew that one never enters the same river twice, believe in homecoming? Odysseus does not return to stay, but to set off again.

> The *Odyssey* is the story of motion both purposeful and purposeless, successful and futile. What else is the history of law? (182).

In his rereading of the epic, Michael Berg also describes the postmodern novel he writes. *The Reader*—like the *Odyssey* and the law, by his description—refuses the possibility of enlightenment. Hanna, Michael Berg, the judge and the jury seek knowledge of a history that promises to elude them. Knowing that enlightenment is unattainable, Hanna and Michael seek proxy goals instead: she seeks death and he seeks nothing more than to continue the act of seeking. In the absence of a *telos*, the narrator underscores his *logos* instead, constructing a narrative in which the quest—the process of starting out, circling back and starting over again—is its own object of desire.

His quest is only to see more than other people do, and in this, he succeeds. Like a tragic chorus, he sees farther into Hanna's drama than she ever could. Conversely, she provides the narrative he needs, the character with which he can identify— and forget his own—as he reads and relates her story. As blind and bumbling as a tragic hero, she solves every immediate problem by ignoring the larger one that surrounds her on all sides. She takes a young lover in the first half of the novel and a governmental job in the second, showing no signs that she imagines the consequences those actions have on others. She expresses an awareness of other people only in retrospect, when her recognition can't hinder her action.

Against her obliviousness, the novel writes its judgment against her in a necessarily metaphorical form. The massive scale of her indifference—shown not only towards one

person, but ultimately towards six million— suggests the need for a sympathy so excessive it is legible only by indirection. In this context, the abuse that Michael Berg suffers points towards the much greater harms that Hanna inflicts. Her most injured victims are necessarily absent from the novel, and the narrator elects to stand in for them. A belated witness to the Shoah, he tries to feel it in his own body by becoming a victim of the same perpetrator, enacting the same narrative form: she selects someone to read to her, and after awhile, she makes her reader go away.

This bisected narrative conflates Michael Berg's history with his nation's, separating a pre-traumatized past from a post-traumatic present. The narrator describes the haziness of his life after Hanna as an exaggerated version of his generation's after the war:

> All survivor literature talks about this numbness, in which life's functions are reduced to a minimum...I was preoccupied [by the fact that this general numbness] had taken hold not only of the perpetrators and victims, but of all of us, judges and lay members of the court, prosecutors and recorders, who had to deal with these events now; when I likened perpetrators, victims, the dead, the living, survivors, and their descendants to each other, I didn't feel good about it and I still don't (103).

This shared numbness works like Rorty said Humbert Humbert does: the members of the court know the suffering is severe precisely because, like Hanna, they can't feel it. And just as he feels guilty for identifying with the perpetrators, Michael Berg feels guilty for identifying with the victims. If his sadomasochistic relationship to Hanna gave him insight into her victims' experiences, his history is not, as he acknowledges here,

analogous with theirs. Dwarfed by the history it metonymically represents, his trauma is a de facto explanation for his post-traumatic state. It serves at once to justify the numbness he feels and to authorize his narration of history, positioning him at the margins of power within it.[27] His marriage fails, he explains, because he could never stop comparing his wife to Hanna and feeling like something was wrong—but as a survivor of Auschwitz tells him, "That could have happened even if there was no Hanna," and certainly, it could also not have happened even though there was.

Her character, however, takes a greater hold on his than one independent agent could reasonably take over another. His narrative is entirely dependent on hers; without her, he would have no story to narrate and no character to be. With this symbiotic form of identification, Berg demonstrates a way of reading that is akin to melancholic mourning as Freud describes it. Drawing on his analysis of soldiers returned from war, Freud tells the melancholic's story in the past tense: he attached his libido to a particular person, and by some rupture, the attachment was shattered; rather than withdraw and re-attach to someone else, as psychoanalysis deems is normal, "[the free libido] was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (emphasis his. *MM*, 586).

Michael Berg follows this Freudian narrative closely, incorporating Hanna—his abandoned object—into himself, identifying with her completely. That identification is so strong that he makes little distinction between her narrative and his. As Freud describes it, "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth

[27] As Laura Hinton notes, male masochism offers "the male subject a position of social transgression" (17). From that position, he is authorized to write.

be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object." Fusing Hanna's story with his own, Berg treats his narrative as an aesthetic object—giving form to it as he gives form to hers. And by tying the two narratives inextricably together, he elicits this same kind of identification from his reader. He models the reaction that he invites, formally encouraging his reader to experience his "libido" through the narrative's drive towards Hanna.

This drive is unsatisfied except through the act of reading. Bringing the reader closer to the characters and the characters closer to each other, reading becomes synonymous with intimacy within the terms of the novel. Michael Berg communicates with Hanna by reading to her, first in bed as a young man and later by tape across the walls of the prison where she serves her time. Beginning with the *Odyssey*, he reads books aloud and records his readings on tape; he mails them to her and writes their titles in a notebook he keeps. "Taken together, the titles in the notebook testify to a great and fundamental confidence in bourgeois culture," he observes.

> I do not remember asking myself whether I should go beyond Kafka, Frisch, Jonson, Bachmann, and Lenz, and read experimental literature, literature in which I did not recognize the story or like any of the characters. To me it was obvious that experimental literature was experimenting with the reader, and Hanna didn't need that and neither did I (185).

The relationship between Hanna and Michael Berg depends upon conventional narrative forms— upon the assumption that a character must be likable, and that the reader must

identify with her as she progresses over time. To question any of these assumptions would be to threaten the logic that holds them together: if he could not be Hanna's sympathetic reader, he would have to find a new way to justify and represent his relationship to her. So he forms Hanna's canon along traditional lines, reinforcing his identification with her as he reads.

He continues to send his recorded texts for years with no response, and he wonders what her life is like, whether she is still alive. Eventually he receives a note in a childlike scrawl: "Kid, the last story was especially nice. Thank you. Hanna" "I read the note and was filled with joy and jubilation," he recalls. "By finding the courage to learn to read and write, Hanna had advanced from dependence to independence, a step towards liberation" (187-188). Years passed; he kept reading, and she wrote back one-liners: "Goethe's poems are like tiny paintings in beautiful frames' or 'Lenz must write on a typewriter.'" The first full-length letter he receives is written by a warden, who informs him that Hanna's release is due. The warden says that he is the only one who has written to Frau Schmitz, and she wonders if he could find her an apartment, help establish her in the world. "You cannot imagine how lonely and helpless one can be on the outside after eighteen years in prison," she writes (192).

But rather than face that fact of her limited power in the world, Hanna hangs herself on the day that she is to be released. Michael Berg goes to her cell after her death, and he finds a shelf laden with books. "Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Jean Améry—the literature of the victims, next to the autobiography of Rudolf Hess, Hannah Arendt's report on Eichmann in Jerusalem, and scholarly literature on the camps." The warden tells him that she ordered her books "with care": "as soon as she learned to read,

she began to read about the concentration camps." Hanna's reading habits implicitly prove Berg right in his own narrative, providing evidence of the remorse she must have felt. Against any objection that might linger among his readers, they suggest that Berg was right: she was a sympathetic reader after all, and she learned something over time, gaining insight into the people she had never recognized as such.

And just as Hanna's character becomes more sympathetic after her death, Michael Berg's becomes unsympathetic in proportion. "She so hoped you would write," the warden chastises. "She wasn't talking about the packages the tapes came in. Why did you never write?" Accused retrospectively, just as he accused himself after he snubbed Hanna at the pool, Berg once again has no response.

The novel forces the reader's identification with Berg by inviting sympathy for the guilty party who survives in the end. By securing identification in this moment, it provides a vicarious experience of conflict, and ultimately survival in its aftermath. In this way, it enables the dramatized narrator to function much as Nietzsche says the tragic chorus does. Dismissing the "usual aesthetic clichés" that the chorus stands in for the audience or its ideal member, Nietzsche defines the chorus by the position from which it views the drama. Standing at the margins of the stage, the chorus is essentially unlike the audience because it believes the drama to be true. "The true spectator whoever he may be, must always remain aware that he is watching a work of art and not an empirical reality," Nietzsche writes. In contrast, "the tragic chorus of the Greeks is required to grant the figures on the stage a physical existence" (37). By this reading, the chorus marks off the boundary between fact and fiction; like Michael Berg, it exists within the realm of a fiction that accepts the tragedy as true. And like Michael Berg, it enables the reader to

identify with that liminal space, providing "the metaphysical consolation (with which, as I wish to point out, every true tragedy leaves us)". By identifying with the chorus—and the narrator—who survives in the end, the audience is assured that "whatever changes may occur, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and joyful." That testament to the goodness of living, Nietzsche writes, "is given concrete form as a satyr chorus, a chorus of natural beings, living ineradicably behind all civilization, as it were, remaining the same for ever, regardless of the changing generations and the path of history." (39)

Representing the act of survival, Michael Berg becomes the sole mourner of Hanna's death. The admonishing warden says that Hanna left a note, asking Berg to entrust the small estate she left behind to the lone survivor of the fire in the church. "And tell him I say hello to him." He asks the warden about Hanna's life in prison, and finds that until several years earlier, she was a well-respected member of the community of inmates and guards. But something changed: she grew slovenly and anti-social, as though in constant retreat from the world, "into a lonely cell safe from all eyes, where looks, clothing and smell meant nothing. [It] would be wrong to say she had given up. She redefined her place in a way that was right for her, but no longer impressed the other women" (208). Hanna's resistance to social norms extends from the courtroom to the polis in the prison, where she resists— once again—self-destructively. Refusing to exercise the citizenship that the prison community affords her, she turns inward, and then she disappears.

This posthumous portrait corroborates Berg's sympathetic reading of Hanna, and he earnestly tries to fulfill her last wishes. He finds the last survivor of the church fire, who proves reluctant to accept Hanna's money. She shakes her head, suggesting that to

comply with Hanna's will would be to "grant Frau Schmitz an absolution". Berg tries to protest but inwardly agrees that, "Hanna was indeed asking a great deal. Her years of imprisonment were not merely to be the required atonement: Hanna wanted to give them her own meaning, and she wanted this giving of meaning to be recognized" (212). Hanna uses her legacy to control the way in which she is read, urging her readers—including her narrator— to understand her years in prison as a time in which she read, understood, and converted from bad to good. But her narrator is ambivalent about Hanna's efforts to wrest narrative control from his hands. He explicitly argues Hanna's case, but implicitly acknowledges the reader's right to interpret the narrative as she sees fit. By ending his narration with this ambivalent stance, he acknowledges that he, too, may have asked for too much—in his pleas on Hanna's behalf, he has tried to exert the same kind of control on his reader that she tries to exert on him after her death.

This exchange between Michael Berg and the survivor of the fire poses one of the central questions in the court and in the novel: whether Hanna's failure to act well is the result of a willful refusal or of an innate incapacity. The characters distribute their sympathies according to how they answer this question. If they decide that Hanna knows her crimes are cruel but still chooses to commit them, then they do as the survivor does and give her the novel's maximum sentence: they withhold their identification from her entirely, seeing her as one of "them" rather than one of "us". Conversely, if they decide that Hanna knows not what she does, they follow Michael Berg wholly, identifying with him as he identifies with her. The novel allows room for both of these readings with the questions it leaves unanswered, and more persuasively, it also allows room to split the difference between them. By portraying Michael Berg as a somewhat unreliable but also

sympathetic character, it enables the reader to gain the necessary distance to stand in judgment of Hanna, and but still stand close enough to the story to feel included in the world it represents.

With the conflicted identification it elicits, *The Reader* fictionalizes problems of legal ethics that are historically fraught. It asks how individuals can remain responsible for their actions when they are subject to forces much larger than themselves, and to this degree, it serves a social function much like Attic tragedy's. The genre did cultural work for the burgeoning city-state by debating the bases of the law it would need: It represented a crime that is difficult to locate and a punishment that is excessive to help the citizens imagine a truer justice by contrast.

The historians Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet argue this point, suggesting that tragedy paved the way for a law that was difficult to conceive without the modern concept of the will. As the Greeks made the transition from divine to human law, Vernant and Naquet maintain, the citizens were uncertain of the responsibility they bore for themselves. With the belief that their agency was limited by the gods, they found it difficult to define their accountability to each other. In this context, tragedy narrated the conditions under which a good man might behave badly, which enabled them to conceive of a criminal in their midst. This was "not the fruit of disinterested reflection on the subjective conditions that make an individual the cause responsible for his actions," write Vernant and Naquet. "It [was] rather a matter of legal categories that, at the time of the city-state, were imposed by the law as norms for common thought" (60). Tragedy did the aesthetic work of this imposition, preparing the citizenry for a society ruled by the

law instead of the gods. Arbitrating a system of mitigated justice, it helped them make the transition to individual selfhood from an age when any guilt was collective.

To distinguish literature from law, Vernant and Naquet cite legality's lack of interest in the interior life of the criminal. "The law did not proceed on the basis of a psychological analysis of the varying degrees of the responsibility of the agent," they write. Rather than investigate the mind of the criminal, it judged the relative badness of the crime:

> It followed criteria designed to regulate, in the name of the State, the exercise of private vengeance, by drawing distinctions, in accordance with the carrying intensity of emotional reaction aroused in the group in question, between the varying forms of murder calling for different legal sentences.

The law, Vernant and Naquet suggest, distinguishes a hierarchy of criminality and metes out punishment accordingly. It gauges the emotional response of the people and tempers it with reason, regulating private vengeance with a logic that is public. Thus it is no coincidence that legality coincides with ancient tragedy. As the polis began to take shape, tragedy forced its audiences to draw a line to decide: when they would stop sympathizing with one of their fellow citizens long enough to judge him.

This balance between sympathy and judgment is crucial to political community, as Socrates suggests in Plato's *Republic*. He decrees that the ideal polis will represent the fellow feeling that exists between people who live in metaphysically close quarters: "when any one of the citizens experiences any good or evil," Socrates proclaims, "the whole State will make his case their own, and will either rejoice or sorrow with him"

(416). Bound in an emotional life that is collective, the citizenry sympathizes with one another even when it issues moral judgments. Good and evil are understood to be fates that one experiences rather than qualities that one is; the polis binds together in pity for people who meet bad fates and happiness for their luckier members. Drawing on this model of statehood, tragedy elicits a readerly response that, as Martha Nussbaum describes it, "is distinct from moral censure or blame: it requires the belief that the person did not deserve the suffering" (384).

*The Reader* considers the utility of this ancient ethic of reading by juxtaposing it against its modern opposite. By subjecting its protagonist to a literal judgment in a court of law, it underlines the formal demands of the modern novel, which determine the innocence and guilt of a protagonist through the identification she elicits. By its traditional definition, the modern novel requires a protagonist to be good to engender the reader's sympathy. Hanna calls this tradition into question in her responses to the judge, who represents the reader in the diegetic world of the novel. The judge raises the factual questions that a reader would want to know; he asks Hanna whether she participated fully in the murderous act of selecting prisoners, and whether she knew that the prisoners she selected would be sent to their death. "Hanna didn't understand what the presiding judge was getting at," Michael Berg observes, imagining the limits of her comprehension as the judge tries to fathom the limits of her guilt.

"I... I mean... so what would you have done?" Hanna asks, turning to the judge to ask the question that reading primers pose at the end of a story, leading new readers to do what experienced ones do reflexively: to imagine what it would be like to be a fictional character and to live her story in her place. "She meant it as a serious question,"

the narrator observes. "She did not know what she should or could have done differently, and therefore wanted to hear from the judge, who seemed to know everything, what he would have done." The courtroom falls silent after Hanna's question, which seems unprecedented. "It is not the custom at German trials for defendants to question the judge," Berg interjects. "But now the question had been asked, and everyone was waiting for the judge's answer."

Certainly, they were. Hanna asks the question that the Holocaust poses to every citizen who lives after it: What would I have done? Everybody wants to believe that they would have resisted, but Nazism is most terrifying precisely because it was so hard to resist. From Hannah Arendt to Daniel Goldhagen, the historiography of the Holocaust testifies to the banality of evil and the collective nature of guilt, representing a political body in which individual agency is diminished. Through its unprecedented bureaucracy, Nazism enabled each individual to act as Schlink's Hanna does: with such attention to the means that the ends become invisible, so their moral value becomes difficult to weigh. In this way, individuals lose their power to make moral decisions, and the Enlightenment's faith in the power of man thinking becomes a relic of a less cynical age.

The judge is unable to address this philosophical history when Hanna questions him in court. He affects a look of irritation that serves as a mask, Michael Berg observes, buying time for him to consider an answer. "But not too long," Berg reflects. "The longer he took, the greater the tension and expectation, and the better his answer had to be." Finally, like Oedipus to the sphinx, he answers: 'There are matters one simply cannot get drawn into, that one must distance oneself from, if the price is not life and limb." Deferring to universal laws of human behavior, he feints towards a Kantian

notion of objectivity that leaves Berg unsatisfied. "Perhaps this would have been all right if he had said the same thing, but referred directly to Hanna or himself," he thinks:

> Talking about what 'one' must and must not do and what it costs did not do justice to the seriousness of Hanna's question. She had wanted to know what she should have done in her particular situation, not that there are things that are not done. The judge's answer came across as hapless and pathetic. Everyone felt it. They reacted with sighs of disappointment and stared in amazement at Hanna, who had more or less won the exchange. But she herself was lost in thought.
>
> 'So should I have... Should I have not.. should I not have signed up at Siemens?'
>
> It was not a question directed at the judge. She was talking out loud to herself, hesitantly, because she had not yet asked herself that question and did not know whether it was the right one, or what the answer was" (111-112).

Here, *The Reader* raises the question that modern reading primers ask at the end of every story: What would you have done if you had been in it?. Attributing historical significance to this question, it assumes that its readers will ask it—and try to answer—as a matter of course. Experienced readers have been taught to comply by identifying with a protagonist, and they reflexively blame the quality of the book if they can't: if the novel expects me to identify with a character and I can't, then the novel is bad.[28] *The Reader* reframes these habits of reading as habits of life, and it asks if the verdict is the same.

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[28] Some theoretical criticism exists on the subject of sympathetic identification, but practically none treats it as a feature of both form and content. Hans Robert Jauss analyzes it formally in his *Aesthetic Experience*

Noting the character's politics and religion, philosophy and manners, readers wield cultural values like a legal system. They align themselves with characters who provide them with a solid defense, identifying with characters who represent their goodness well, and also with those who represent their badness understandably. Thus, through their identification, readers police the walls of their polis; they arbitrate the difference between "us" and "them," insuring that "I" will always be part of "us".

Michael Berg is no exception, seeing himself in the history he reads in Hanna. His fiction gathers weight from the history that lies behind it, and at the same time, it gives his reader to know that the Holocaust happened, and that whatever happens in the novel is immaterial to that. It reiterates Saul Friedländer's argument that there are different ways of knowing; "[the postwar] decades have increased our knowledge of the events as such," Friedländer writes, "but not our understanding of them. There is no clearer perspective today, no deeper comprehension than immediately after the war" (qtd. in Ascheim, xx). Hanna's refusal to give the court the answers it's looking for points to this greater, historical inscrutability, which increases the power the past has over the present, just as it increases the power Hanna has over her court. As she tells Michael Berg from her prison cell, "When no one understands you, then no one can call you to

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*and Literary Hermeneutics,* where he divides readers' ways of identifying with protagonists into seven categories. That analysis is of interest here and it will be discussed later in the chapter, but it is of limited utility because of its excessive formalism. Jauss brackets off the moral and philosophical factors of sympathy—which are central to this study—to study only its formal properties. A more populous school of recent criticism treats identification as a function of content, reading protagonists as sympathetic or not depending upon their feminist, queer or multicultural import. These theories draw interesting parallels between characters and readers who share the same demographic coordinates, but they too are of limited utility here. Drawing on both of those bodies of criticism, I argue that sympathy works through form and content in equal measures.

account. Not even the court could call me to account. But the dead can. They understand." (198)

*The Reader*'s effort to simultaneously understand Hanna and condemn her puts the novel on a philosophical fence. Like the ancient Greeks, it suggests that the individual must be understood in relation to her polis—or, as we say, that identity is socially constructed. But like Kant, this postmodern novel still expects its protagonist to think for herself. This philosophical conflict is also readable in terms of literary genre: it reflects the tragic notion that an individual's power in history is small, but it also represents the novelistic credo that an individual must act as if her power is great.

## Chapter Two

### Terror and *Phobos,* in and around American Pastoral

"In the final analysis, what are the two principal mainsprings of dramatic art? Have all the authors worthy of the name not declared that they are *terror* and *pity*? Now, what can provoke *terror* if not the portrayal of crime triumphant, and what can cause *pity* better than the depiction of virtue a prey to misfortune?"

—The Marquis de Sade, "The Author of *Les Crimes de l'Amour* to Villeterque, Hack Writer" (24).

The Marquis de Sade describes narrative as a judicial system that takes its terms for granted, assuming its readers know the meaning and consequences of "crime" and "virtue," without further discussion. Such sweeping assumptions prove most valuable to contemporary critics as artifacts of a less skeptical age, when the ethics of reading seemed impervious to history. In this context, de Sade's "final analysis" becomes less useful for the finality to which it aspires than for the specificity it unwittingly provides: When de Sade claims to describe all audiences, all the time, he reaches at once too high and too low: pretending to do what no one could, he overlooks his ability to de what most people can't—to describe the audiences that he knew, in Paris, in France, at the end of the eighteenth century. He fails in his stated aim, to portray an audience that transcends its time and place, but he succeeds in portraying a reader who is schooled in the *grands récits* of the European Enlightenment.

That is, he articulates the assumptions under which modern Europeans read. "The mainsprings of dramatic art," as de Sade describes them, rest in the violation of a modern audience's expectations: that an individual who works hard is necessarily virtuous, and

with virtue, he necessarily progresses; with progress, he gains knowledge, and with knowledge, he finds happiness. De Sade, like his contemporaries, would have been well versed in these axioms, which he would have read in the form of the novel. The genre gives aesthetic form to these tenets of empirical reason, and circulates narratives of enlightenment throughout the western world. It teaches audiences to become like those that de Sade describes, trusting that the search for knowledge leads to the repose of truth, and, conversely, that reason will not allow a breach in that equation. For readers like these, the suffering of the good becomes a contradiction in terms, marking the point at which meaning gives way to absurdity, and logic flags against the threat of random terror.

To articulate these assumptions that modernity makes, de Sade misappropriates Aristotelian terms: *eleos* and *phobos* refer to the affects that tragedy produces, but de Sade means something else entirely. The narratives that he describes are ones in which a good person suffers badly, or a bad person thrives well, either of which assumes a Manichean morality that is antithetical to ancient tragedy. Tragedy's moral sphere is essentially ambiguous, revolving around guilt that is inherited, and suffering that is partially but not wholly deserved. Noble but flawed, the tragic hero is somewhat less criminal because he is also victimized; his narrative is not a "portrait of crime triumphant" or of virtue punished, but of crime and virtue blended so thoroughly that they become inextricable. Tragedy uses this moral ambiguity to invite an ambivalent response, in which the spectator tempers his judgment of the crimes that the hero commits with pity for the ones that he suffers. Implicit in this formulation is the wish for a more objective measure by which to weigh vice against virtue, to reach an impartial judgment that the audience could collectively affirm. But that kind of justice is nowhere

to be found in tragic drama, which works outside the bounds of reason.[29] The hero is destined to commit his crime, and similarly ordained to be punished excessively for it. His agency is limited and his guilt extended to every member of his afflicted house, rendering the individual actor difficult to judge.

Tragic guilt is collectively owned, and, consequently, it defies the modern credo that every man can be the master of his fate. This defiance makes tragedy inaccessible to the modern reader, as Kierkegaard writes in 1847: "Our age has to leave the individual entirely to himself, so that in a stricter sense he becomes his own creator. His guilt is therefore sin, his pain remorse. But the tragic is then done away with." (148). Kierkegaard's argument—that tragedy contradicts the spirit of the Enlightenment—gains support from de Sade's poor reading of the genre, which illustrates the difference between the modern and tragic worldviews: where the modern explicitly works to distinguish the individual from his neighbors, the tragic works to bind them together. Both Kierkegaard and de Sade work to bridge that gap, but from opposite ends: where Kierkegaard advocates the logic of the ancients to enlighten the misguided moderns, de Sade erases the difference between the two by bringing the ancients up to date. He translates the terminology of tragedy for a modern audience, using pity and terror to name a modern reader's shock at the indeterminacy that tragedy takes for granted. With this misuse of Aristotelian terms, de Sade makes tragedy a text more modern than it is. He describes the genre as if it works like a novel, narrating a conflict between the goodness of the protagonist and the evil of the world that keeps her from happiness. In this way, he brings the ancient genre to the modern reader, who is generically prepared to

[29] cf. Hegel: "True pity, on the contrary, is sympathy at the same time with the sufferer's justification" (1198).

identify with a virtuous heroine in her journey through a vice-ridden landscape. He cleanses the muddiness from tragedy's moral sphere and reinscribes the tragic hero as a modern protagonist, who makes meaning around the polarity she learns to see between good and evil. With that reinscription, he protects his readers from the threat that tragedy implicitly poses: that sometimes, meaning simply will not be made.

But if modern readers travel like foreigners in the world that tragedy represents, postmodern readers acclimate to it easily, because it is like our own. The cultural logic that dominates the west at the close of the twentieth century resembles the one in which tragedy appeared, when old systems of belief became obsolete but no new grand narratives had yet emerged to take their place.[30] The citizens of postmodern culture share tragedy's audiences' mistrust in their ability to determine their own fate with the truths they discover. Assuming that identity is socially constructed, they imagine the individual as a nub in the matrix of relations that bind friends and family, gender and ethnicity, nation and culture. The solitary seeker becomes an anachronism in this moment, and the act of seeking falls under a more general suspicion, as the history of the twentieth century provides ample evidence that the search for knowledge is not generically good. The reader who has easy access to information about German concentration camps and Rwandan villages must conclude that intellectual progress perfects tools for evil as well, and that data bears little relation to enlightenment in the Kantian sense. We benefit from the masterpieces and vaccines that are our cultural legacy, but with them, we also inherit technologies that multiply our capacity for self-destruction. And as we pay witness to two world wars and multiple genocides, we lose

[30] See Introduction for a fuller description of this historical account of the genre.

faith in the performative power of the phrase, "never again," becoming disabused of the hope that knowing what is right precludes action that is wrong. As that crisis of knowledge grows, we make the concession from which tragedy begins, recognizing that the sum total of human enlightenment provides imperfect protection against the vicissitudes of fate.[31]

That concession assumes material dimensions after September 11, when the vocabulary of terror gains currency among the citizens of western culture—and, especially, among Americans. Lacking a dramatic chorus to reassure us that what we witness is fictional, we watch the televised attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as testaments to our collective vulnerability to forces that we can neither predict nor resist. These terrorist acts, like all terrorist acts, generate tragic terror without the fictional frame: they imply that danger lies well hidden in any ordinary landscape. A kamikaze pilot quietly boarding a commercial airline creates a threat against which knowledge is impotent. No individual or agency could ever amass enough information to protect against it, just as no Greek could know enough to escape an angry god.

And in both cases, violence erupts with the appearance of randomness that results from a plan that is carefully calculated. The narrative that the western media constructs, in which Al-Qaeda operatives plot in secret cells that are dispersed invisibly within the visible populace, functions much like the cosmology that the Greeks imagined, in which the gods nurture their resentments secretly to wreak well-orchestrated havoc on earth. In

[31] Citizens respond to this variously, exhibiting impulses toward litigation on the one hand and eastern religion on the other; with the former, we cling to our legacy from the Enlightenment, and seek a responsible party for the damage we suffer; and in the other, relinquish our claim to that legacy, and seek knowledge by a different definition.

this master narrative, danger lingers where mortals can't see it to culminate in a tragedy that befalls the noblest and most unsuspecting citizen. The intrusion of hidden forces in mundane reality provides a rationale for events that would otherwise be inexplicable; it explains why an individual's good works might not lead to his future happiness. The break in that causal chain is the central subject of tragedy, and *phobos* names the emotion with which its spectators recognize it. At the sight of suffering that begins without warning or immediate provocation, we are reminded that even the best among us might meet the worst possible fate: hence, terror.

Aristotle describes tragedy in these terms. He defines the genre by its depiction of a person in pain that the spectator "might expect to suffer himself or that one of his own would, and this whenever it should seem near at hand" (*P*, 1452b). Tragedy, by this account, threatens the members of its audience with the mortality that they share with the hero and with each other. This communitarian ethos is essential to the genre, which arose at a moment like ours, when the borders of political community were uncertain, in a polis that had began to take shape but had yet to take hold. For the new neighbors in the city-state, tragedy provided a vocabulary with which to debate how far, exactly, to extend the boundaries that divide *us* from *them*.

This is the central question that the western world has writ large in the months since September 11: Who is included among the victims of this attack? Are they confined to a subset of Americans who wield power and money in New York and Washington, or do they exist among the housewives in Tennessee and the clerks in McDonald's? And if the answer is the latter, the limits of that category require further definition: Does the citizenry-under-attack end at the borders of the United States, or does

it include Canadians and Europeans, Asians and Latin Americans—and beyond that, all law abiding citizens, living all over the globe?

These questions are essentially questions of identification. They ask how far each person will extend his imagination to care for the well being of someone who differs, in some degree, from himself. It has been widely noted (as an irony or something worse) that when America expects the rest of the world to extend this kind of compassionate attention, it expects the very thing that it will never give. As the Indian novelist Arudhati Roy admonished only eighteen days after the attacks: "It will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try to understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own." History, she suggests, serves as a national character reference for this possibility; the American government has traditionally demonstrated an overwhelming obliviousness of the value of lives that are lived outside of its borders.[32] And without using the word, she suggests that the terror attacks were "blowback," the delayed and unsanctioned punishment for seemingly unrelated crimes.[33] To the degree that this is true, she writes,

> Terrorism as a phenomenon may never go away. But if it is to be contained, the first step is for America to at least acknowledge that it shares the planet with other nations, with other human beings who, even if

[32] She cites in particular a 1996 interview in which "Madeleine Albright, then the US secretary of state, was asked on national television what she felt about the fact that 500,000 Iraqi children had died as a result of US economic sanctions. She replied that it was 'a very hard choice', but that, all things considered, 'we think the price is worth it'." Roy uses understatement to suggest that such hardheartedness is characteristic of American foreign policy, reminding her reader that, "Albright never lost her job for saying this".

[33] By Chalmers Johnson's definition, the term refers to the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people: "What the daily press reports as the malign acts of 'terrorists' or 'drug lords' or 'rogue states' or 'illegal arms merchants often turn out to be blowback from earlier American operations" (8).

> they are not on TV, have loves and griefs and stories and songs and sorrows and, for heaven's sake, rights.

That this argument is posited in this way by a novelist, rather than a pundit or a politician, supports the genre theorists who suggest that the novel is uniquely suited to foster the sympathy that Roy describes. Within a fictional frame, it teaches readers to imagine how it would feel to be other than they are, and to care for people who previously seemed unreal.[34] And at the turn of the twenty-first century, as Roy suggests, this discussion of identification extends beyond the bounds of fiction to assume geographic coordinates, as the limits of sympathy become a global concern. Technology enables westerners to see how other people live and die, but it can't teach us how to use that information. Postmodern novels work to fill that gap in our collective education: Tracing the difference between a global economy and a global community, they test the rights and responsibilities that every citizen has to a polis whose limits are increasingly unclear.

Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) raises these tragic concerns in typically postmodern forms. It asks why bad things happen to good people, and, alternatively, whether even the best people could ever accurately be called good. Tracing the benign beginnings of one terrible act, Roth contrasts a terrorist's extraordinary violence with her family's ordinary virtue and foregrounds problems of identification. The story of a father who struggles to rationalize his daughter's irrational acts becomes a narrative of a community's failure, underlining the inevitability with which every person misperceives

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[34] Cf. Richard Rorty: "This process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and especially, the novel" (*CIS*, xiv).

the logic by which his neighbors live. This novelistic assertion of the partiality of knowledge echoes contemporary debates over the degree to which "the truth" is socially constructed and therefore fundamentally untranslatable from one culture to another. *American Pastoral* reframes these theoretical problems in historical terms by fusing the political and psychological differences that fragment nations and families. In this way, it represents knowledge that exists only in private languages, which necessarily fail in the public sphere, and it posits domestic relations that explicitly mirror global ones, where citizens strain towards a transcendent understanding that exists only in fictional forms.

In its *fabula*, *American Pastoral* recounts a stock narrative of downfall: a local hero grows up to have a daughter whose eccentricity becomes an obscure extremism, which leads her to bomb the local post office for reasons that she never precisely states. The *sjuzet* constructs that narrative in an inverted order, starting with the static image of a good family in ruins and working backwards to recount the narrative from which that "portrait of evil triumphant" emerges. With that inversion, *American Pastoral* gives away the plot in the beginning and dispels the question that typically drives novelistic desire: "What will happen next?" Instead, it raises the much less answerable questions that Kierkegaard attributes to tragedy: "Why has this befallen me? Why can it not be otherwise?" (149).

The novel begins with Zuckerman's reminiscences about his old neighborhood in New Jersey, and its golden boy, Seymour Levov.[35] As Zuckerman describes him, Levov seemed exemplary from birth; "the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews," with athletic prowess and a star quality that made "him appear, if not divine," then at least "a

[35]Zuckerman provides the narrative voice for the three Roth novels preceding *American Pastoral*, and Lorrie Moore called him Roth's "literary doppelganger"; Roth called him his "alter brain." (7-8).

distinguished cut above the more primordial humanity." His "steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask" earned him the nickname "the Swede," and the neighborhood unofficially elected him "our Kennedy" (4-6).

These reveries are inspired by a letter that Zuckerman receives twenty-five years after graduation, when the Swede writes him, ostensibly, because he wants to commission an homage to his recently deceased father. Knowing that Zuckerman has become a writer, the Swede expresses his hope that the novelist's craft will enable him to see what others can't, and to reveal that hidden truth to others. Specifically, he wants Zuckerman to represent his father's interior life in writing: "Not everyone knew," the bereaved son writes, hinting at a sorrow he doesn't explain, "how much he suffered because of the shocks that befell his loved ones" (18).

Subsequently, the Swede becomes the protagonist of the novel, but that letter is the only place where his language appears unmediated by his narrator—and that phrase is the letter's only suggestion that the Swede's harmonious exterior covers anything but more harmony. It resonates with Zuckerman, who longs to close the distance that keeps him from his childhood hero. Like a teenager finally invited to sit with the cool kids in the cafeteria, Zuckerman relishes the opportunity to get beyond the myth and see the Swede as he is. This desire for intimacy grows exponentially when Zuckerman perceives the possibility that the Swede's life story might be less ideal than it seems. "What sort of mental existence had been his," he asks excitedly, and "what, if anything, had ever threatened to destabilize his trajectory?" (20).

Their meeting yields no answers to the novelist's questions. The Swede drives the conversation towards trivial subjects, representing himself as a caricature of success in specifically American terms. He reminds his listener of his family's modest beginnings and embellishes his anecdotes with photographs of his pretty wife and his handsome sons, cataloging the boys' sports victories and the wife's ability to manage a career and a home. "I kept waiting for him to lay bare something more than this pointed unobjectionableness," Zuckerman recalls, "but all that rose to the surface was more surface... 'Something had turned him into a human platitude" (23). In an effort to discern something more profound, Zuckerman tries to move the conversation beyond the Swede's immediate experience. He asks about the family glove-making business and learns that it moved from Newark to Puerto Rico, fleeing the blights of "taxes, corruption and race" that turned the American city into a slum (24). Heartened by this nod to external realities, Zuckerman leaps up to pursue them, but the Swede thwarts his efforts handily by bringing the conversation back in praise of his family, listing the reasons they love life in Puerto Rico, with its water sports and good weather.

Zuckerman's behavior supports the popular translation of Aristotle's claim that every hero must have a flaw. He hopes to discover that the Swede is like the tragic hero as Aristotle describes him: "a man who is neither outstanding in virtue and righteousness," nor one who falls to misfortune because of his extraordinary "wickedness and vice" (P, 1453a). The Swede, Zuckerman suspects, must straddle those poles in his character, reconciling godly perfection and human fallibility in the figure of the modern American. He must be both distant from his narrator and near: in his perfection, he is anonymous and remote; in his mortality, his anonymity gives way to particularity and he

becomes a friend. Zuckerman strains to gain that kind of intimacy through the act of writing, as if by getting the details of the Swede's character down in black and white, he will achieve some kind of knowledge that eludes him. In this effort, he works to turn the Swede's biography into a tragedy by Aristotelian criteria, enabling audiences to "feel pity for a man who does not deserve his misfortune" and "fear for someone [who is also] like ourselves" (*P*, 1453a4-5).

But Zuckerman's effort to discover the Swede in discomfort also constitutes a novelistic impulse: to foster the reader's identification with the protagonist in pain. This spectacle of suffering is essential to the modern genre, as de Sade contends in his "Reflections on the Novel." A novelist does not arouse his reader's interest "by making virtue triumph";

> This rule, which exists neither in Nature nor in the works of Aristotle, is simply one that we should like all men to follow for our own sake and happiness, and is in no wise essential in the novel, nor is't even the one most likely to awaken the reader's interest. For when virtue triumphs, the world is in joint and things as they ought to be, our tears are stopped even, as it were, before they begin to flow (106).

Novel-readers reject this uneventfully happy story, de Sade argues, in favor of ones that devolve from "severe trials and tribulations" to culminate in degrees of unhappiness. The protagonist's fondest hopes are dispelled, giving readers an opportunity to "finally witness virtue overwhelmed by vice," de Sade writes: "our hearts are inevitably rent asunder" (107). De Sade's contention gains support from ample evidence among modern novels, in which some pained beginning leads a protagonist out into the world, where she

suffers and learns, and her suffering comes to cease, for better or worse. Novels from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Sentimental Education* begin because someone lacks something desirable—a husband, or a career, or what Georg Lukács calls "a totality of life that is rounded from within" (60)—and the reader joins the protagonist in her focus on that absence. Together, they traverse the length of the novel in search of something that can fill it.

Genre theorists frequently view this relationship between novel-readers and their protagonists in an historical frame, suggesting that identification enables the novel to do cultural work for the modern nation-state. By encouraging readers to identify with a virtuous protagonist against the obstacles that keep her from happiness, the modern novel unites a vaguely defined *us* against an even vaguer *them*. And in that kind of identification, it reconciles the polyglot populace of modern Europe, creating a narrative in which difference becomes the precursor for assimilation. "Socially," Timothy Brennan explains:

> The novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation (49).

Beginning from this premise—that the novel's "manner of presentation" helped modern Europeans to perceive their rights and responsibilities within the nation-state—my argument is that the postmodern novel works to accomplish the same feat of imagination for "the global community." It imagines a referent for that catchphrase, under the

assumption that cultural work is necessary to build an international community out of a transnational economy. And it advances that social project just as tragedy advanced it for the polis, which had a similarly nascent status at the moment when tragedy arose. Both genres adapt the narrative forms they inherit to enable the citizens of a new community to imagine themselves as such. They construct a spectacle of suffering that unites their audience in a collective identification with people who are in many ways unlike themselves.

*American Pastoral* frames this project in both formal and political terms. It foregrounds problems of identification by examining the degree to which its characters see themselves in terms of the national history they share, and, conversely, the degree to which that history determines who they will become. The national pastoral of the title appears in these terms, as the characters variously try to establish their identities through their identifications with each other. These identifications are always incomplete, as the characters are divided personally and politically, culturally and geographically. And these literal and figurative distances function metonymically for the larger ones of the global landscape in which this pastoral is embedded; in this respect, Roth's novel updates the modern genre for a postmodern age. It nods to the novel's historical function in western culture by highlighting the formal devices through which one person imagines how it would feel to be another; but where the modern novel assumes the possibility of that feat of imagination, the postmodern novel treats it as a nostalgic fantasy.

*American Pastoral* dramatizes this kind of creation in Zuckerman's effort to fabricate a novel out of the data of someone else's life. In his effort to turn the Swede into a protagonist, Zuckerman struggles to discover something wrong with his character

and his story, some great and hidden sorrow. This search is motivated by reasons both personal and professional: Zuckerman knows that a character who is impervious to peril and pain might well be a hero, but he is neither a sympathetic protagonist nor a plausible human, so he does not belong in the novel, and he cannot be a friend. With this in mind, the novelist-narrator looks beyond the Swede's romantic drama to discover something darker, with which he might identify.

His interest rises when his dinner partner mentions his recent treatment for prostate cancer, but it dissolves soon after, when the Swede assures him that the operation was completely successful. Zuckerman will not relinquish his interest in suffering so easily, however; he notes that the procedure can be disastrous for some men, and that it was for friends of his. "One wound up impotent. The other's impotent and incontinent. Fellows my age. It's been rough for them. Desolating. It can leave you in diapers." Then Zuckerman discloses a personal detail to his reader that he conceals from his dinner partner: "the person I had referred to as 'the other' was me" (28-29). Simultaneously intimating and concealing how he must have suffered, Zuckerman remains as closed to the Swede as the Swede does to him. And he is hardly more generous with his reader; like the Swede, he hints at a personal narrative of pain and humiliation, and then he changes the subject.

After that disclosure, Zuckerman shifts his attention—and the novel's—permanently away from himself, towards the Swede. His protagonist and former hero refuses his sympathy, saying, "I got off easy". "I'd say you did," Zuckerman replies, "amicably enough." But his amiability masks envy and more than a little bitterness at the thought "that this big jeroboam of self-contentment really was in possession of all he had

ever wanted" (29-30). Zuckerman leaves the table with his preconceptions confirmed: the Swede is a conglomeration of shiny surfaces, devoid of the vulnerability of mortals.

This mythology gives way months later at their twenty-fifth reunion, when the Swede's brother Jerry reports that the Swede died of prostate cancer soon after that dinner, and that he died a broken man in a broken family. While his life had fairy tale qualities—a beauty queen wife, three handsome sons and the money to keep them in waterskis—it also had the stuff of tragedy: his daughter planted a bomb in their local post office, killing a man for an obscurely stated political cause. With this act of terrorism reported one-quarter of the way through the book, the Levovs' placid pastoral becomes an historical footnote, a rise and fall that testifies to their turbulent times.

This sketchy outline of a life story provides the basis of the novel, and Zuckerman gleans it as gossip. At his high school reunion, the Swede's brother Jerry relays the barest facts of his biography, and those "facts" become the *fabula* of the novel: the Swede goes away to college and falls in love with Miss New Jersey; he takes over the family business and has a family; he moves to the suburbs and grows into "a liberal sweetheart of a father. The philosopher-king of ordinary life" (69). Unlike many parents his age, he is temperamentally sympathetic to teenagers who grow their hair long and protest the war, and he tries to reason with his daughter when she becomes one of them. But he cannot wrap his mind around her way of thinking, because it is, according to her uncle's reports, antithetical to reason. She is "miserable, self-righteous," Jerry rants; the "little shit was no good from the time she was born" (69). Furious at her father and at the world, she kills a randomly chosen man for reasons she never gives. Her opposition to the

Vietnam War puts her anger within a legible cultural framework, but it fails to explain why she got a bomb and lit the fuse. "That bomb detonated [the Swede's] life," Jerry laments, wringing his hands. "Just what she had in mind. That's why they had it in for him, the daughter and her friends. He was so in love with his own good luck, and they hated him for it" (69). By his logic, Merry bombed the post office because the sight of such good fortune, displayed with such disregard for those who don't share it, drove her to distraction. In other words, she couldn't live with her father's *hybris*, which is commonly understood as a mortal's excessive pride in his excessive privilege.

Before the bombing, the Swede is highly susceptible to *hybris* by that definition; overly blessed, he has good looks and good luck, a happy family and an easy life. This excess of safety paradoxically becomes dangerous, and that danger provides the context in which Zuckerman first introduces the Swede. He introduces his protagonist by indirection, through his resemblance to another protagonist, from a novel he read when he was ten years old. Titled *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, the novel starkly contrasted the goodness of its protagonist with the badness of his fate. It "could as well have been called *The Lamb from Tomkinsville*," Zuckerman speculates, "even *The Lamb from Tomkinsville Led to the Slaughter*." It narrates the story of the Kid, a "clean-cut young pitcher" who works two jobs to support his family, after his mother and father die suddenly, in quick succession. Unsurprisingly, the Kid overcomes this adversity and more, rising from abject poverty to become a baseball hero and lead his team to the World Series, where he "makes the final game-saving play, a running catch smack up against the right center-field wall." To save the game, however, the Kid sacrifices himself; he falls from the catch in agony, and the novel concludes with the tableau of his

"inert form" carried off the field on a stretcher. "I had never read anything like it," Zuckerman recalls, "The cruelty of life. The injustice of it" (8-9).

This disparity between being good and living well reminds Zuckerman of his hero, and the danger that attends the excessive safety in which he lives:

> Needless to say, I thought of the Swede and the Kid as one and wondered how the Swede could bear to read this book that had left me near tears and unable to sleep... Did it occur to him that if disaster could strike down the Kid from Tomkinsville, it could come and strike the great Swede down too? Or was a book about a sweet star savagely and unjustly punished—a book about a greatly gifted innocent whose worst fault is his tendency to keep his right shoulder down and swing up but whom the thundering heavens destroy nonetheless—simply a book between those 'Thinker' bookends up on his shelf? (9)

This question opens *American Pastoral* and drives Zuckerman's subsequent narration about the Levovs and all that befalls them. A novelist by trade, Zuckerman looks for signs that his protagonist knew that what happened to the Kid from Tomkinsville could happen to him, too. He looks for signs, in other words, that the Swede possessed the knowledge that Aristotle attributes to the spectator of ancient tragedy, who saw tragedy as an experience he "might expect to suffer himself or that one of his own would."

However, if the Swede seemed a likely candidate to suffer for his hybris, Zuckerman concludes that he did not see himself in that light. "The cause of the disaster for him," Zuckerman writes, remains unexplained by reference to character and fate; for him, it has "to be a transgression" (89). The Swede spends his life looking for what went

wrong in his story, and by Zuckerman's reckoning, he recasts his plot to bear the sole responsibility for his family's fate. He convinces himself that he has behaved badly, and that his bad behavior made his daughter into a terrorist. Tracing Merry's criminal act back to its origins in her father's, he contains the forces of evil that would otherwise lie outside of him. "It doesn't matter whether he was the cause of anything," Zuckerman explains.

> He makes himself responsible anyway. He has been doing that all his life, making himself unnaturally responsible, keeping under control not just himself but whatever else threatens to be uncontrollable, giving his all to keep his world together. Yes, the cause of the disaster has for him to be a transgression. How else would the Swede explain it to himself? (88).

The product of a culture steeped in Freud, the Swede knows that every Antigone has an Oedipal complex that mitigates her self-determination, so he plays the part of the king too well. He traces his daughter's criminality to the incestuous desire he enacted once on a trip home from the beach. At age eleven, he remembers, Merry sat next to him and pleaded, "Daddy, kiss me the way you k-k-kiss umumumumother," and strangely enough, he did (89). That moment becomes, in her father's eyes, the one of her undoing. Something must have made Merry do the unreasonable things she did, Levov reasons, and surely it could have been this—the family crime, passed from father to daughter.

Oedipus serves psychoanalytic theory well because his narrative is unconfined to a single generation. His parents wrongfully abandon him, and he becomes a wrongdoer as well, committing patricide and incest that spring from the crime that is committed against him. That criminal legacy passes through previous and successive generations,

all of whom inherit the family's *hamartia* (alternately translated as "error," "sin," and failure") and are subsequently plagued by its *atē* (alternately translated as "folly," "ruin," "mischief," and "blindness visited upon one by the gods"). These varying translations lay out an ambiguous causality in which agency is difficult to locate. Tragedy's criminals are usually also victims of the crimes they commit, and filial lines supply the network by which *hamartia* travels; the tragic hero enacts the criminal legacy that lies latent in the rest of his family. Thus the audience pities Oedipus for killing his father just as it pities Antigone for defying hers, because those crimes are not entirely their fault. The heroes commit morally questionable acts of their own volition, but they commit them only within a highly determined sphere that leaves them little choice. The only members of their *hamartia*-plagued house who can bear the consequences of its *atē*, they sacrifice themselves to pay their family's debt to the gods.[36] In this way, *atē* circulates criminality until it becomes a community property. It provides an umbrella term for what Martha Nussbaum calls "a variety of important goings-wrong that do not result from settled badness," and thus it "is a concept well fitted to discourse about the gap between being good and living well" (*FG*, 383).[37]

Working in this gap, *atē* names an ancient form of the ambiguous causality that is now called "blowback"; it constructs a narrative in which one crime begets another through histories that are illegible. In both cases, terror arises from the arbitrariness with which the sufferers seem to be chosen, through criteria that are invisible and unreachable

[36] In the opening lines of the play, Antigone begs her sister to bear her share of that burden, asking with fatal optimism, "What more do you think could Zeus require of us to load the curse that's on the house of Oedipus?" Zeus' demands, of course, are far from met, and the audience knows it.

[37] Nussbaum continues, illustrating the range of tragic guilt with references to Agamemmnon, Creon and Neoptolemus: "To come to grief through *hamartia* is, then, to fall through some sort of mistake in action that is causally intelligible, not simply fortuitous, done in some sense by oneself; and yet is not the outgrowth of a settled defective disposition of character" (*FG*, 383).

to the individuals who are affected. Terrorists, as the political theorist Ehud Sprinzak notes, "are not in the business of killing large numbers of people, they are in the business of killing a small number of people and instilling in every one of us the fear that we are next in line." The victims of terror suffer through no determining fault of their own, but because they share a common and widely held kinship with a criminal body. Terror creates a narrative in which the cause of suffering is not an evil action but an unlucky affiliation, and thus it disperses its threat indiscriminately, through its witnesses as well as its victims.

Despite the degree of arbitrariness with which tragic justice is enacted, most philosophers of tragedy concur with the Swede that every reversal of fate is contingent on some transgression. They define *hybris* as an error in what one *does* rather than an error in what one *is*, dismissing the popular notion that the tragic hero is doomed by a flaw that resides in his person.[38] "[*Hybris*] is not, like pride, something one *feels* (or 'takes')," Walter Kaufmann maintains, "but rather something that involves *action*" (emphasis his, 64-65). More specifically, it is an unjust act that a stronger person takes against a weaker one, combined with an obliviousness of the other's suffering. Oedipus is not doomed because he possesses a fatal preoccupation with knowledge, but rather, because he acts on that preoccupation without regard to the consequences to himself and others. By this calculation, *hybris* is not a flaw bred into the hero's character; rather, it is a misstep that he makes in his plot—when he allows himself to remain ignorant about the reality of other people.

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[38] This interpretation is gain support from Grube's translation of the *Poetics*, which uses the word "flaw" with the qualification that it refers to "a moral or intellectual weakness" (xxiv-xxv).

This distinction is subtle, but it was important for the Greeks, who used tragedy as a literary arbiter of the nascent law. Tragic drama coincided with the advent of the judicial system, and it provided the citizens with a vocabulary in which to negotiate the limits of criminal agency. In tragedy—and more pointedly in Aristotle's interpretation of it—they learned that criminality resides less in character than in action, and, therefore, that it is subject to the rule of law. From this lesson, they also learned the necessity of an impartial judge, who can render guilt and innocence different in ways that every citizen can see. As Walter Kauffmann writes, tragedy:

> makes us see how countless agonies belong to one great pattern; our lives gain form; and the pattern transcends us. We are not singled out; we suddenly belong to a great fraternity that includes some of mankind's greatest heroes. The suffering we feel in seeing or reading a tragedy is thus not merely Hecuba's but pain of which we had some previous knowledge (82).

By adding greater pathos to the mythical narratives that had long been familiar to the Greeks, tragedy turned the relatively peaceful accounts of the house of Oedipus into occasions for pity and terror. It bound two affects together, providing an aesthetic and social frame for the emotion that Germans would call *schaudenfreude*: the bitter satisfactions that spectators feel when they see incredibly great things topple.

To establish its authority, the burgeoning polis needed to contain this affect, which sustained the system of justice that preceded the rule of law. The Greeks established order in the early years of the polis by ostracizing citizens annually, removing any one who threatened to overpower the rest. This ostracism of the strong was

practiced without recourse to the otherwise well-established democratic institutions; representing a backward step in the polis' progression from tribal to political law, it survived beyond its time because it served important functions. In ostracism, the city rid itself of people who might pose a threat to its order, and it provided a socially sanctioned outlet for the citizens' anti-social urges (Vernant and Naquet, 134-136).

These urges existed in the language of the time under the rubric of *phthonos*, which is translated as "a mixture of envy and religious distrust for anyone who rose too high or was too successful" (Vernant and Naquet, 134). *Phthonos* was important to the myth-driven culture that preceded the polis; it named the ordinary citizen's natural response to *hybris*. Those twinned terms express the animosity that the weak have toward the strong, not for any specific act of wrongdoing, but simply for the fact of their existence. This animosity posed an implicit threat to the stability of the polis, which needed powerful leaders who could garner popular support.[39] In this context, ostracism performed the politically necessary task of containing *phthonos*, by directing it toward a single object who could be expelled, after which the city could resume its business. Tragedy translated this expulsion into aesthetic terms, giving the citizens a fictional frame in which to learn to enact the law.

Their liminal moment is like ours: As the ancients worked to expand their political community with a rationalization of *phthonos*, postmodern citizens need to do the same. Economic globalization is well underway but no "global community" exists to do its cultural work, and ensure justice on a transnational scale. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon make sense in this tragic vocabulary, where they

[39] Vernant and Naquet

appear to be a punishment for western *hybris*. Naming the ignorance that is the privilege of the powerful—ignorance, specifically, about the powerless—*hybris* frames the attacks as the product of resentment, enacted against a national and corporate culture that could build buildings so flagrantly high, without considering its effects on other people. It frames them as a violent outpouring of "envy and religious distrust" against those who wield too much power, with too much obliviousness of others.

Jean Baudrillard framed the attacks this way, invoking the logic if not the language of tragedy, and contorting the facts to do so. He locates the source of the violence in the hegemonic powers of the United States to describe the destruction of the World Trade Center as a symbolic suicide. "When the two towers collapsed," Baudrillard wrote in *Le Monde*,

> one could feel that they answered the suicide of the kamikazes by their own suicide. It has been said: "God cannot declare war on Itself." Well, It can. The West, in its God-like position (of divine power, and absolute moral legitimacy) becomes suicidal, and declares war on itself.

One point in this argument is valid and important: hegemony depends upon violence, which becomes a destructive force that remains uncontrollable to the most hegemonic power. However, Baudrillard reduces the utility of this argument by refusing to distinguish between violence that is real and that which is symbolic. Rather than saying that the west endangers itself by the anger it generates when it behaves oppressively in the world, he posits its wounds as literally self-inflicted, and thereby erases the difference between murder and suicide. This erasure renders his analysis fundamentally corrupt,

and, paradoxically, an illustration of the same kind of *hybris* that it ostensibly critiques. At a privileged distance from the affects of terror and grief, Baudrillard interprets the destruction of the World Trade Center only in symbolic terms, and, consequently, he has no vocabulary with which to consider the loss of actual lives, through no fault of the people who lived them.

Terrorism's reflection of global economic conditions is more usefully formulated in the recent remarks of the Brazilian political philosopher Renato Janine Ribeiro. Writing on the rash of kidnappings that attracted great public interest in São Paolo, Ribeiro suggests that violence exacted with a degree of randomness against the rich possesses a special appeal to citizens of postmodern culture. "The fascination," she writes, "stems from the turbulent transformation of a former slavery-based society in which the excluded are no longer willing to be docile while an elite enjoys the fruits of a globalized economy." More pointedly, she suggests, the kidnappings hold the public's attention because they represent a kind of turnabout, when ordinary citizens deploy their leaders' tools against them. The kidnappers extract powerful people from their lives without warning to assert that "daily, well-structured acts of violence are no longer just the tools of the rich." Implicit in Ribiero's translation of the kidnappers' intended message is an analogy between the violence of economic oppression and that of political terrorism, suggesting that the latter is a form of "blowback" that originates in the former.

Following this logic, Ribeiro inadvertently explains why terrorism provides such an effective outlet for the kinds of resentment that the Greeks called *phthonos*: it gives limited expression to the anti-social impulses that multiply among citizens who fear that they lack control of their fates. Witnessing the sight of violence enacted against people

who previously seemed impervious to danger, the citizens are reminded that the boxcutters and nail clippers they possess could serve as devastating weapons against a power that always threatens to overwhelm them.

Crucial to this discussion is the difference between relative and absolute values, which structure the polarity of Merry and her father: the daughter sees the world in relative terms, where power functions panopticonally to make her father's economic success dependent on distant workers' respective failure, while the father sees a world of absolutes. After Merry is estranged from her family, she sends an emissary with a message that begins with a question:

> What do you pay the workers in your factory in Ponce, Puerto Rico? What do you pay the workers who stitch gloves for you in Hong Kong and Taiwan? What do you pay the women going blind in the Philippines hand-stitching designs to satisfy the ladies shopping at Bonwits? You're nothing but a shitty little capitalist who exploits the brown and yellow people of the world and lives in luxury behind the nigger-proof security gates of his mansion (133).

Rejecting that relativity wholesale, the Swede sees the world with Kantian empiricism, believing that his happiness is self-sufficient, and that it is just what he—and everyone—deserves. Under this assumption that his existence provides the model to which everyone else in the world aspires, the Swede perceives the global economy as a natural order. In this respect, he exemplifies the popular axiom that Americans imagine a world in which nobody is foreign to them; as Henry Kissinger writes, the national

character depends on Americans' "habit of rejecting history" by "extol[ling] the image of a universal man living by universal maxims" (qtd. in Brennan, 24). Such imagined "universality," Kissinger and others suggest, enables Americans to map their particular qualities, which are particularly American, all over the globe. It represents solipsism on a national scale.[40]

Contemporary theorists debate this point in the vocabulary of empire and cultural imperialism. On one hand, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri examine empire as a "new global form of sovereignty," which "establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers" (xii). Writing to refute the idea that "postmodernity is American," as the Swede would have it, they describe the new world order as Merry would, as "a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers" (emphasis theirs, xiii-xiv). In this formulation, Merry's relativist vision assumes the all-encompassing proportions that inhere in her father's empirical values. Hardt and Negri are criticized on precisely these grounds by theorists who see the postmodern empire as an American phenomenon rather than a global one; by inverting those terms, they argue, Hardt and Negri advance the very logic through which cultural imperialism works.[41] Timothy Brennan provides a succinct description of this view, suggesting that America "does not only occupy or invade an 'elsewhere' for geopolitical advantage. It generalizes 'here'," much as the Swede does in his imagination of the Vietnamese villagers.

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[40] See Chapter Four on solipsism versus sympathy vis-à-vis literary form.

[41] "The United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project. Imperialism is over. no nation will be world leader in the way modern European nations were." (xiv)

"Extending its shadow," Brennan continues, "empire now becomes the elsewhere. This is, perhaps, the principle means of decentering" (*HW*, 135).

The Swede provides a study in the self-delusion that Kissinger and Brennan variously describe: he imagines that he belongs to an order that transcends him, in which his values are universally shared. But Merry disabuses him of that notion with the bomb that she detonates, and he survives the explosion in perpetual mourning. He spends his remaining years asking the tragic questions—what he did to deserve this, and where, exactly, did his good fate go bad?—in a postmodern version of Aristotle's tragic reversal. Before the bombing, the Swede never had to ask unanswerable questions; afterwards, he couldn't do anything else. Living above the cares of mortals, he was swathed in copious amounts of luck, which, paradoxically, made him unlucky.

In this respect, his narrative functions as a synecdoche for his nation's. *American Pastoral* underlines terror's communal effects by rendering Merry's story inextricable from her father's and her father's from America's: together the Levovs are the consummate American family, immigrants turned exporters, comprising the hero and the criminal, each bound to the other. Merry's terrorist act reverberates to create a sense of inevitable doom, which is witnessed in her parents' crumbling marriage and her father's more sweeping loss of faith. His persistent efforts to bring Merry back to the fold of the family ring are continually thwarted, and his chance at a good life dwindles long before he's diagnosed with the cancer that killed him.

Zuckerman takes that skeletal biography and fills it, rationalizing it with hypothetical motives and unseen actions that would explain it. The over-determination of Zuckerman's narrative is, to some extent, an inevitable feature of a dead person's

biography; because the Swede's life story is over, its ending holds no mystery. Consequently, the accumulation of biographical data poses no challenge to this narrator; taking the availability of that information for granted, he works to explain how it came to be. But as he repeatedly observes, to explain why things are as they are is to take a job like Sisyphus', affording no hope of completion, and only shreds of success. Zuckerman watches at his high school reunion as the elderly women he knew as sweater girls joke about their wrinkles, and he has,

> the uncanny sense that what goes on *behind* what we see is what I was seeing....Destiny had become perfectly understandable while everything unenigmatic, such as standing for the photograph in the third row back, with my arm on the shoulder of Marshall Goldstein ("Children 39, 37. Grandchildren 8, 6) and my other on the shoulder of Stanley Wernikoff ("Children 39, 38. Grandchildren 5,2, 8 mo.") had become inexplicable. (53)

Life as it is lived, Zuckerman implies, becomes mysterious when it is almost over, and metaphysics become increasingly tangible as one's physical existence wanes. "Destiny" exits the realm of the supernatural to enter the mundane, where it becomes a descriptor of the end of every story.

Zuckerman characterizes this sense of over-determination as a generic feature of biography, but also one that is particular to the Swede's. Like a tragic hero's, the Swede's exemplary status ties him to something much larger than himself; as the narrator reflects, the Swede seemed "fettered to history, an *instrument* of history" (5). This becomes literally true over the course of the novel, as history assumes the determining

role that the gods once held. Trying to translate Greek religion into modern terms, G. Lowes Dickinson writes: "When we try to conceive the state of mind of primitive man, the first thing that occurs to us is the bewilderment and terror he must have felt in the presence of nature. Naked, houseless, weaponless, he is at the mercy, every hour, of this immense and incalculable Something so alien and hostile to himself" (3). The Greeks, Dickinson suggests, rationalized this frightening force with their religious narratives. The modern novel, I would continue, accomplished the same goal by legitimating western culture's narratives of enlightenment, and the postmodern novel uses history to the same effect. By Zuckerman's account, the Swede is as thoroughly determined by history as Oedipus was by the gods—and because he is excessively prepared for glory, he is doomed from the beginning.

Zuckerman tries to imagine a trajectory in which that doom would make sense, a narrative in which a golden boy would plausibly bear a rotten daughter. In the process, he dramatizes his role as the creator of that fiction and defines his occupation by the expansive sympathy it requires.[42] The story that he receives from Jerry Levov is marked by harsh oppositions between an unfathomable monster masquerading as a young girl and the well-meaning father who falls victim to her torments. Zuckerman establishes his ownership of that story by softening its edges, adding generous amounts of sympathy and telling a less polarized version.

He also calls attention to his authorial presence by foregrounding the difficulty of his task. Striving to create a coherent narrative, in which Merry's perspective stands in juxtaposition to her father's, he writes a novel whose *telos* is its own resolution. The diegetic narrator's quest for meaning mirrors his protagonist's; from different

[42] In this respect, he resembles *The Reader*'s Michael Berg.

perspectives and for different reasons, Zuckerman and the Swede try to answer the question that Zuckerman poses: "What is the poison that caused it, that caused this poor guy to be placed outside his life for the rest of his life?" (74) Both the narrator and protagonist inevitably fail to find an answer, as both are doomed by the knowledge that they will never understand what they know. Because the Swede is dead before Zuckerman learns his story, the novel begins without hope that its protagonist will find the reasonable explanation he seeks. And even as Zuckerman strives to provide the logic Levov wanted, he acknowledges that all that he can provide is fiction.

In defiance of his occupation, the narrator longs to know people who are real—who exist in three dimensions, containing interior lives within material realities. That is, he wants to know people who exist as the Levovs do for him but not for his reader, to whom they remain a fiction. In that intermediary role, he wants to know them well and "get them right," to translate them from one world to another by reconciling their interior lives with the exteriors they present. But if this perfect mimesis could arguably be the goal of literature, it is irrelevant to real life, as he admits:

> The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That is how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing to do would be to forget being right or wrong about people and go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you. (35)

*American Pastoral* reiterates this distinction between getting it right and getting it wrong, and it pledges allegiance to the inevitable degree of fiction in every fact. If Seymour Levov's narrative offers any prescription for happiness, it is to learn, as Zuckerman says, to go "along for the ride," to live happily ever after with the understanding that absolute knowledge is impossible.

The novel induces that explicitly unknowing state in its reader by telling a story that underlines its hypothetical status. The Swede's story is Zuckerman's conjecture, presented in contrast with the "real" history that frames it. By deploying that contrast, Zuckerman gives his readers first-hand experience with the frustration of imperfect knowledge: he leads us to imagine that there is such a person as the Swede, and provides teasing tidbits of information about him, only to say that ultimately he is unknowable. With these formal devices, Zuckerman transfers his protagonist's frustration to his reader in a literal way; he makes us try in vain to identify with the Swede just as he tries in vain to identify with his daughter. That impossible effort becomes a project that is shared by everyone who comes in contact with the story of the Swede, as all of the characters remain fundamentally unknowable to each other. And the narrator remains as ignorant as the rest, because he has no privileged perspective from which to learn about the people he knows.

Consequently, his reader remains ignorant as well, enabling this narrator to force a performance of the kind of frustration he represents: the reader accumulates knowledge about the Levovs only to be perpetually reminded that they remain unknowable, just as Merry is inevitably unknowable to her seeking father. This repetition can be read in two

ways. On one hand, it suggests that the narrator has little faith in his readers' ability to identify with people unlike ourselves, so he foists upon us his protagonist's predicament, saving us from the effort of identifying with someone who is not, strictly speaking "like us." A more optimistic reading would suggest that, as a novelist, Zuckerman shares tragedy's communitarian impulse, which he exercises by uniting fictional and real characters in a common experience. By this logic, his failure to explain the workings of fate functions to distract the reader from his success in turning that failure into an experience that is shared.

The reader is discouraged from considering these two possibilities for long, however, as Zuckerman moves to the margins of the narrative after he introduces the Swede. Assuming his position outside of the drama he represents, he shifts the reader's attention away from himself as a character and towards the story he writes, creating increasingly vivid portraits of the characters who replace him as the subject of the novel. And as the dramatized narrator becomes increasingly invisible, he appears increasingly omniscient; his diminishing presence encourages his reader to forget that he is a character, too, and therefore limited to his subjectivity. The fictional lives he narrates transcend that limitation and take on the quality of fact as he leaves the fictional world he creates, to play god with its citizens' lives.[43]

Zuckerman makes this process of creation explicit. He begins building the character of his protagonist from neighborhood lore, recording the stories that everyone knew about the Swede. Those recollections of a public figure quickly fade into speculations about a private man, as the novelist-narrator weaves the facts that he

[43] As Wayne Booth writes, "observers and narrator-agents... can be either *privileged* to know what could not be learned by strictly natural means or *limited* to realistic vision and inference. Complete privilege is what we usually call omniscience" (149).

remembers with the fictions he can only imagine. He conceives of the Swede as his protagonist while he dances at the high school reunion:

> I am out there on the floor and I am thinking of the Swede, and of what happened to this country in a mere twenty-five years, between the triumphant days at wartime Weequahic High and the explosion of his daughter's bomb in 1968, of that mysterious, troubling, extraordinary historical transition. I am thinking of the sixties and of the disorder occasioned by the Vietnam War, of how certain families lost their kids and certain families didn't, and how the Seymour Levovs were one of those that did—families full of tolerance and kindly, well-intentioned liberal goodwill, and theirs were the kids who went on a rampage, or went to jail, or disappeared underground, or fled to Sweden or Canada (88).

Portraying an absurdly soothing landscape dotted with excessively prosperous Americans, Zuckerman asks why peace falls apart—why the placid fifties give way to the volatile sixties and the Swede and his nation fall from hybris to hell.[44] Like a tragic hero, the Swede absorbs these higher forces within a mortal realm. He metonymically represents the fate of his neighborhood--whose "wartime hope seemed to converge in [his] marvelous body"-- and he encapsulates the fate of his nation, which is writ small in him. Zuckerman tries to gain access to those larger narratives by entering the mind of their protagonist, contemplating "the very thing that must have baffled the Swede till the moment he died: how had he become history's plaything?" (87).

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[44] In this context, the American culture of the 1950s embodies *hybris* as it is commonly understood: as the excessive pride that comes before a fall.

The Swede tries to stave off that kind of cynicism by believing in his capacity for self-determination. Like the protagonists of the modern novel as Georg Lukács describes them, the Swede is compelled by "poetically necessary youthfulness" to look for a universal truth to solve the mysteries of his life. (60, 85). In this respect, he could be a protagonist from a century or more ago, when the novel commonly derived its "inner form" from its protagonist's seeking nature. Lukács quotes Novalis to argue that the modern protagonist believes "that destiny and soul are twin names for a single concept," and consequently, that his quest for knowledge can transform his life. This faith in self-determination stands in sharp contrast to his author's knowledge that such thorough transformation is impossible. The modern novelist, Lukács continues, directs "this insight, this irony" at his protagonists, who inevitably "are destroyed by trying to turn his faith into reality, and against his own wisdom, which has been forced to see the uselessness of the struggle and the final victory of reality." By this account, the author treats his protagonist like a charmingly naïve younger brother who merits a warm condescension mixed with admiration, for his failure to understand how thoroughly he is limited. The reader goes unmentioned in this formulation, although Lukács implies that the intelligent reader shares the author's awareness that the protagonist's hopes will inevitably be dashed, knowing that in the real world, "totality is impossible" (84-86). The author according to Lukács, however, never makes that fact explicit; he helps his reader fend off the cynicism that his knowledge creates, and fosters the illusion that a perfectly happy ending is possible, so everyone might yet get what they want.

But *American Pastoral* disabuses its reader of that kind of hope from the start. Zuckerman shares the knowledge he has from the beginning: that the Swede will die with

sorrows too terrible to put into words. And he imparts that information to his reader, functioning like Lukacs' modern author, translated from fact to fiction. He knows, in Lukács language, that "a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest that life has to offer," but unlike the authors Lukács describes, he discloses that fact in the novel he writes. With that disclosure, he shifts the reader's curiosity from plot to character: we cannot ask what will happen, so instead, we ask how it came to be, and how these people will survive it.

Within this foreclosure, Zuckerman imagines that the Swede would spend his life the same way as his narrator spends the novel: trying to create a logic for the good family's terrible fate. Five years after the bombing, Zuckerman suggests, the Swede would look for reasons. He would remember Merry's troubled reaction to the sight of a monk whose self-immolation was televised in the early sixties, and he would pinpoint that grisly vision as the source of her distress. "Of course she was just ten then," the imaginary Swede concedes, "maybe eleven years old, and in the years between then and now a million things had happened to her, to them, to the world" (152). But still, the narrator speculates, her father would insist; she had been horribly upset to see a man setting himself on fire, with

> no screaming, no writhing, just his calmness at the heart of the flames—no pain registering on anyone on camera, only on Merry and the Swede and Dawn, horrified together in their living room. Out of nowhere and into their home, the nimbus of flames, the upright monk, and the sudden liquefaction before he keels over; into their home all those other monks, seated along the curbstone impassively looking on, a few with their hands

> pressed together before them in the Asian gesture of peace and unity; into their home on Arcady Hill Road the charred and blackened corpse on his back in that empty street (153-4).

Merry was not alone in her horror, as her father concedes: she was bound in the event with millions of American viewers, and she was only "as unprepared as the rest of the country for what she was seeing" (152).

But if Merry's horror at the sight was common, her response was not; for the Swede, it explains her deviation from her friends and neighbors, and also from the blessed fate that she should have had. For him, his daughter is unique among the television audience in her possession of a character so fragile as to be irrevocably damaged by the terrible sight that everybody saw. A character to be pitied, not damned, she was uniquely susceptible to mortal suffering contained in an unmoved frame, and brought halfway around the world, into her home. For weeks afterward, she talked about it and dreamed about it, the Swede remembers; she woke in the night crying about it. Paradoxically, the extreme sensitivity she demonstrates as a child provides her father's explanation for the extreme lack of sensitivity she demonstrates as an adult: "If their set happened to be tuned to another channel or turned off or broken," he hypothesizes, "if they had all been out together as a family for the evening, Merry would never have seen what she shouldn't have seen and would never have done what she shouldn't have done" (156-157).

History appears to the Swede as the fault that makes Merry go bad: the sixties sweep into Old Rimrock and dispel his American dream. His brother Jerry agrees, recalling that, "Seymour was into quaint Americana. But the kid wasn't. He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in. My brother thought he could take his

family out of human confusion and into Old Rimrock, and she put them right back in" (68). But if Merry is driven by the politics of her day, her drive begins apolitically, in attachments that are fervent without focus and rebellious without cause. As a child, she is prone to fancy and fanaticism, developing an Audrey Hepburn obsession that becomes a fervor. Its intensity is unmatched by its longevity, however, as raptures over a movie star segue strangely into an enthusiasm for livestock, and then for Communism, and then for linguistic perfection, as she pledges to master the stutter that is her absurdly literal "flaw." These extra-curricular interests follow no apparent logic until Merry becomes a teenager who, like many other teenagers at the time, focuses her attentions on the Vietnam War and the people who support it—her fellow citizens in general, and more specifically, her parents.

In the rhetoric of protest, Merry finds a vocabulary with which to locate herself in a world that exceeds New Jersey. She ties the domestic directly to the global as she defies her mother's urging for her self-improvement: "I'm not going to spend my whole life wrestling day and night with a fucking stutter when kids are g-g-getting b-b-b-b-b-b-bu-bu-bu roasted alive by Lyndon B-b-baines b-b-b-bu-bu-burn-'em-up Johnson!" (101). Merry's mother, Dawn, is baffled and appalled by the particularly noxious quality of her daughter's outbursts, but the Swede is sympathetic. He tries to identify with Merry by rephrasing her opposition to the war as a wish that Vietnamese families could live like theirs; this wishful extrapolation from self to other is a kind of sympathy that he understands. But she rejects his attempts to redescribe her politics, sputtering in fury that the people in Vietnam don't want to live in the American suburbs:

> They just want to go to b-bed at night, in their own country, leading their own lives, and without thinking they're going to get b-b-blown to b-b-b-bb-b-bits in their sleep. B-b-blown to b-b-b-b-bits all for the sake of the privileged people of New Jersey leading their p-p-peaceful, s-s-secure, acquisitive, meaningless l-l-l-little bloodsucking lives! (108)

Infuriated by her father's naïve insistence on his universality—on a world in which every narrative has his as a model—Merry posits her family in a global economy; she organizes her self around a politics of relativity.[45] Eschewing the narrative of progress that her father tells—a narrative in which each individual strives to be happy, and succeeds or fails on his or her own merits—Merry will not perceive of her fate as wholly separate from other people's. She aligns herself with "the other" in her global economy and imagines other people's experiences to such a degree that she seems to feel them, too, her mother reflects, as if "she'd been born not at the Newark Beth Israel but at the Beth Israel in Hanoi" (101).

Indeed, Merry renounces her origins whenever she can. She bombs her hometown, literally and figuratively, before she flees it, and spends the rest of her life evading her parents' desperate attempts to find her and bring her home. Years pass after the bombing before she contacts anyone from home, including her parents, and then, it is only because she wants her Audrey Hepburn scrapbook back. She deprives her mother and father of the reunion they want with her and sends an emissary in her stead, a young woman named Rita Cohen, who horrifies the Swede when he goes to meet her alone. All he wants is to see Merry, he says; Rita asks why, and he answers as if he thinks she

[45] Kierkegaard writes that this is an attempt at happiness, through tragedy: "If an individual renounces the absolute in favor of the relative, the tragic is his—and if he has the tragic, he can be happy. A person in our age of monstrous relativity seems comic if he tries to be absolute" (145-146)

misunderstands the basic outlines of the story: "She's my daughter. Somebody is dead. My daughter is being accused of murder." "You're really stuck on that, aren't you?" Rita asks, mocking his attempts to find unequivocal value in such an equivocal world. "Do you know how many Vietnamese have been killed in the few minutes we've had the luxury to talk about whether Dawnie loves her daughter? It's all relative, Swede. Death is all relative" (138-139).

Where the Swede sees Merry's violence in the context of an Oedipal drama, Merry—and Rita, as her spokesperson—reframe it in less domestic terms. When Rita asks the Swede what he pays the workers in his third-world factories, she implicitly criticizes his view of a world in which every human gets paid what he deserves. The Swede sees his glove company as the product of one man's hard work, recalling his immigrant father who raised himself by the bootstraps to build a successful factory, and he sees nothing wrong with extrapolating that individualistic model on a global scale. Merry and Rita, by contrast, see the Levov family business as a cog in a vast machine of systematic oppression, where Americans enjoy privileged status.

That is, Merry and Rita see their world in terms of what Fredric Jameson calls the postmodern sublime, and more pointedly, what Bruce Robbins has called "the sweatshop sublime." Both terms represent postmodern glosses on the term Kant used to name the limit point of the power of enlightenment. Under the rubric of the sublime, Kant groups everything that exceeds man's capacity for understanding; he defines the sublime as a confrontation with an object so overwhelming, its only definition is "that in comparison with which all else is small" (*CJ*, 97). For Kant, this notion of the perpetually larger-than is inoperative in the physical world, where materiality can always assume some bigger

form: an ocean, or a mountain, or an infinite universe. Consequently, the Kantian sublime can only name objects that exist inside a person's head: if we perceive an object as sublime, it is not because it actually is sublime, but because we have the idea of sublimity within ourselves.[46] This conflation of subject with object forces us to experience the sublime with ambivalence, Kant writes; we balance our displeasure at the encounter of such an overpowering idea with our pleasure in our capacity for reason, which enables us to produce an idea of such mammoth proportions[47]. The sublime makes us fear, in other words, for the smallness of our sensibilities, but it also makes us proud that we know enough to be afraid.

Jameson uses this Kantian ambivalence to capture the emotion with which an individual experiences life in the age of late capital: when we get lost in the Westin Bonaventure, he contends, we are embarrassed by our incapacity to orient ourselves but are impressed with our culture's capacity to produce such a disorienting monstrosity. Like Merry, we can no longer conceive of ourselves as independent agents with any specificity, but like the Levovs, we continue to try. Dissociated from the economic effects of the purchases we make and the glove factories we own by distances that transcend every national boundary, we live in what Jameson calls an "extraordinarily demoralizing and depressing original new global space." And any moment that any one of us acknowledges our microscopic place within it, we experience

> the "moment of truth" of postmodernism. What has been called the postmodernist "sublime" is only the moment in which this content has

[46] "The sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but in only our own ideas"(CJ, 97)
[47] "Therefore," he explains, "the feeling of the sublime in nature is a feeling of respect for our own vocation" (CJ, 106)

> become most explicit, has moved the closest to the surface as a coherent new type of space in its own right. (49)

The coherence of this space, however, lies in the eye of the beholder: what Merry perceives as "a coherent new type of space in its own right" the Swede perceives as the chaos that he can't master well enough to keep his family safe.

From the difference between these two worldviews, one of the central debates of postmodern theory emerges: How can postmodern citizens maintain their sense of agency against the determining effects of the global economy? Merry represents a nihilistic descendant of Foucault, conceding that she can never win any direct confrontation with power, so her only alternative to submission is self-destruction. Against this counter-enlightenment argument, the Swede represents the desire to salvage the narratives of enlightenment that are his cultural inheritance.

These philosophical debates that lay the groundwork for postmodern theory iterate the arguments over tragedy; the genre similarly negotiates the limits of human understanding. The Swede appears in this context as a tragic hero, whose doom is sealed by his failure to concede the existence of the sublime. Refusing to see his smallness in relation to history, which lies far outside his control, he tries to achieve agency in a world that doesn't afford it. Like Oedipus, he believes in his potential to understand the incomprehensible; as the political scientist Christopher Rocco describes him, Oedipus becomes tragic by "believing as though he could, alone and unaided, master his fate, the way he mastered the Sphinx. Watching Oedipus enlighten himself," Rocco continues with a nod to his postmodern readers, "we cannot help but recall Foucault's observation about

modern disciplinary power: no matter how much in control we believe ourselves to be, forces beyond our power circumscribe our lives and direct our destinies, even as we desperately, sometimes madly, attempt to shape the forces that shape us (41). *American Pastoral* dramatizes this tragedy by narrating the irresolvable conflict between the modern hero and the postmodern condition in which he lives. It lends emotional weight to that conflict by embodying the forces of history in the protagonist's daughter, who seems to wield the wind of the gods to destroy her father.

But the drama of that clash is only an exaggeration of the conflict that Zuckerman posits as an inevitability in any relationship between people: we are, he suggests, unable to know how anyone else experiences her story in the world, and that ignorance renders us fundamentally alone. "When it comes to knowing other people," he writes,

> you might as well have the *brain* of a tank. You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misperception (35).

Fathers are fated, in other words, to misunderstand their daughters, and, by extension, Americans are fated to misunderstand Vietnamese villagers. And yet, despite the inevitability of these failures, the quest to understand is equally inevitable, as he continues:

> And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of *other people*, which gets bled of the significance we think it has and takes on instead a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we all to envision one another's interior workings and invisible aims? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? (35-36)

Following Zuckerman's acknowledgement of the futility of all of their efforts, the central characters—by his account—spend the novel trying to imagine what life is like for other people: Seymour tries to fathom how Merry feels; Merry tries to fathom what Vietnamese villagers feel, and Zuckerman tries to fathom how Seymour and Merry feel. In Zuckerman's narration, the failure of these imaginative efforts becomes both visible and inevitable, because the reader knows from the beginning that Seymour will never find his way into his daughter's way of thinking, and that Zuckerman's novel is just a fiction.

It is this absence of logic that makes Merry so terrifying, and, so terrible to her father. Seemingly aware of the source of the power she wields, she insists upon her unknowability: "You can't explain away what I've done by motives, Daddy," she says when he finally finds her, years after the bombing. "I certainly wouldn't explain away what *you've* done by motives." Her refusal to admit a rational causality defies the narrative logic by which he organizes the world, so he insists, "But I *do* have motives. *Everyone* has motives." "You cannot reduce the journey of a soul to that kind of

psychology," his daughter replies. "It's not worthy of you' (251). With her refusal to admit causality into her narrative, Merry voices the tragic principle that her father, like Aristotle, tried to silence: that powers greater than individual people make tragedy happen without reason.

Against this possibility, the Swede tries to believe in a Platonic idea of goodness, so that he can hold onto the idea that his daughter ends badly not because she is bad, but because a mistake was made in the gap between her character and her actions.[48] In his eyes, the bad plot in which she participates seems to be an error of history, which evidently misplaced some evil in Old Rimrock, where it does not belong. But his daughter disabuses him of this notion in their final meeting, when he finds her disheveled and dirty in a hovel with no heat or hot water. She tells him about her life in the interval since she left Old Rimrock: she lived on the streets, became a Jain, was raped, and committed two additional bombings after the first, killing three people in addition to the man in the post office. This cannot be, he thinks; this woman before him is not his daughter, "for the simple reason that his daughter could not have absorbed so much pain." And yet, it is his daughter, and as her father recognizes, "of course this all could have happened to her. Things happen like this every day all over the world. He had no idea how people behaved" (262-263). More specifically, he had no idea how his daughter behaved, and he flees the thought.

[48] For Plato, goodness is an essential quality, embodied in the character and requiring no proof in action, whereas Aristotle understands ethics in a more narrative sense, as the sum total of a series of good acts. Martha Nussbaum writes: "if the good person is, as *Republic III (388)* insists, altogether self-sufficient, that is, in need of nothing from without to complete the value and goodness of his life, then a praise of that goodness, of those activities, will show an audience all that is ethically important about a good person" (*FG*, 381).

Levov spends his life this way, focusing on his daughter's victimization at the expense of her criminality, rationalizing the violence she commits with accounts of what she suffers. Zuckerman recounts the effects of this rationalization with a narrative voice that slips from the third to the first person, writing that when Levov met Merry after years of absence, he thought, "this was his daughter, and she was unknowable. This murderer is mine" (266). In a more intimate context, with more direct involvement, the Swede identifies with Merry much as a Lacanian audience identifies with a tragic hero: he feels pity and terror for her, with the understanding that she feels neither for herself. At the same time, he identifies so strongly with his protagonist in that act of identification, that his voice recedes, subsumed into the fictional first person. And that effect is redoubled as the Swede invites an identical response from his reader: by judging himself so harshly, he invites the sympathy that he fails to offer for himself.

Here and elsewhere, Zuckerman represents the Swede as a case study in extreme denial: on a literal level, the Swede refuses to accept the import of his daughter's actions, but more broadly, he refuses to accept the obsolescence of the narrative form by which he lives. He thinks in terms of the novelistic narrative that Lukacs describes, believing that his family pulled itself from rags to riches by the strength of its qualities—not because it was well suited to the needs of a global economy. Similarly, he believes that his daughter's fate is his fault, convincing himself that his incestuous kiss is to blame for Merry's tragic reversal. And as much as that responsibility grieves him, placing it elsewhere would grieve him more. Bearing that burden alone enables him to maintain his belief in his own agency, which would disappear if he believed that fault was impossible to find.

Where the Swede fends against that indeterminacy to the death, Merry positively revels in it. She begins to doubt in her father's good, American values when she is a child, confronting the sight of the burning monk on TV. She wailed existential questions, her father recalls: "Do you have to m-m-melt yourself down in fire to bring p-p-people to their senses? Does anybody care? Does anybody have a conscience left?" Her parents tried to comfort her, but they couldn't give her any good answers. "How could they answer her?" Zuckerman asks. "Yes, some people have a conscience, many people have a conscience, but unfortunately there are people who don't have a conscience, that is true" (154).

The Swede proves ill equipped to address those kinds of questions because, according to his brother, he had never asked them of himself. Jerry tells Zuckerman that until Merry blew up the post office, the Swede had never faced a question he couldn't answer; he lived in a hero's world where the ideal coincided perfectly with the real, so he had never had to wonder why bad things have to happen. Never in his life had he had occasion to ask, "Why are things the way they are," Jerry complains. "Why should he bother, when the way they were was always perfect?" Expressing some bitterness that his brother was spared so many of the normal pains of living, Jerry turns the question to Zuckerman: "Why are things the way they are?. The question to which there is no answer, and up until then he was so blessed he didn't even know it existed" (70). Because the Swede couldn't help his daughter reconcile the gap between the ideal and the real, Jerry suggests, she forced the difference upon him.

"Four people blown up by her," the Swede marvels; it was "so grotesque, so out of scale, it was unimaginable. It had to be." Unable to countenance that fact of her criminality, he focuses on the fact of her victimization: "The rape. The rape obscured

everything else. Concentrate on the rape." But he has no details about it, no knowledge of where to place his blame, and his desire for some kind of vengeance. So, perhaps predictably, he turns his gaze on himself: "With all the walls he'd built up, she gets raped. All of that protection and he could not prevent her from getting raped. Tell me everything about it! I'm going to kill them!" (260-272). Murderous after the news that his daughter is a murderer, his rage is as impotent as his "protection" was.

The divide between the Swede and his daughter mirrors the contrast that Jonathan Lear draws between the early and late Freud, and, like that contrast, it illuminates the formal dimensions of tragedy. Lear distinguishes between the early Freud, who had an Aristotelian—or Swede-like—faith in the power of human reason, and the later one who thought more like Merry, with "a more Platonic outlook in which some part of human nature must be recognized as beyond logos, indeed, as set over against logos." Freud shifted, Lear suggests, from the novelistic logic of his early work to the tragic skepticism of his late work at the moment in which he analyzes the *fort-da* game. "What changed his mind was a certain type of mimesis" that he saw in his analysis of a child, repeatedly throwing a spool of thread away and then bring it back again (178)

As Lear notes, Freud's description of the game highlights its narrative qualities, which require the analyst to try to identify with its protagonist, as the Swede tries to identify with his daughter, and Roth's reader tries to identify with the Swede. The protagonist of the *fort-da* story is the son of Freud's recently deceased daughter, and, like many modern protagonists, he widely known as "a good boy". He "did not disturb his parents at night," Freud applauds; "he conscientiously obeyed orders not to touch certain things or go in certain rooms, and above all, he never cried when his mother left him for a

few hours." Like a tragic hero though, this good boy had one "disturbing habit": he regularly took his toys, one by one, and threw them in the corner, "so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business." As he threw them, he "gave vent to a long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o'", which, Freud speculates, was the child's rough rendering of the German word *fort* (gone). The analyst noted that he issued this mournful lament with "an expression of interest and satisfaction."

Freud concludes that the *fort-da* game dramatizes for the child the departure of his mother, who he mimetically represents in a spool that he ritualistically casts away, only to bring back. Noting that the game takes on a different meaning and, significantly, a different literary genre, depending upon when it ends—when the spool is *fort* (gone), or when it is *da* (there)—he observes that the game frequently concludes at the end of the "first act," when the spool is gone, "though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act." Freud wonders why the psyche consistently recreates tragedy. From this question, he draws his theory of trauma, suggesting that the psyche chooses to re-enact its most painful moments in a form that it can control. "At the outset," Freud writes, the child "was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part." To this theory he adds the "reminder" that

> the artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which, unlike children's, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance in tragedy) the most painful experiences and yet can be felt by them as highly enjoyable (*FR*, 595-600).

Lear reads Aristotle's reading of tragedy against Freud's analysis of trauma. He describes the analyst who watches the game as "the audience of a tragic mimesis acted out on a small stage within the micropolis of a family." Lear follows Freud in noting that the game takes a different form, because, unlike the real loss they represent, any losses incurred in the *fort-da* game are fictional; the game has an author, and its author is also its protagonist. The child uses this fictional loss, Freud argues, to "[compensate] himself" for the pain he suffers at his mother's real departure, when he is instructed not to cry, and, rewarded for the "great cultural achievement" of renouncing that "instinctual satisfaction". That satisfaction becomes allowable to the child only when he authors the suffering the produces it. "Significantly," Lear writes,

> the question of whether the drama is a tragedy or a comedy, at least in the modern sense of those terms, is up to the child. If the drama ends in '*fort*,' it has been a tragedy; if it ends in '*da*,' the mother has returned, and there has been a comic restoration. (179)

The child can determine the meaning of the drama by choosing where it ends, suggesting, as Lear writes, that "the child exerts imaginative control not merely over the ending of the drama but also over its form" (179)

By Lear's reading, Freud's theory of trauma is a revision of Aristotelian *katharsis*. Freud suggests that tragedy generates pleasure not from the subject's submission, but quite the opposite; by representing a fictional tragedy, Freud argues, humans can lay claim to a degree of agency that the real world doesn't afford. As Lear explains,

> The inclusion of pity as a tragic emotion also enables the audience to play its own 'fort-da' game with terror. As the child enacts a tragedy by

> throwing a spool, so the ancient audience can imaginatively throw itself into the drama, but always with the tacit knowledge that it could at any moment pull itself back. This tacit knowledge is guaranteed by pity.

Pity limits terror, parceling it out in manageable amounts, so that the audience can experience it without the threat of annihilation. The chorus is integral to this function of pity, Lear continues, as it "is meant to express the audience's fears, but the chorus also renders the audience twice removed from the portrayed disaster. The chorus of *Oedipus Tyrannos* is, after all, bound up in the miasma, as the audience is not" (186).[49]

*American Pastoral* blurs this distinction: the Swede is clearly bound up in his miasma in a way that the reader is not, and yet, because the cruel god is a recognizable historical force, the miasma also exceeds the bounds of fiction to pose a real threat to the reader. The Swede voices the reader's response, then, when he exclaims, "Lead me not into this day! Seeing so much so fast." The reader is reminded that the Swede came to danger because he overindulged his appetite for fiction, which paradoxically serves as a sign of our collective vulnerability and a measure of our safety. Our position is as liminal as Zuckerman's, as we are implicated in the narrative we read, but experiencing a degree of safety in our ability to get outside of it.

In that paradox, the reader experiences something like tragic catharsis, which rises from a similar conjunction of self-pity with terror. Catharsis, Jonathan Lear writes, is the product of tragedy's "emotional one-two punch": first the audience is softened up with pity, which enables them to feel—as we do with the Swede—like they know how things really are. Then, the audience recognizes that their pity rests on an illusion, that they are just like Oedipus: "flawed and blind and out of control" (212).

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[49] Nietzsche explains the chorus similarly:

*American Pastoral* puts similar demands on its readers, who can take comfort in the thought that they have more mastery over the difference between reality and fiction than the protagonist does, and therefore, that they can protect themselves better than he can; and yet, the reader is always ensnared by the history that strikes the Swede down without warning. Zuckerman highlights this paradox in his self-conscious narration, shifting seamlessly from his protagonist's first person voice to his third person interjection as he observes,

> how stoical [the Swede] had always been in his ability not to see, how prodigious had been his powers to regularize. But in the three extra killings he had been confronted by something impossible to regularize, even for him. Being told it was horrible enough, but only by retelling it had he understood how horrible. One plus one plus two. Four. And the instrument of this unblinding is Merry. The daughter has made her father see. And perhaps this was all she had ever wanted to do. She has given him sight, the sight to see clear through to that which will never be regularized, to see what you can't see and don't see and won't see until three is added to one to get four. (266)

This "unblinding" is a revelation to the Swede but not his reader, who is privy to the authorial frame in which the Swede's faith is undercut from the start. Zuckerman acknowledges from the novel's opening pages that the Swede's narrative of himself is a fiction, which exists only through his refusal to see the evidence that would refute it. Quite the opposite of a self-determining protagonist, the Swede is "fettered to history, an instrument of history," living among other mortals who are equally vulnerable to forces

that none of them can control. The Swede faces this painful revelation when he finds Merry and finally concedes defeat: "She is not in my power and she never was. She is in the power of something that does not give a shit. Something demented. We all are. Their elders are not responsible for this. They are themselves not responsible for this. Something else is" (256).

This amorphous "something else" holds all of the characters of the novel in its grasp, and thereby levels the differences between them. The widow of one of Merry's victims comes to see the Levovs, and she says as much, noting that both families' fates were determined by forces they couldn't control. She consoles the Swede with the remark that,

> you are as much the victims of this tragedy as we are. The difference is that for us, though the recovery will take time, we will survive as a family... It will not be any easier for us than for you to make sense of something so senseless. But we are the same family we were when Fred was here, and we will survive (216).

The families of the criminals and the victims become almost indistinguishable in relation to senseless violence, which renders even its perpetrators victimized. And yet, a difference remains even in this speech, where the degree of intended comfort remains open to question. Zuckerman reflects that "the clarity and force with which she implied that the Swede and his family would *not* survive made him wonder, in the weeks that followed, if her kindness and her compassion were so all-encompassing as he had first wanted to believe" (217).

But Mrs. Conclon is right: the Levovs are less likely to find happiness than Merry's victims are, because Merry does not want happiness at all—at least not as her culture understands it. She rejects modernity's narratives of the good life by destroying the privilege she has, first by detonating it with a bomb, and then by abandoning the shreds that remain. But these seemingly self-destructive efforts represent a bid for happiness on different terms, as Kierkegaard describes them when he advocates tragedy against a modern narrative of enlightenment: "If an individual renounces the absolute in favor of the relative, the tragic is his—and if he has the tragic, he can be happy" (144).

The absolute that Merry renounces in favor of the relative is embodied in her father, who maintains his faith in the possibility of universal truth, despite all evidence to the contrary. After his daughter disappears, he sets out to find her, following a prescribed narrative in which the search for knowledge always leads to a happy ending: if only he can find her, he thinks, he will bring her back home, where she will see the error of her ways and the true value of his. But when he finally finds her, she is filthy and alone in an abandoned building, where she professes her religious faith and renounces human contact.[50] She wants to live outside of the society of her nation and her family, but her father urges her to come home, fearing for her life: "You'll meet a violent end, Meredith," he cries. "Somebody will kill you!" Characteristically distant from the hopes and fears that motivate other people's narratives, she responds without affect, "But only to be reborn" (250).

[50] She resists her father's efforts to understand her; she is utterly unknowable the narrator, and consequently, to the reader.

Such disdain for the worldly rewards of a care for the self is a hallmark of the tragic hero, who prefers the ephemeral glory of abstract virtues instead. Uninterested in being "happy" by her father's definition, Merry is as immune to reason as a tragic hero, who defies the basic assumptions on which rational arguments would gain traction. Merry becomes unfathomable to the Swede because she lives outside of the paradigm that he thinks is universal—in which life and pleasure are inherently desirable goods. Striving toward goals that are intangible and unfathomable to her father, she refutes the conviction that he shares with Aristotle, that "there is pretty much an objective at which everybody aims, both each in private and all together, both in pursuit and in avoidance. And this, to put it in a nutshell, is happiness and its elements" (*R*, 1.5.1).

*American Pastoral* narrates the debate between Merry and her father over this Aristotelian concept, as the daughter defies her father's conviction in the universality of his narrative. In this respect, Merry functions like the tragic hero, defying the entreaties of her friends and advisors, to abandon her high-mindedness and behave with common sense. Antigone's sister, Ismene, provides a case in point, representing the concerns of the ordinary citizen who wants to live in ordinary peace. When Antigone asks her for her support in flouting Creon's law, Ismene begs her heroic sister to consider the sorrows their family has already suffered. "Think how much worse our end will be than all the rest," she implores, "if we defy our sovereign's edict and his power." But Antigone dismisses this plea as timidity cloaked in reason, and haughtily retracts her request for help: "I would not want you as a partner if you asked. Go to what you please. I go to bury him. How beautiful to die in such pursuit!" Preferring a beautiful death to an ugly life, the tragic hero terrifies everyone around her. "You foolhardy thing! You frighten me," Ismene

exclaims, making no impression. "Don't fear for me," Antigone retorts. "Be anxious for yourself" (194).

Here as elsewhere, the hero becomes recognizable by her insistence that the worst possible fate is a compromised life, and consequently, by the contempt she has for the conciliatory impulses of the people around her. She sees an ideal that exists only outside the realm of ordinary mortals, and she acts on her desire to reach it. The other characters witness her self-destruction with ambivalence, as their desire for her to survive among them conflicts with their admiration of ability to choose not to do so. With the hero's rejection of the compromises that both ruin and sustain everyday life, she inspires pity and terror among her family and friends—in the drama as well as the theater. She unites her real and fictional spectators in their conflicted emotions at the spectacle of her inevitable (metaphorical if not literal) suicide.

Tragedy results from this kind of defiance, as Lacan suggests in his reading of Antigone. The genre, Lacan maintains, works to protect the citizens from the fanatics among them, who endanger the public by their preference for ideals that are visible only to them. To advance this thesis, he amplifies his theory of the "second death," which he derives from de Sade. Quoting a lengthy passage of *Juliette*, Lacan explains why the tragic hero understands death to be not an inevitable evil, but a viable good: "Without destruction the earth would receive no nourishment and, as a result, there would be no possibility for man to reproduce his species.... Thus crime is necessary in the world." Ignoring the illogic by which de Sade erases the difference between death and crime, Lacan pursues the more interesting point that de Sade makes; he continues:

> To be of even greater service to nature, one should seek to prevent the regeneration of the body that we bury. Murder only takes the first life of the individual whom we strike down; we should also seek to take his second life, if we are to be even more useful to nature. For nature wants annihilation; it is beyond our capacity to achieve the scale of destruction it desires (210-211; 78).

This is the rule by which Merry Levov lives: rejecting her father's faith in a narrative of progressive enlightenment, she inverts that narrative. She seeks a happiness that becomes attainable only by renouncing the search for it, and in this renunciation, she disavows the Swede's assumption that the search for knowledge leads inevitably to happiness. She joins de Sade in his preference for annihilation over regeneration, and seeks "the second death" of the people she kills: not only are they murdered, they are murdered without logic, chosen for no reason other than their patronage of the post office.

But the dialogue between Ismene and Antigone serves another function that has equal formal importance: speaking as the ordinary citizen, Ismene cues her audience's response to Antigone's reckless defiance. The audience follows Ismene to experience *eleos* and *phobos* when she voices them; together, Antigone's real and fictional witnesses provide the protective emotions that the hero lacks on her own behalf. Lacan argues for this compensatory model of identification in his reading of the play, where he suggests that the spectator feels pity and terror for the hero precisely because she feels neither for herself. He characterizes the tragic hero by this particular lack of affect, suggesting that "only the martyrs know neither pity nor fear." Both the cause and the effect of this lack, martyrdom explains the city's sacrifice of its citizens who fail to feel the affects of self-

protection. "Believe me," Lacan continues, "the day when the martyrs are victorious will be the day of universal conflagration. The play is calculated to demonstrate that fact" (267).

Lacan says no more on the subject, but political readings of tragedy amplify his theory, explaining why martyrdom is antithetical to democracy, and, therefore, why it is an enemy of the state. If tragedy taught its audiences that they were wholly governed by the gods, then they would have little faith in themselves as political animals, and that faithlessness would eliminate every reason to act in the public good. Plato and Aristotle protect the citizens from this drama-induced cynicism by creating more civic-minded readings of tragedy in both *The Republic* and *Poetics*. They portray tragedy's heroes as negative examples of citizenship, and as such, they establish reasonable rules by which their neighbors might expect to live a good life (*eudaimonia*). Invoking that expectation as an incentive for good citizenship, they use tragedy to delineate a promise for what the polis can provide.

They achieve this end by denying the danger that tragedy represents in two different ways: Plato dismisses the genre as a mimetic failure and Aristotle willfully misreads it, lending his logic to contain the threat of its terrifyingly bad endings. The latter approach is more interesting here, because it has more bearing on the Swede's, but the former merits mention as well. Plato contends that a causal chain necessarily links a good character (*hexis*) to good behavior (*praxis*), and, consequently to a good fate; from this premise, he reads any representation of a break in that chain as a misrepresentation of reality. Tragedy's heroes have no place in his ideal polis, then, because they suffer more

than they should, and consequently "[speak] wrongly about human beings in matters of the greatest importance." The citizens, he suggests, have no need for such a fiction. Aristotle likewise reassures his audience that tragedy depicts reality wrongly, but instead of forbidding its wrongness, he creates a logic by which it can be right. Separating plot from character, he explains why a good person might behave badly, and subsequently meet a bad fate. This paradox makes sense within the Aristotelian logic of *hamartia*, which suggests that any citizen might live under the shadow of some transgression in his family history. This narrative treats suffering as an inevitable consequence of a buried crime, denying its admission as evidence of mortals' vulnerability to the whims of the gods. Tracing every tragedy to a human error, Aristotle affirms "the bounds of logos," as Jonathan Lear suggests, and thereby reasserts "the autonomy of human nature" (189). Performing a victory of reason over chaos, he staves off the cynicism that thrives among people who believe that their fates are out of their control

Aristotle continues that project with the equilibrium he composes out of tragic pity and terror. According to Aristotle, the spectator pities the hero for making a mistake that is understandable, but his pity is always mitigated by his terror of suffering that tests the limit of human comprehension. Pity then provides an affect through which reason and the polis are mutually affirmed. "We shall not fear things that we believe cannot happen to us," Aristotle decrees; conversely, we shall not pity things that we fear too much (*R*, II 5.13.1382). If we believe, in other words, that the person who suffers is exactly identical to ourselves, our pity is nullified by our overwhelming terror that this will happen to us, too. If, conversely, we believe that the sufferer is foreign to us, our overwhelming pity nullifies our terror, which diminishes in proportion to our distance

from danger. Tragedy must walk this narrow line, simultaneously generating *phobos* and limiting it by balancing it with *eleos*.[51] With this careful balance, the drama positions its audience at a specifically moderated distance from suffering, so that its spectators can feel safe enough from their own terrors to experience pity for another person, who suffers in the same way as they do but to a greater degree.

In this way, pity, as Jonathan Lear maintains, achieves the social management of terror; it "domesticates fear, ensuring that it will not get out of hand" (186). Lear uses this rhetoric of "domestication" to suggest not only that Aristotle uses pity to contain fear, but also that he uses it to put fear to an explicitly political purpose, for the good of the state. *Eleos*, he suggests, "keeps the audience emotionally connected to the dramatized events," and reassures a fearful populace that:

> Humans are the unique animals whose task it is to determine their own nature, through debate, legislation, education, and other cultural activities, for instance tragedy. These activities all occur within the polis, which is itself a creation and manifestation of human logos. In feeling pity, an audience of citizens sets its own outer bounds on what it counts as human. (187).

This description of pity echoes Timothy Brennan's description of novelistic identification, which served the modern nation-state as pity served the polis. Establishing an affective tie between a fictional character and a real citizen, pity and identification

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[51] Aristotle cites the case of Amasis, who does not cry at the sight of his son's death, but instead, at the sight of his friend begging. His argument is that the first tragedy is too near to evoke pity; the tragic event must be represented at some remove in order for the audience to respond correctly. Drawing implicitly on this example, Jonathan Lear persuasively argues for Aristotle's recognition of the mimetic gap. "Were it not for the fact that Aristotle recognized a salient difference between mimesis and the real-life events it portrays, Aristotle would have had to agree with Plato that poetry should be banned from the ideal state. Aristotle disagrees with Plato not over whether tragedy can be used as part of an ethical education in the appropriate emotional responses, but over whether a mimesis is easily confused with the real thing" (198).

articulate the boundaries of the imagined community in which they appear. They represent a spectacle of suffering that invites its witnesses to test the division between the foreign and the familiar, and to reassert the boundary that distinguishes *us* from *them*.

In *American Pastoral*, these two aesthetic models clash: the Swede struggles to rationalize his daughter's irrational behavior, and bring her from *them* back to *us*. In this effort, he looks for the reassurance that Aristotle offered his fellow citizen, as Lear writes: "Of course Oedipus is going to be taken by surprise" by his reversal of fortune, "but, from Aristotle's perspective, the audience is reassured that the reversal is the outcome of a particular blindness on his part, not a surd eruption of meaningless devastation" (186). This kind of eruption is the Swede's worst fear. His efforts to find a reason for his daughter's actions represent his effort to contain her within the bounds of his home and his country—to "domesticate" her, in both senses of the word.

This preference for the domestic to the foreign is ingrained in the novel-reader, who learns to behave like the Swede: identifying with protagonists whose mistakes become understandable if not forgivable in the end, when they return safe among *us*, after their travels among *them*. *American Pastoral* works within this tradition, encouraging the reader to identify with the Swede by presenting the spectacle of the excessive punishment that he heaps upon himself.[52] His inability to appreciate the degree to which his daughter's crimes are not his fault invites his reader to serve a compensatory function, like the tragic spectator, who extends sympathy for a character who has none for himself.

At the same time, *American Pastoral* calls this tradition into question with Merry's ambiguity, which is never resolved. Appearing variously as an erring good girl

[52] In this respect, the Swede is like Michael Berg: he invites the reader's sympathy as he refuses to sympathize with himself.

and a sphinx-like terrorist, Merry unifies two contradictory cultural clichés, which mitigate against each other. Her terrorism is, to some degree, sanctified by its unlikelihood; popular mythology suggests that middle-class white girls are their own worst enemies, not agents of true terror. A product of assimilation—the daughter of a secular Jew and his all-American wife—she is a domesticated foreigner, more likely to become an anorectic, bulimic, or self-loathing cutter than to prove any real threat to the state. In the popular imagination, the violence of girls functions more as metaphor than as fact, and Merry provides a case in point: her rebellion appears in epistemological and Oedipal terms, where politics function only as rhetorical gloss. Her political aims remain opaque in ways that would be more difficult to render if she were a Middle Eastern man, or even an observant Jewish boy, rather than an American girl. In this respect, the Swede's effort to rationalize his daughter's thought mirrors the national project to contain foreignness within the domestic.

He strives to maintain the belief that Julia Kristeva attributes to the western world: that, "the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity." By "recognizing him within ourselves," Kristeva continues, "we are spared detesting him in himself" (1). The Swede strains to avoid detesting his daughter in this way, by tracing her crimes back to their origins in him, and turning her into a character who invites more pity than terror, despite the terrorism she commits. His rage becomes essentially Oedipal, and her reasons intelligible if skewed; she is angry, and possibly crazy, but not a force to be reckoned with. That forgiving if patronizing portrait is passed on from the father to his admiring narrator, who neither corroborates nor refutes it, but passes it on without intervention, leaving open two alternative possibilities: either Merry is the victimized

daughter, drawn to violence because her circumstances were too grim and her sensitivity too great to be borne without it; or she is a criminal, turned from good to bad for reasons . . . no one can guess.

With this latter possibility, *American Pastoral* considers suffering that exists for no reason, and it raises the prospect of what Lear calls a "pitiless tragedy." The theorists of tragedy, Lear writes, make their job too easy by calling attention to dramas in which the hero is most deserving of pity. "Aristotle focused on Oedipus," he writes, "and Freud has brought to our attention deep reasons why we might take Oedipus to be 'like us'; but need we feel pity for Medea or Antigone? Might our awe, our wrenching upset, and our terror come from a profound recognition that they are not 'like us'?" (188). This is the question that *American Pastoral* asks, foregrounding the quota of pity that inheres in novelistic identification. It chronicles the Swede's futile effort to believe that his daughter is "like us," and it dramatizes humanity's effort to sympathize with its most unsympathetic members. Because if "we" can imagine that "their" actions have a *logos* of their own, we need not face our worst fear: that "they"—or "I"—are too bad to eventually become good, and join us.

# Chapter Three

## The Limits of Pity in the Polis: Kazuo Ishiguro's The Unconsoled

Plato characterizes the ideal polis by its citizens' capacity to sympathize with one another: "When any one of the citizens experiences any good or evil," he writes, "the whole State will make his case their own, and will either rejoice or sorrow with him" (416). In his 1997 novel, *The Unconsoled*, Kazuo Ishiguro revives this Platonic possibility in a city that is an anachronism—a premodern polis misplaced in a postmodern age. With this misplacement, *The Unconsoled* juxtaposes local and global conceptions of community, considering how much consolation nations can provide in a post-national world, and how much sympathy narrative could ever inspire. Its protagonist is a world-class pianist who is simultaneously omniscient and ignorant of the people around him, creating a demand for sympathy that always exceeds the supply. Other people appear in his unreliable narration as a shapeless mass of sufferers, telling stories that are consistently sad. They vie for the protagonist's sympathies, and, by extension, the reader's, as they raise ancient questions: Does global citizenship preclude membership in a more particular community—and do humans seek too much consolation from art, or does art give too little to us?

Although *The Unconsoled* follows postmodern fashion by answering these questions only with other questions, its plot is deceptively simple.[53] It begins when Ryder arrives in the unnamed town, which is vaguely European and self-consciously

[53] As I argue in Chapter Three, this juxtaposition of simplicity and complexity is typical of postmodern ambiguity, which privileges the problems of character over those of plot.

insular, to give a piano recital. His greatest desire is to go practice, but he is perpetually thwarted by the townspeople's expectations of him, which are both unreasonable and unknowable. Ryder is held to a hectic itinerary that he remembers neither making nor seeing; strangely, he opts not to right the situation, but rather, to passively inhabit a narrative in which he is never where he is supposed to be. The townspeople add to these already harrying effects by besieging him with their seemingly infinite demands, which they make with an obsequiousness that turns inexplicably to pride. Piling complaint upon complaint, they narrate their life stories and demonstrate their artistic talents, seeking his approval. At the same time, they acknowledge how deficient they are, how fully and deservedly excluded from the cosmopolitan culture where he lives. In this context, they demonstrate equal enthusiasm for his greatness and his irrelevance, reminding him that he is as excluded from their world as they are from his. Against all of this local drama, Ryder is dwarfed and he knows it, so he never takes the stage at all. The novel concludes as he awaits his imminent departure with optimistic thoughts about the next stop on his tour.

This teleological structure is undermined, however, by the antithetical character who enacts it, putting it to contradictory purposes. Ryder alternately invites and prohibits the reader's identification by representing himself alternately as a saint who can absolve all human suffering and a prima donna interested only in himself. With extraordinary interpersonal skills at both extremes, he can either see into other people's minds or ignore their existence completely. His capacity for obliviousness is tremendous and unhindered—possibly even exacerbated—by his artistic genius; he hurts virtually

everyone who crosses his path because he can't imagine how it might feel to be other than he is.

Ryder renders the world around him opaque in his highly unreliable narration, which makes the mixed messages that he receives doubly hard for the reader to interpret. The townspeople greet him with both affection and its opposite, as when he happens upon a funeral, and the mourners entreat him to attend. They are so honored to meet him, they cry, and his presence will be balm for the bereaved. "But surely," he protests, "at such a private moment..." "No, no, please," one man comes forward to implore, "I'm the brother of the widow. She'd be so delighted if you'd join us." Under the weight of that request, Ryder follows the man through the gravestones, where he sees the widow in wailing sorrowfully. "Behind her," he recalls,

> the great majority were sobbing in what appeared to be genuine grief, but even so, the widow's anguished moans remained clearly distinguishable—slow, exhausted, yet shockingly full-chested cries such as might emerge from a victim of prolonged torture. The sound made me want to turn away. (365-366).

He is prevented from doing so, however, by the widow's brother, who tries to draw her out of her anguished haze to meet the esteemed artist. When she finally emerges, starting and staring, she quickly embarks upon a path of politeness: "This is an honor indeed," she says, composing herself. "I'm sure everyone here would join me in saying that we are profoundly, deeply flattered" (367). Inquiring after his visit, she asks whether he's seen the local sights, and whether she can offer him anything to eat or drink. "Really, please," Ryder protests, "I had no intention of interrupting like this. Please,

continue with... what you were doing." "But you must have something," the widow insists, demonstrating a hospitality driven more by form than content, as she actually has no food or drink to offer. "Somebody," she calls, turning to her fellow mourners, "hasn't somebody even a flask of coffee?" The townspeople rustle about in search of an appropriate offering, and pass forward a slice of cake wrapped in plastic. The brother shouts in disapproval—"Is that the best we can do? What is this?"—and the widow searches for peppermints to accompany it. "Another peppermint," she says, thrusting a packet upon him, "it's all we can offer." At her most obsequiously generous moment, he realizes that,

> the widow was feeling the most intense hatred towards me. Indeed, it occurred to me that, polite though they all were, virtually everyone else present—the thick-set man included—were bitterly resenting my presence. Curiously, just as this thought flashed through my head, a voice from the back said, not loudly but quite distinctly: 'Why's he so special anyway? This is Hermann's time" (369).

This scene is representative of many in which Ryder is asked to fulfill functions that he doesn't understand as he lurches through worlds where he doesn't belong. He meets citizens profess their thrill at the encounter and their hopes for the acquaintance, but they undermine those professions with other, opposite ones, making their loathing at once implicit and apparent. The narrator's unreliability doubles this opposition, casting him alternately as a paranoid and a narcissist, a sensitive genius and a run-of-the-mill megalomaniac.

In these oppositions, the novel constructs an ambiguous polarity between the citizens and the artist, which is much like the one that tragedy constructs between its chorus and its hero. "On the one hand," Vernant and Naquet write,

> the chorus, an anonymous and collective being whose role is to express, through its fears, hopes, and judgments, the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community; on the other the individualized figure whose action forms the center of the drama and who is seen as a hero from another age, always more or less alien to the ordinary condition of a citizen (24)

Transient, Ryder is a visitor from a global culture, which seems like another planet. The locals smother him with praise and ridicule him with abandon, extolling his talent as they exclude his person. Like the tragic chorus, they honor the protagonist as a leader and an alien; like the tragic hero, he embodies the citizenry as he is exiled from their city.

The townspeople share a collective hope that Ryder can save them from an artistic "crisis" that they have suffered. They withhold the particulars of that catastrophe from him and his reader, conveying their city's troubled history in brief asides that indicate only that their local artists have failed them somehow. Without a true artist in their midst, they say, they have no common cause to bring them out of their houses, and no way to express their love and longing for each other. They urge Ryder to save them from their mutual estrangement, but he can hardly fathom their need, much less imagine how he might help: their wives have left them and their parents are sad; their husbands are drunkards and they miss their children terribly, even though they live right across town. They know that he is extremely busy— given his stature, he must be, they apologize

continually—but they also know that their solitary confinement would end and their lives would be transformed if he could just use his art to transmit these messages between them.

"Clearly," Ryder observes, "this city was expecting something more of me than a simple recital," but he has little idea what that expectation is, much less how to fulfill it (15). His failure is inevitable, because his job is impossible: the townspeople want something that no human could ever give. He aggravates the problem by behaving as capriciously as they do, vacillating from kindness to cruelty without warning or apparent reason. Sympathetic and hard-hearted by turns, the artist is both essential to the life of the city and exempt from it, in equal and intense degrees; he is either implicated in the citizens' suffering, or overburdened by their demands.

The novel turns on these antitheses. Old ties resurface and Ryder discovers that he might belong to the people he meets, that he might bear some responsibility to them. A woman named Sophie addresses him as if he is her absent husband, too busy with his art to give her what she needs; her son, Boris, tries desperately to please him, as if he is the distant father who has ignored his son for too long. The novel invites its reader to question whether Ryder has any real ties to these people, and it never answers the question, creating a desire for enlightenment that goes unfulfilled as it makes room for two possible readings: either the townspeople make unreasonable demands on the artist, or he lets them down horribly when they need him. Against these two possibilities, Ryder and his reader share a common goal: to construct a coherent narrative whose protagonist's place is clear. The novel resists that coherence, hanging a haze of blame over the protagonist and everyone around him. The characters take turns assuming

penitent postures, and the novel refuses to arbitrate the accusations they fling at each other.

Rightfully called Kafka-esque and "dreamlike" by its critics, *The Unconsoled* resembles the classic anxiety dream in which the dreamer stands inexplicably pantless in front of his high school. Unsure where he is or how he got there, Ryder is perpetually late and unprepared, and he disappoints everybody, inevitably. He finds himself at black-tie events in his pajamas, facing an expectant audience when he has nothing to say, and everyone he meets feels entitled—by some previous conversation or event, which is only mentioned indirectly—to expect more of him than he could ever hope to give. One failure begets another, and Ryder fears that the recital will be the biggest of them all, unless he can get away from other people long enough to practice. Ryder flails from one wrong-headed move to the next as the reader watches and, inevitably, worries. He forgets the multitudes of other people who are perpetually waiting for him, but we remember, knowing that in the end, he will fail them all.

But if Ryder's narrative often seems overdetermined, it also has the trappings of teleology, suggesting that *The Unconsoled* might also represent a narrative of progress. Its protagonist arrives in town at the beginning of the novel and strains to surmount obstacles in the middle; he is scheduled to perform at the denouement, and to depart in the end. This teleology toys with generic conventions that invite the reader to identify with a protagonist in the desire for some lost object—a successful career in Paris, maybe, or a better husband than Mr. Casaubon. Eliciting identification along those conventional lines, *The Unconsoled* underlines the failure of sympathy that identification requires. It

represents a protagonist whose object of desire is not a holy grail, a career, or a husband, but simply time alone—practicing the piano, ignoring other people. Readers who identify with him will share in his desire, and want him to get what he wants, to forget about everybody else and let them solve their problems themselves.

If Ryder were to satisfy this desire, he would dash the extravagant hopes that the townspeople lay upon him. He would say that he cannot—or more to the point, that he *will* not— save them all; his recital will not cure the poisoned atmosphere that they breathe, and his words will not bridge the gaps they feel. In tempestuous outbursts, this is exactly what he says: "I do not care about this group of citizens! I do not care how long they are kept waiting! The fact is, if I am not able to practise, I will pack up and leave this city immediately, in the next hour! There will be no lecture, no performance, nothing!" (342).

Those fits of pique are balanced by their opposite, however, as when Ryder neglects his duties to spend the afternoon at the porters' café, learning how the local people spend their leisure time. He treats his family as if they are strangers and strangers as if they are family, ignoring the obvious pain of the people closest to him while he shuttles off to care for people he's never met before. Alternately a solitary genius and the savior of humankind, Ryder sees himself as a source of largesse in a little world. "Look," he explains in frustration when his ostensible wife urges him to stay home instead of traveling to his next recital. "The fact is, people need me. I arrive in a place and more often than not find terrible problems, and people are so grateful I've come."

Gratitude proves unforthcoming from these people, however, and Ryder's family seems to suffer for nothing. They are bound together, paradoxically, by the filial neglect

they share: Ryder feels neglected by Sophie, who feels neglected by him; Boris is neglected by both of them, and he neglects Gustav in turn. Ryder's aging parents threaten to appear in a town that has no resources to care for them, because Ryder has neglected to make the necessary preparations—but they avert the disaster that pends by neglecting to show up. Ryder mourns his parents' absence with a chuckle that becomes a sob, alluding to a long history of promises broken: "I was very sure they would come this time" (512). The implications of that injured cry are never represented directly, but they evoke the shadow of an unhappy past that looms over the inexplicable present.

That past is most sharply re-enacted in Ryder's neglect of Boris, who craves the protagonist's paternal attentions and never gets them for long. Boris begs Ryder to take him back to the house where they used to live, where he left his favorite toy, a plastic soccer player that was essential to his favorite game. In a fleeting moment of sympathy with his (ostensible) son, Ryder recalls the game and remembers how much Boris liked it.[54] Boris named one of the players Number Nine and invested him with near-mythical abilities; a "highly moody personality," Number Nine was the star of the home team and the protagonist of the narrative. He would languish in the middle of every game, "[sulking] in some obscure part of the pitch, apparently oblivious of the fact that his team was losing badly." Then, just when the game seemed irretrievably lost and the crowd seemed sunk in misery, "Number Nine would finally give a glimpse of his true ability, pulling back a goal for his side with some fine piece of skill" (41). The commentator would rave, the crowd would cheer, and Number Nine would win a happy ending for the home team.

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[54] For the sake of convenience, I will refer to Boris as Ryder's son and Sophie as his wife, although, as I said, the novel suggests that the child and his mother might also have been unknown to Ryder before his arrival in town.

Boris's game maps the structure of the realist novel: the protagonist is jeopardized in the beginning; he suffers in the middle, and he is relieved—for better or worse— in the end. Boris uses that familiar form to represent an inevitable win for the good guys, as the defeat that once threatened to befall them belongs to their opponents instead. Number Nine and his creator celebrate, and the narrative ends, leaving the losers in the moment of their loss, which they experience in private. The narrative frame closes around the winners and excludes the losers, ensuring that there will not be a witness to their suffering. The affects of winning are writ large in the victors with whom the spectator identifies, while the affects of loss are repressed in the disappearance of the people who suffer them.

The novel, like Boris's game, requires this kind of repression: it gives shape to a shapeless world through the sympathies that it gives, and, conversely, withholds. It aims to represent realistically a world in which suffering is common (because every life ends in death), and yet, it claims that some sufferers—the protagonists—merit special attention. Their singularity is essential to the form of the novel, which reiterates modernity's logic that sympathy is a zero-sum game. The narrator of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* makes this logic explicit when she reflects that,

> We do not expect people to be moved by what is not unusual. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity (144).

Without that wadding, readers would sink into a limitless sympathy, mourning for every creature in Middlemarch and beyond; we would feel sorry for everybody who gets things that she doesn't want and loses things that she does.

The realist novel fends against that amorphous, *eleos*-like affect, which would breed lassitude and chaos into the order of western individualism.[55] It focuses its reader's identification on a single character, rationalizing the suffering of others by diminishing them in proportion. Readers live peacefully with their knowledge of the losers who fall by the wayside because they identify wholly with the winners: we are not overly bothered that Casaubon dies alone in the middle of the novel because Dorothea Brooke lives happily without him in the end. The novel leads us to believe that both of them got approximately what they deserved; this identificatory justice reinforces the logic of liberalism, in which the pursuit of happiness is a necessary good. It links the reader's desires with the protagonist's, equating one (real) desire with another (fictional) one, enabling Dorothea to satisfy her reader in the process of satisfying herself.

Eliot's narrator reminds her reader of the necessary limits of that satisfaction: the novel can only provide a happy ending by forgetting the characters who are not included within it. With this reminder, she writes a prescription for cruelty by postmodern definitions.[56] In the age of late capital, as Clement Rosset writes, cruelty need not be an active "pleasure taken in the cultivation of suffering"; it can also be a passive obliviousness, an indifference to other people (18). Richard Rorty agrees, defining

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[55] Novel theorists from Ian Watt to Georg Lukács agree that the genre teaches individual readers to separate their fates from the multitudes that surround them.

[56] As the promises of the Enlightenment fell through on national television, and living rooms and libraries of the west filled with portraits of people in pain, philosophers viewed the power of knowledge suspiciously. They criticized their disciplinary tendency to build castles in the air while people needed houses on the ground, and they revised their definition of cruelty to include that failure of sympathy.

cruelty in the thought that, "there must always be suffering, so why not let *them* suffer?" A problem of affect, not ignorance, this kind of cruelty is impervious to reason. It will not be diminished "by inquiry," Rorty suggests, but "by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (*CIS*, xvi).

To foster that ability, Rorty prescribes the novel, and his prescription is half-right: goodwill girds some habits that novels teach. Novel-readers learn to sympathize with characters along ethical lines, to identify with the characters who are good, and to want the best things to come to them. Rorty endorses these ethics of identification, suggesting that they promote solidarity between citizens.[57] Reversing Plato's ban on fiction in the ideal polis, he argues that even when the novel represents cruelty, it teaches citizens how to be kind. "We are more likely to notice the joys or suffering of one person," he writes, "if our attention is directed to it by the surprising indifference of another person. By identification with Mr. Causaubon in *Middlemarch*, for example, we may come to notice what we ourselves have been doing (165).

This choice of examples is revealing: Casaubon epitomizes the myopic philosopher at his worst. Searching for the Key to All Mythologies while his wife weeps unnoticed beside him, Casaubon dies a miserable failure because he can't fathom what it might be like to be someone other than himself; his fixation on his grand narrative blinds him to the little stories that proliferate all around him. With this passing reference, Rorty links cruelty to the search for enlightenment, suggesting that when knowledge is imagined abstractly, it distracts its seeker from the feelings of other people.

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[57] To support this argument, he makes two central claims: first, that the novel gives "us the details" of "the cruelty we ourselves are capable of", and second, that it uses those details to teach us sympathy, which makes us less cruel than we could be.

Moving swiftly from *Middlemarch* to *Lolita*, Rorty defines cruelty as a regrettable consequence of living one's life in one head; with this definition, he damns philosophers and novelists alike. He implies that the real Vladimir Nabokov was like the fictional Casaubon, obscuring his emotional attachments by thinking in abstract ways, rejecting other people's company to enjoy his own more fully. But the novelist had the advantage of the philosopher, according to Rorty, because his genre allowed him to temper his abstractions with emotion. Although he enacted cruelty in life, he worked against it in literature: he encouraged his readers to sympathize with people like Dolores Haze by representing a person like Humbert Humbert, who did not.

Rorty uses fictional and biographical references to contend that the novelist was well positioned to be a bad citizen. A "hero to himself and his parents" and therefore, a "very lucky man," Nabokov assumed his position to be at the center of his universe. Bathed in parental adoration, Rorty suggests, Nabokov adored himself, too. He relished pleasures in his head that normal people couldn't imagine; his brain "happened to be wired up so as to make him able to continually surprise and delight himself by arranging words into iridescent patterns." This Nabokov was self-satisfied with good reason, and he could have spent his life like Mr. Causaubon, scratching illegible notes to himself—except that he was also "blessed with an oversize sense of pity" which made him "unable to tolerate suffering" (155).

Following this logic, Rorty argues that Nabokov redeemed himself for his aesthetic prowess with a compensatory talent: to imagine what it might be like to be someone other than who he was. He knew that he had the potential to be more attuned to words than people—that he could fetishize literary language at the expense of human

experience—and he warned himself against that possibility with the novels he wrote. He created Humbert Humbert's lack of sympathy to fend off his fear of his own.

Writing inhabits a paradoxical position in Rorty's ethical universe. He contends that the novelist's formal facility compensates for the cruelty it creates by eliciting kindness from its reader. Consequently, it represents the writer's twin gifts for self-absorption and generosity; it is his greatest weapon and also the grace that prevents him from using it. Inspiring acts of creation that are solitary and social in equal measures, it renders the writer as attentive to people in fiction as he is distracted him from them in fact. He ignores his family and his friends to while away his hours imagining how pretend people feel, making him cruel and kind at both extremes.

*The Unconsoled* represents a similarly ambiguous portrait of the artist, which has flummoxed many of its critics. One of them is Richard Rorty, who wrote in a 1995 review that he was "upset and bewildered by Ishiguro's new, long, complicated novel." Expressing admiration for "Ishiguro's moral decency and his command of his medium," Rorty expresses uncertainty about the purpose to which those talents were put. He compares Ryder unfavorably to the protagonists of Ishiguro's previous novels: unlike the butler of *The Remains of the Day* and the painter of *Artist of the Floating World*, Ryder is opaque to Rorty, seemingly devoid of long-term memory, with a history and a personality that are only dimly legible. "He occasionally feels helpless pity," Rorty writes, but "he never tries to pull things together nor to act for a consistent purpose." Ryder achieves a degree of resolution, Rorty acknowledges, conceding that he is unsure how to read it. As

he charts his responses to the mitigated peace with which the novel concludes, Rorty refers to himself first as "the reader," then as "he," then as "one":

> The reader, however, is not consoled. He has never been bored in the course of the 500-odd pages which precede [the novel's final] scene. As with Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain and Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire, one closes Ishiguro's book feeling that one has been in the hands of an immensely skillful, bold, inventive writer who is trying to do something that nobody has ever done before. The only problem is that one is not sure what exactly has been attempted, nor what has been achieved.

Referring to the befuddlement of "the reader" and the lack of consolation "one" feels, Rorty's circumlocutions are telling. They suggest that Rorty reads the novel rightly, to attend to the relationships it constructs between characters and readers, and to consider how their experiences are or are not shared. By focusing his review on his affective ties to the characters, he traces the novel's labyrinthine movements on the ground where they take place: on the reader's identification, or *eleos*, or whatever has taken its place.

This terrain is potentially rich for Rorty: *The Unconsoled* encapsulates the problem of solidarity and considers how far it extends. It elicits conflicting sympathies and pits them against each other in mutually exclusive arrangements, reminding its readers of what the realist novel helps Rorty forget: that to identify with one character is often to ignore another. A well-trained reader of novels accepts this proposition implicitly, and Rorty's limited sympathy for Casaubon suggests that he accepts it, too. He follows *Middlemarch*'s cues to identify with Dorothea, primarily, with a quality and degree of sympathy that goes without saying. Within that, he feels sorry that Casaubon

has to die, and he understands why Dorothea wanted him for her husband in the first place; possibly, he even wishes that she could want him still. The novel all of those diversions, but only within limits: it reins them in with reminders of the primary identification that, generically, takes precedence. Whatever identification an idiosyncratically compassionate reader might feel with marginal characters exist only to the degree that the novel formally allows it, to the degree that it does not interfere with the relationship between reader and protagonist. Identification becomes a regulatory device in this context, training good readers to be willing spectators for whatever cruelties the protagonist must inflict to get the happy ending that she—and by extension, we—want.

Rorty's willingness to accept the necessity of Casaubon's lonely death suggests that he has learned these habits of reading well. He acknowledges Casaubon's suffering only in a brief aside, as he acknowledges also that many readers would not remember it at all. With the smallness of this gesture, he illustrates what is half-wrong about his theory of the novel: the genre does *illuminate* its readers' capacity for cruelty, but it doesn't necessarily *diminish* it. On the contrary, it requires at least a little bit of cruelty from its readers, giving form to a formless world by fostering sympathy for some characters and denying it to others. It constructs histories that rationalize those judgments—reiterating the difference between *us* and *them* —as it helps us to forget the cruelties that our identifications and our desires will allow.

*The Unconsoled*, in contrast, reminds us perpetually. Tempting its reader to identify with its protagonist, it also tempts us to want what he wants at the expense of the

world around him. It forces us to notice that we wish that Ryder would stop helping everybody else so that he can go and practice, so that he will perform well, so that the novel will end happily. It balances this desire with its opposite: one by one, the townspeople relay their tales of woe, each of which is unique unto him, and that specificity exerts a pull on the reader, eliciting our identification. We identify briefly with the debauched conductor Mr. Brodsky, who wants the love of his life to return to him, and we identify with Stephan, the young pianist who wants his parents to be happy with the music he plays and therefore also with him. We want Ryder to identify with them, too, so that he will allay the pain that they feel, individually and collectively; we want him to solve his problems and everyone else's too—and to play beautiful music on top of it all.

There is nothing wrong with wanting everybody to be happy. In itself, that is—as Rorty suggests—an impulse that is as useful to the public sphere as it is admirable in the private. And sometimes—as Rorty implies—that desire is fulfilled: happiness comes at nobody's expense, and everyone lives happily ever after. This is rarely the way that realist novels work, however, because cruelty is integral to their form. Marriage plots like *Middlemarch*'s demonstrate the necessity of this cruelty quite clearly: they create narrative desire by lording the possibility of unhappiness over the characters they represent. An unhappy ending threatens to befall at least one of two characters: either the Wrong Man—the dim Casaubon, the nasty Lovelace, the cunning Gilbert Osmond, et al—will mourn his loss of the lady; or the Right Lady will mourn her marriage to the Wrong Man. The novel toys with those twinned, dystopic visions, creating a narrative out of their threats and reprieves. It constructs a system of affective justice over the

course of the time it creates: by making the reader care about fictional people, it describes what punishment is, and by making her care about some more than others, it rationalizes the ways in which punishment is distributed. It explains why some people get happy endings while other people don't, rendering the differences between citizens not only acceptable, but just. With this explanation, it teaches readers to distance themselves from the people who suffer capital losses, distinguishing *us* from *them* and ensuring that *I* am on the winning side.

This formula continues as capital gives way to late capital, and, accordingly, the modern novel gives way to the postmodern. The citizen of a modern nation imagines the poorest people living on the wrong side of the tracks, while the citizen of a postmodern, postnational economy imagines them living on the wrong side of the globe. At that kind of distance, the extremely poor become all but invisible to the extremely rich; they appear, literally, only in two dimensions. *The Unconsoled* takes place at this boundary between the two worlds: the two-dimensional and the three-, the local and the global. It questions how the people who lack cultural capital might stake their rightful claims for identification—their claims to exist in three dimensions—and what will be gained and lost if they do.

By asking this question, it joins a postmodern tradition that invites readers to question the processes by which they identify with fictional characters. Like Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and more recently, Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, *The Unconsoled* questions the ways in which novelistic identification works as an arbiter of

cultural categories.[58] Rhys' and Randall's novels are more overt in their recuperative efforts, which aim to recreate a history that was previously written only between hegemonic lines. They refer to foundational texts to point out the ways in which identification is historically constructed, examining the ways in which readers' sympathies work through prevailing notions of gender, ethnicity, and class. Ishiguro examines these things, too, but his reference is more oblique. Juxtaposing two opposing narratives against each other—as Rhys and Randall do—he calls the reader's attention to the workings of identification, underlining how it is culturally bound, and how it is aesthetically produced.

The claims that Ishiguro's marginalized characters make upon the reader's capacity for identification are always questionable, however, because they are undercut by their opposite. Ryder's unreliability leaves open the possibility that the townspeople are just tiresome whiners who would make it their business to complain even under the best of circumstances. And unlike Rhys' and Randall's protagonists, their suffering is utterly mundane: they are not taken from their homes and locked in foreign attics, nor are they subject the ritual humiliations of slavery; they are not exactly oppressed; they are simply unhappy. Leading small lives in a small world, they are just afraid they will disappear into the surrounding landscape, which is unfathomably big.

*The Unconsoled* pits their little histories in a zero-sum conflict with the more worldly problems of the globetrotting artist. In the story of a cosmopolitan who has no time for face-to-face chatter, the novel questions whether its genre can ever provide the

[58] Rhys takes Rochester's first wife, Bertha, out of *Jane Eyre's* musty attic to give her a story and a history; more recently, Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* represents a similarly recuperative project, uncovering the stories of the slaves who are buried in Margaret Mitchell's pale version of history.

kind of solidarity that Rorty prescribes, and whether local narratives can work within an economy that is increasingly global. These questions promise to be answered unhappily, as the town's history seems be a series of disasters, its present fraught with doom. The townspeople anticipate the climax of Ryder's recital in terms that are foreboding: the conductor, Mr. Brodsky, might resume the drunken loutishness that has consumed him for decades, or the young pianist Stephan might play his piece poorly and bring shame to his family. Ryder's elderly parents might be left to their own devices, because the committee in charge of their care is a shambles. All of these contingencies dim the novel's prospects of a happy ending, but none of them pose a greater threat than the frailties of Ryder himself. He might offend the citizenry by his demonstrating his obliviousness of their situation—by playing a piece by a composer with whom they share a troubled history, for example, or by failing to publicly acknowledge the porters, who eagerly await his mention.

The inevitability of this unhappy ending is presaged in Boris's allegory—the allegory of Number Nine. That story which will not end happily either, because it will not start, because Boris has lost its protagonist. Ryder promises to take his son back to the house where they used to live, where Number Nine was forgotten, but he never does; he is distracted by the persistent demands that strangers make upon him. A pair of journalists come to the café to take Ryder away for an interview, referring to the schedule that he has never seen, and Ryder overhears them remarking that he thinks he is too good, too busy, too cosmopolitan for this burg. As they indicate their distrust that he will honor his commitments, he feels obligated to prove them wrong, so he fulfills their demands, no matter how arcane they become. He shuttles around town with them while Boris waits

interminably, suggesting that the artist is too much of a primadonna to honor—or even remember—his commitments to his child.

*The Unconsoled* represents that narrative of the not-remembered son as the inverse of another: the one of the father who has his head in the artistic/intellectual clouds. Like Woolf's Mr. Ramsay, Ishiguro's Ryder takes a marginal interest in his son; more interested than Mr. Ramsay, he can imagine the boy's experience enough to know how much Number Nine matters. But Ryder's imagination is mercurial, shifting objects so quickly that it leaves everyone hungry for more. His sympathy for his son is quickly eclipsed by his sympathy for strangers, who quickly eclipse one another in their competition for his attentions. As the claims and counter-claims pile up, the novel provides little instruction for a reader who wants to know where her sympathies rightfully belong.

By eliciting conflicting desires, *The Unconsoled* puts identification to a narrative test and demonstrates the formal and political problems it causes. In Freudian terms, identification is "the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person"; it is the affect that holds families, cities, and nations together (*GP*, 46). Freud developed this theory of identification in the wake of the Second World War, and, as Diana Fuss notes, he used it to "negotiate a traumatic perception installed at the very heart of modernity: the fear of a fundamental and irretrievable loss of connection to the Other" (39). This kind of loss—vaguely defined but undeniably felt—plagues the town in *The Unconsoled*, although there has been no war. The only crisis is the embarrassment of art, which, in some prelapsarian history, bound the people together.

In their nostalgia for their better days, the townspeople lose sight of their present and jeopardize their future by entrusting them to a foreigner. Ryder is excluded from the town and its desires, so he has no investment in the sense of community that his recital might bring; he just wants to do a good job. Oriented toward that goal, his greatest desire is to go and practice, and, occasionally, he works to fulfill it. But he is distracted by the perpetual interruptions of the people around him, who always want more of his time and his services. His narrative is embedded in theirs, which always threaten to absorb teleology altogether and turn his narrative line into a chaotic snarl. With the intersecting narratives it represents, *The Unconsoled* foregrounds the relationship between sympathy and desire; it asks whether one is ever justified in withholding one's sympathy in order to get what one wants.

Ryder answers this question poorly, if at all. The novel guarantees his failure from the beginning by presenting him with an unreachable *telos*: to restore the townspeople to their former glory. Whether or not those halcyon days ever happened is highly questionable, but that they will not return is guaranteed. Somebody will inevitably suffer under Ryder's care, and somebody else will prove unable to offer his sympathies properly. This inevitability is not lost on Ryder, and it holds him in a perpetual state of anxiety. Unsure of his relationship to the people around him, he can neither fulfill nor dismiss their requests. He runs into a familiar woman on the bus and recalls her vaguely as a "special friend" from his primary school; he remembers building forts with her, piling blankets over a table and hiding in the world they built inside. His memory becomes more pointed as his narration goes on, but it is always marked by significant omissions. He remembers a day when he "had been saying something to

Fiona, no doubt and some length and in an upset manner," to which she protested: "That's silly. That means you'll be all on your own. You'll get lonely." "I don't mind that," he replied. "I like being lonely." "You're just being silly again," she said. "No one likes being lonely. I'm going to have a big family. Five children at least" (171).

To contradict Fiona and demonstrate his affinity for isolation, the young Ryder embarked on a masochistic plan. He instituted a regime of "training sessions," compelling himself go out to a vacant field and venture farther and father away from his house, alone among the grasses, where he would begin to feel an inevitable "sense of panic and a need for the company of my parents." Associating that need with immaturity, he forced himself not to fulfill it and stood still near a tree for several minutes, "fighting his emotions" until they subsided. "There was no doubting the strange thrill that had accompanied the growing fear and panic of these occasions," he recalled, "a sensation which perhaps accounted for the somewhat compulsive hold my 'training sessions' had on me" (172).

This recollection of self-deprivation appears tangentially to the insight that Fiona sheds on his hitherto unmentioned family. "But you know, don't you," the young Fiona confided that day in the fort, "when *you* get married, it needn't be like it is with your mum and dad. It needn't be like that at all. Husbands and wives don't always argue all the time. They only argue like that when... special things happen." At this allusion to some prefatory disaster, Fiona is interrupted by her mother's rebuke: "He's too young. You're not to tell him" (173). The source of Ryder's family problems is never mentioned again but it looms over the rest of the narrative, implying that some parental problem—which appears to be unmentionable because it is unmentioned—made Ryder into the

solitary artist he is. Like a tragic hero, Ryder is shaped by events that preceded him; unlike a tragic hero, he doesn't attempt to discover the story that lies behind his. His family tree reverberates with tremors whose source is unknown and seemingly unknowable to him. Lacking any faith in an enlightenment that might set him free, he pursues a more modest goal: to live as painlessly as possible with the knowledge that he has.

That is no easy task, because he knows so much. Ryder reads other people's minds with an impossible omniscience, which gives him insight into their life-stories that paralyzes him in his own. His observations about external realities segue into revelations about interior ones that should be inaccessible to him. When a young man chauffeurs him around town, confiding in the visiting artist as everybody does, Ryder slips seamlessly into Stephan's head: "The rain continued to fall steadily," Ryder observes,

> as we traveled through the night-time streets. The young man remained silent for a long time and I wondered if he had become angry with me. But then I caught sight of his profile in the changing light and realized he was turning over in his mind a particular incident from several years ago. it was an episode he had pondered many times before—often when lying awake at night or when driving alone—and now his fear that I would prove unable to help him had caused him once more to bring it to the front of his mind (65).

The artist's X-ray vision has two possible explanations: he is literally visionary, with empathy that knows no bounds, or he is utterly self-absorbed, projecting his thoughts upon the world with a solipsism that annihilates. Or, possibly, the difference between

the two is moot, as Wittgenstein suggests: "solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism" (5.64). Weighing the difference between solipsism and realism, *The Unconsoled* represents them as two alternative descriptions of the same phenomenon: a mimetic identity between internal and external worlds. It considers whether its protagonist is a solipsistic Humbert Humbert, or a realistic Dorothea Brooke—whether he is cruel, or kind, or both.

It renders this question inert, in typically postmodern fashion, by placing the narrative outside the bounds of plausibility. Free indirect discourse fades into narrated monologue, and Ryder's perception of reality unites with reality itself, representing a fantasy in which mimesis is perfect. *The Unconsoled* never lets its reader forget, however, that this is just a fantasy, existing only in fiction. The demands on Ryder, like the demands on the rest of us, are too great to be fulfilled: he couldn't possibly sympathize with everyone who tells him a sad story, or he would never get to his recital; he would never get anywhere at all. Possessing too much knowledge about others, he would become unable to act for himself—like a tragic hero, or one of the postmodern cynics that Peter Sloterdijk describes: "We are enlightened, we are apathetic. It does not occur to us to love the kind of knowledge we have. Rather, we ask ourselves how we might contrive to live with it without becoming ossified" (xxvi).

The novel generates these oppositions—between fantasy and reality, solipsism and sainthood—and refuses to reconcile them. This refusal of narrative coherence is typical of postmodern texts, but it is also typical of tragedy; as Vernant and Naquet suggest, the genre is characterized by its ambiguity, which springs from the contingency

of its language. "On the lips of different characters the same words take on different or opposed meanings," they write, "because their semantic significance is not the same in religious, legal, political parlance." Antigone opposes Creon, for example, because she adheres to *nómos* by a different definition. "For the girl the word means 'religious rule'; for Creon it means 'an edict promulgated from the state". The play hinges on language that appears to be transparent but turns out to be opaque: "instead of establishing communication and agreement between the characters, the words they exchange [...] underline the impermeability of their minds, the barrier between them" (114). Building on this premise, Vernant and Naquet attribute the hero's fall to his failure to recognize two things: that his truths are not transparent to the people around him, and that their words carry meanings that are, likewise, lost on him. A nation unto himself, he is "enclosed within his own particular world," where "the word has one and only one meaning" (116).

Ryder is similarly enclosed. Like a boy in a permanent bubble, he exists in his own world at the beginning of the novel is even more firmly locked in it in the end. Both abandoned and abandoning, he has disappointed the townspeople and his family, and they have disappointed him; the recital is an unmitigated disaster, a spectacle of the townspeople's various wounds and aches. Mr. Brodsky has lost the love of his life, and apparently, also his leg—although he says that all he lost that day was his prosthesis, because he lost his real leg years ago in an incident that he has long forgotten. In any case, the recital begins when the conductor ambles on stage with an ironing board that he uses to support himself, and the audience sits in stony judgment upon his performance, never noticing he has one less leg than he did the last time they saw him. Sitting with

their chins in their hands as they watch him suffer, the citizens remain impassive when an enthusiastic swing of his baton causes their former hero to collapse on stage. "I expected people to rush to his aid," Ryder reflects, standing still, "but the gasp that greeted his fall faded into an embarrassed silence" (496).

With their non-response, the townspeople corroborate the hotel manager's observation that, "audiences, concert audiences, they're not like friends and relatives who listen sympathetically in living rooms." Equating cosmopolitan culture with an impartiality that lies on a continuum with cruelty, the manager suggests that strangers are the artist's only fair judges. Friends and relatives are unable to appreciate artistic merits on their own, because their judgment is clouded by their emotional attachments. The quality of filial sympathy is called into question, however, by the context in which the manager makes this remark: he uses it to explain to his son, the budding pianist Stephan, why he will not attend the recital that Stephan has planned in honor of his parents. Assuming that disgrace is inevitable in his son's performance, Hoffmann notes that, "real concert audiences, they are used to standards, professional standards" (479).

The citizens enact cruelties like this one in the name of professionalism and good judgment, demonstrating their ability to rise above their provinicialism by withholding their sympathy from each other. The novel ends anti-climactically after this scene; realizing that the citizens' drama of pain and suffering overshadows any aesthetic contribution he might make, Ryder concedes defeat and never takes the stage at all. Sophie finally loses patience with Ryder's continual absences, which continue even when he is present, and leaves him, taking Boris with her. Ryder leaves town alone, but he doesn't quite get away; he circles the outskirts in a tram, where the starkness of his

solitude is moderated only by the kindness of strangers, and by the breakfast that is serendipitously served. An electrician sits next to Ryder and notices that he is sobbing and alone. Not recognizing the famous artist, he pats Ryder on the shoulder and says, "Come on. Go and get yourself some breakfast. Then we'll talk about all your troubles. Or if you prefer, we can just forget about it all and talk about whatever you like, whatever's likely to cheer you up" (533). It is a paltry consolation, perhaps, but a consolation nonetheless; Ryder gets his breakfast, which smells good, and sits down with his new friend, to talk.

With this conclusion, the novel testifies to the modest peace that follows the moment when everything goes wrong, and it demonstrates the spirit of tragedy as Nietzsche defined it. "The Dionysian man resembles Hamlet," Nietzsche writes, and Ryder resembles him too: "Both have once looked into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint" (59-60). The tragic hero—like Ryder—knows that his world will persist in being bad no matter what he does, and so he doesn't do much; he is nauseous, apathetic, lethargic.

Against this knowledge, art offers mild consolation. Aesthetic creation is Nietzsche's only hope at the end of a bad day: "art approaches as a saving sorceress," he writes, "expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live" (60). On the face of it, *The Unconsoled* refutes this argument with the story an artist who saves nobody. Music does not save its creator or anybody else in town; after the much-anticipated recital, the

townspeople are left with the same problems they had before the visiting artist arrived. But the novel continues beyond that disaster, representing Ryder's life in its aftermath. After his familiars have become unfathomable, strangers step in to provide comfort—to provide something like tragic *eleos* as they remind him of their mundane commonality, eating breakfast and enjoying it.

Rorty's finds this ending unconsoling and Ryder "not quite all there". The protagonist is "real enough to cause concern, impatience, and indignation," he writes, "(but not sympathy) in the reader". The careful exclusion of sympathy from this sentence is especially noteworthy as the novel creates a situation that would seem to invite it—after all, Ryder's wife and son have just left him, his parents have failed to show up (again), and he failed to do the job he wanted to do (again). If Ryder were like Dorothea Brooke, the reader might suspect that Rorty's lack of sympathy was a failure on his part—but Ryder is not like Dorothea at all. As Louis Menand suggests, he is not a realistic character, but "one of the peculiar sort of homunculi Mr. Ishiguro has invented to replace characters, and although the relations among them are important, they are not quite the same as human relations." Ryder exists, partly, as a stand-in for realistic protagonists like Dorothea. He is real enough to elicit his reader's emotional responses but too papery too sustain them, reminding us of what we are unable to know about him, and of what we are unable to know about each other; he makes us miss the kind of identification that we had with Dorothea, and he reminds us who suffered for the fact that we had it. Rorty seems attuned to this as he pines for the sense of identification that *The Unconsoled* refuses its readers. He represents that response as a lack of understanding, however, because he never names exactly what it is that he's missing.

*The Unconsoled* is a study of solidarity: it asks how far we extend it, and why, and with what consequences to whom. Following Rorty, this question raises another: Is the fiction of solidarity different from the fact of it, and how do we get from one to the other? In his work on cruelty, Rorty implies that the sympathy readers feel with fictional characters is essentially like the sympathy that people feel with each other in fact—that when we identify with Casaubon, we can translate that experience of identification into the real world, to each other. By positing fiction as a source of solidarity, he takes for granted the ease with which people might transfer their sympathy from the fictional world to the real one. But literature, by definition, represents what does not exist. Aiming to imagine what *might* be, not just to see *what is*, novelists use formal devices that enable us to see into other people's heads, to identify with their experiences in ways that are, in fact, impossible to do.

Philosophers call this impossibility the problem of Other Minds—which can be roughly summarized in the question: "Is sympathy possible?"[59] Given that we only learn language through our own experience, they ask how can we ever know what other people mean when they use it; and without the use of language, they ask, how can we ever come to imagine the experiences of others? As Rorty reads it, the novel gives its reader an experience of overcoming that problem—understanding other people's pain, seeing all things, ignoring no one.

But *The Unconsoled* raises that reassuring aesthetic model only to remind us of its fictionality. It inflicts a peculiarly postmodern pain on its reader by representing moments of great intimacy between its protagonist and the people around him while

[59]cf. Wittgenstein: "If one has to imagine someone else's pain on the model of one's own, that is none too easy to do: for I have to imagine the pain I *do not feel* on the model of the pain which *I do feel*."

reminding us that in fact, unlike in fiction, we cannot get that close to each other. The fact of that distance is necessarily painful at times; without it, the differences between *fort* and *da*, life and death, wouldn't matter, and *The Unconsoled* works to represent the pain that they cause. It distributes the spectacle of suffering widely among its characters, enabling Ryder to take a rest from his role as the beleaguered protagonist by indulging his own cruelty as a reader: when he wants to relax, he uses the sight of other people's suffering to forget his own. This sado-masochistic model of reading emerges in the first introduction of the elderly porter, Gustav, who shows Ryder to his room in the hotel when he arrives to town. The porter strains under the pianist's heavy suitcases, refusing to set them down, even while they stand still in the elevator. Ryder notices the older man's discomfort and urges him to rest— but Gustav politely repeats his refusal, thanking Ryder for noticing.

Many of his fellow-citizens "have at some point or another tried their hand at portering," Gustav says by way of explanation: "Everyone in this town has at some point had the experience of carrying luggage from place to place. Because they've done that, they assume being a hotel porter is just an extension of it." As Gustav insists on his professionalism, he draws attention to his author's: everyone has written a sentence and told a story, but that doesn't make everyone a novelist. Gustav implicates amateur authors everywhere, recalling the "people over the years, sir, in this very elevator, who've said to me, 'I might give up what I'm doing one of these days and take up portering...That's the life for me. Not a care in the world." (5-6).

To distinguish themselves from the dilettantes, Gustav reports, the professional porters formed a union and ensured that their jobs would be painful. They legislated the

number of bags that they would carry and the ways in which they would carry them, guaranteeing that they would suffer visibly for their work. In his response to this story of suffering, the visiting pianist models the behavior of the good guest and the good reader: he sees, he sympathizes, and he says so.

Gustav espouses a model of professionalism that matches the townspeople's model of aesthetic judgment: it equates knowledge of cosmopolitan ways indelibly with pain.[60] He brings Ryder to meet the rest of the porters at a local café, and he urges his colleagues to "show Mr. Ryder how we *really* enjoy ourselves." He begins clapping his hands rhythmically, marking the beginning of a performance that they call The Porter's Dance. One of the porters climbs on a table and adopts a pose "like a Greek god, his arms positioned as though carrying an invisible burden." Another man tosses him a cardboard box, "roughly the dimensions of a suitcase, though to judge from the way it was being tossed in the air, it was light and empty." Performing a drama of heavy lifting, the porter catches the box "as though he had caught a slab of stone," and buckles under its apparent weight before he hoists it victoriously over his head.

"In reality of course this was no feat at all," Ryder acknowledges, because the box was evidently empty—but the weight preserves its dramatic effect against its unreality. The porter tosses the box up with hand and performs "little pirouettes" to celebrate; his suffering is over, which means that his performance is over too, so he bows and exits. One after the next, each porter retraces the same narrative: he is at rest when his story starts; he suffers in the middle, and is relieved at last in the end. Watching that narrative of progress, Ryder feels his own burdens lift. "I felt the human warmth starting to engulf

[60] Victoria Hamilton describes tragic drama similarly, suggesting that it depicts a kind of knowledge that "*originates* in the context of absences, *increases* in a context of pain and limitation, and *terminates* in despair or renunciation of limitation" (238).

me... What indeed was the point in worrying so much? It was essential every once in a while to unwind completely and enjoy oneself" (398).

That quality of that enjoyment changes, however, when Gustav takes the floor. After the artistic preamble with the faux suitcase, a waiter tosses him a real one, which lands near him with a thud. Ryder watches Boris's face light up with pride as his grandfather hefts the suitcase to his hip, and he observes that this time, the performance is not an act: the old man is *actually* straining under the bag. His audience cheers as he dances to belittle the effort he makes, and two waiters near him pack another suitcase with wooden chopping boards they bring out from the kitchen. Two or three at a time, they stack them in, push the suitcase shut, and heave it onto the table.

Gustav continues dancing, teasing the audience by pretending not to notice the greater challenge he faces. When he turns and sees the laden suitcase, his face takes "on an expression of dismay" that makes his audience laugh—with the exception of Boris, who falters with concern for his grandfather before he is caught up in the crowd. The performance begins again: Gustav dances under his burden and the people cheer him on; he lifts it over his head and the waiters pack another bag that is heavier still. They bring out a golfing bag and a piece of heavy machinery—an old engine of some kind—which they drag into the bag and heave onto the table. The porters shout, "Come on, Gustav, you show them!" urging their protagonist to prove himself against these adversities, too, and only his grandson protests, stretching his arms out as he urges Gustav to rest. Gustav proves deaf to his pleas, so Boris beseeches the other porters to call off the show, saying, "Grandfather's done enough," but they are too thoroughly entertained to listen.

Gustav hoists the golfing bag up and "his body [shakes] as though it might buckle. His face [becomes] strangely flushed. His jaw [clenches] furiously, his cheeks [grow] distorted, the muscles on his neck [stand] out. Even in the heavy din, the elderly porter's breathing [seems] audible. Yet no one other than Boris [seems] to notice any of this" (405). Gustav betrays nothing to his audience; he finishes his show and receives his applause before he acknowledges to Boris the extent of the damage he inflicts on himself: "if something ever happens to me, if something ever does you'll have to take my place." The boy puts his hand in his grandfather's and nods; together, they are engulfed by the crowd. Ryder watches the dance and its conclusion passively, knowing that Gustav is killing himself, and enjoying the sights: first the drama of the dance, then the play between the sympathetic spectator and his stricken grandfather.

This scene recapitulates the necessity of cruelty to narrative form. It reminds its readers that in fiction as in fact, everybody will inevitably fail somebody, and somebody will inevitably fail us. The protagonist will desire an object and suffer to attain it, and the reader will enjoy the sight of his suffering; the protagonist will satisfy his desire in the end or she will not, and the reader will enjoy the spectacle, either way. *The Unconsoled* redoubles the overwhelming effects of this kind of narrative cruelty by inviting the reader into a complex identification with the protagonist who enacts them. Ryder is perpetually anxious because he is too busy to identify with others, and he extends that anxiety to any reader who is willing to identify with him.

In both cases, the failure of sympathy appears to be inevitable, representing the postmodern phenomenon that sociologists call "compassion fatigue". Susan Moeller uses the term to describe the way in which citizens in a global culture adapt their emotions to

live in a media-saturated world. As history and technology conspire to bring images of terrible suffering into our libraries and living rooms, we imagine that we can only fail to meet their demands upon our sympathies. We experience that failure with a peculiar combination of anxiety, apathy, and self-doubt. That is, we feel very much like Ryder: knowing that we are unable to extend aid that would help, we are overwhelmed by our inability to even extend sympathy as a consolation. Bruce Robbins notes that Ryder is a case study in compassion fatigue and that Ishiguro's novel could take Moeller's term as a subtitle. Ryder's predicament is every postmodern citizen's, Robbins writes, quoting Moeller: "we can't respond to every appeal. And so we've come to believe that we don't care" (*VBJN*, 9). Alternating between sympathy and its opposite, we wonder, as Ryder does, what is wrong with us.

Robbins maintains that postmodern citizens are markedly ambivalent, as Ryder is, about their accountability to the suffering of others. As mass media circulate images of war and famine around the world, he suggests, we question whether the demands upon our sympathies are too great, or whether we have become too small to fulfill the least among them. He surveys the critical discourse on the subject and notes that, "the [trope of compassion fatigue] is undercut by the oft-cited passage in Jonathan Kozol's book on poverty in urban America, *Amazing Grace*, where a mother with AIDS is told about compassion fatigue among the well-to-do. She says to Kozol, 'I don't understand what they have done to get so tired.'"

Robbins quotes Moeller's response to that question: we are not tired, Moeller suggests, because the quantity of news is too great, but because the quality of it is too poor. The market dictates that suffering will be represented with ever-increasing

sensationalism. As the tawdriness becomes too obvious for even the least discriminating viewer, Moeller suggests, we collectively grow tired—not because we have too little time, but because we spend our time doing such stupid things. From this, Robbins concludes that, "our tiredness is a relative rather than an absolute condition," as Ryder's is also:

> The harriedness in *The Unconsoled* could be seen as a temporal metaphor representing a dilemma that is not itself wholly or even primarily temporal: the dilemma of conflicting and uncertain demands for sympathy and solidarity... What we experience as lack of time, like the expression 'not having time for something,' would be a sort of pragmatic euphemism (if I did have time I might be more open to it) for a rejection that really happens on principle (16-17).

The problem of compassion fatigue is not an effect of limited resources, he suggests, but of poor representation. If the citizens of one nation could see the suffering of citizens in another represented more effectively, then they could identify with the sufferers—and if they identified with the sufferers enough, then they would want to help. And if they wanted to help enough, then they probably would.[61]

Moeller is right to point out that the quality of representation is crucial, but the problem of time cannot be underestimated. Humans experience time as a limited quantity, so we are inevitably susceptible to cruelty by Rorty's definition: as a failure to imagine how other people feel. Even the longest novel lacks sufficient time to tell all of its characters' stories fully; consequently, every reader must learn to live in ignorance of

[61] One might question why sympathy appears to be a zero-sum game in this formulation, and Moeller implicitly suggests that the market makes it so. A viewer will only watch one television news program, so the stations compete for it by sapping her sympathies with hyperbole, leaving her with little affect to spare.

some characters. Benedict Anderson inadvertently describes the costs and benefits of that interpersonal ignorance in his description of the costs and benefits of not knowing every language on the globe:

> If every language is acquirable, its acquisition requires a real portion of a person's life: each new conquest is measured against shortening days. What limits one's access to other languages is not their imperviousness but one's own mortality. Hence a certain privacy to all languages (148).

To learn to live, we must learn to acknowledge the inevitability of our death, which prevents us from knowing every language; similarly, to learn to read, we must learn to acknowledge the inevitability of our inability to read, which prevents us from identifying with every person. The novel depends upon that cruelty and the dubious privacy that it accords to some of its characters—like Casaubon—who suffer in ways that no reader can ever know.

That is, no reader can ever know those intricacies of private experience in a rational way; they are only accessible, as Rorty suggests, by acts of imagination. Rorty's work on this subject is significant because it advocates imagination—and the fiction that teaches it—as an aid to political solidarity. In this sense, Rorty works against a western philosophical tradition that assumes imagination to be necessarily detrimental to the health of the state. From Plato to Kant, philosophers in this tradition pit imagination against reason, and fiction against philosophy, to favor the latter over the former. They aim to create a rational citizenry that can dispense its sympathies fairly, freeing their capacity for reason from the clutter of love and hate. It is only with empirical reason,

they suggest, that citizens can learn to be just: to treat people who are close to them exactly as they would treat people who are far away.

It is toward this goal that Plato bans fiction from the polis. Assuming that fiction weakens political bonds, he urges citizens to shun the self-centered affects that fiction fosters, and learn philosophy instead. This legacy persists today, as Martha Nussbaum writes: "a lover of literature who wishes to question Plato's banishment of literary artist from the public realm must, in pleading her case, make some defense of the emotions and their contribution to public rationality" (*PJ*, 54).

Throughout his oeuvre, Ishiguro questions these things: where does literature belong in the public realm, and where do emotions belong in rational judgment. Critics have commented on the striking lack of affect among all of Ishiguro's protagonists, from the indifferent painter in *An Artist of the Floating World* to the buttoned-down butler of *The Remains of the Day* and the automatonic detective of *When We Were Orphans*. Ryder is no exception, his sensitive outbursts notwithstanding; when the people closest to him suffer, he can't remember whether he knows them or not. Responding to those around him with an even-handedness that could be described as objective, he alternately drops and supports them all.

With his strange neutrality, Ryder practices the theories of the Greek and European Enlightenments, and he shows how poorly they might work; he demonstrates the danger of taking Plutarch literally when he says that, "we should regard all human beings as our fellow citizens and neighbors," and he shows what havoc pure reason can wreak (qtd. in Nussbaum, *FLC*, 7). Judging the stories that his compatriots tell him with eyes unclouded by emotional attachments, he treats his friends and family just as he treats

strangers. To do otherwise, he implicitly suggests, would jeopardize the self-sufficiency that enables him to stand alone in a deserted field, or in a town where he knows nobody.

He adheres to anti-emotion tradition of western philosophy, which began in Greece during the sixth century—as tragedy disappeared—and resurged in Europe during the 18th century, as the novel arose. This tradition includes Plato, Epicurus, the Greek and Roman Stoics, as well as Kant and Spinoza, who work to construct citizens who can make rational judgments, free from the taint of feeling. The problem with the emotions, this tradition argues, is not that they render a citizen incapable of judgment, but because they render him susceptible to judgments that are false. Under the sway of his emotions, as Martha Nussbaum writes, he ascribes "a very high value to external persons and events that are not fully controlled by the person's virtue or rational will. [The emotions] are acknowledgements, then, of the person's own incompleteness or vulnerability" (*PJ*, 56). Marking the limits of reason, the emotions threaten the self-sufficiency that is essential to the logic of modernity—to rationalism, capitalism, and the novel.

Ryder strains within this modern logic: he treats his emotions as a problem to be solved and an obstacle to be overcome. He constructs his emotional life in ways that minimize its dangers, subduing the contingencies of feeling with the stabilizing force of reason. He fits Nussbaum's descriptions of antiemotion philosophers, for whom,

> fear involves the thought that there are important bad things that could happen in the future and that one is not fully capable of preventing them. Grief involves the thought that someone or something extremely important has been taken from one; anger the thought that another has seriously

> damaged something to which one attaches great worth; pity the thought that others are suffering in a nontrivial way, through no fault of their own or beyond their fault; hope involves the thought that one's future good is not fully under one's control (*PJ*, 56-57).

Ryder fends against these threats to his self-sufficiency by imagining that he lives in a world in which they don't exist: he believes that the people who act like his family are really not his family, so their loss could never hurt him. Refusing to fully acknowledge any ties of kinship or friendly relation, he maintains his ability to judge every case on the basis of its rational merits. Thus, he protects his independence on the basis of reason, and he bans the emotions that might diminish it.

His wife acknowledges as much when she leaves him, telling their son that he is "outside of our grief," just as he was always "outside of our love." "Leave him be," she instructs, leading Boris away. "Let him go around the world, giving out his expertise and wisdom" (532). But this abandonment does not affect Ryder as it would affect a person with typically human frailties, because he has protected himself against it in advance. He established his self-sufficiency as a boy, when he forced himself to stand in the middle of an empty psychic field, where he was invulnerable, free of the attachments that would turn his solitude into loneliness.

The novel questions the utility of Ryder's rationalism as it juxtaposes two possible narratives. If the people around him are family, then Ryder is like a tragic hero, fulfilling a narrative that lies outside of his control; if they are strangers, then Ryder is like the protagonist of a realist novel, able to determine his ending himself. If Sophie is his wife, then she is estranged from him because he is—like Oedipus—so damaged by

the past that he can't act well in the present. If Sophie is a stranger, then he is a solitary genius, suffering as he solves his problems through the sheer force of his will.

As it juxtaposes these two conflicting accounts of human agency, *The Unconsoled* raises a question that is central to both ancient and postmodern thought: How can individuals be motivated to act, if their actions are always already inscribed by panopticonic powers beyond their control? This question is especially pressing in the historical moments when tragedy and the postmodern novel emerge. During the sixth century in Greece, the city-state began to replace myth as the governing logic of social life, and tragedy arose to mold its spectators into citizens. Assuming direct reference for only one century in western history, it documented the moment in which the myth-driven past gave way to Socratic reason. It contrasted the old belief in predetermination with the new faith in human agency and paved the way for the (politically necessary) belief that every individual exercises autonomy over his fate. As the theorists Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet contend,

> The tragic sense of responsibility emerges when human action becomes the object of reflection and debate while not being regarded as sufficiently autonomous to be self-sufficient. The particular domain of tragedy lies in this border zone where human actions hinge on divine powers and where their true meaning, unsuspected by even those who initiated them and take responsibility for them, is only revealed when it becomes part of an order that is beyond man and escapes him" (27).

Ryder joins Oedipus in the border zone that Vernant and Naquet describe. Inhibited by the meanings that his actions assume within a history that he doesn't know, he can reflect upon his behavior, but he cannot use that reflection to change his fate or anybody else's. He strives for an autonomy that is elusive, and the novel gently mocks his futile attempts. It invites the reader to sympathize with the young Ryder who trains himself for life by standing in a deserted field alone, pretending that his actions matter.

But if Ryder's attempts at agency resonate with the ancients', they are framed in specifically postmodern terms. He lives in an age in which the conflict between global and local cultures is increasingly fraught: multinational corporations wield economic power over national governments and mass media transmits culture across national borders; in this context, citizens both dread and aspire to become full participants in the global economy. They cling to their local identities by throwing bricks through the windows of McDonald's, while, inevitably, they buy movies made in Hollywood and Nikes made in sweatshops. This dichotomy is ripe for representation in tragedy as Vernant and Naquet describe it. The brick-throwing, Nike-wearing citizen is, by their account, a postmodern Oedipus, making a futile effort to demonstrate agency within a system of meaning in which he is lost.

This is what distinguishes Ishiguro from Kafka: where the latter used the lost protagonist to represent the experience of life in the bureaucratic state, the former uses him to represent the experience of life in the state in decline. Tragedy has traditionally shared in that project, as Franco Moretti suggests, contrasting the ancient genre with the novel in these terms. "The symbolic power of tragic form," he writes, "is inversely proportional to the real power of the state. When the state is stable and strong, a national

culture does not have to bother about it, and it evolves in a fundamentally unpolitical fashion." In this confident age, "the anti-heroic conventions of the novelistic worldview" take hold, representing "one of the greatest stabilizing factors of Modernity. But where the state is unsettled and weak, culture tends fatally to 'fill the void': dismissing the novelistic everyday as a realm of vain appearances" (253).

Tragedy, according to Moretti, is an indicator of national insecurity, and the novel is a contrasting sign of confidence. The sweeping gestures of the ancient genre protest too much as they work to represent—and thereby restore—grandeur that the nation has lost. The daily episodes of the novel, in contrast, are the effects of a nation with time and confidence to spare: lacking the need to reassure itself of its heroic potential, a novelistic age can afford to examine its everyday routines. Western culture demonstrates its self-assurance during the age of Enlightenment with the modern novel, Moretti suggests. By his logic, we watch it wane in the postmodern, as our faith in reason flags. Postmodern protagonists demonstrate increasing cynicism about narratives of enlightenment, and the novel incorporates elements of tragedy to represent their dubious progress. In this way, it reinvigorates the Enlightenment form with a narrative logic that defies reason.

*The Unconsoled* is characteristic. Its protagonist's narration is unreliable, in part because he is at once a global actor and a local pawn. The novel toys with the difference between two, suggesting that he is like a tragic hero—simultaneously a slave and a master to his fate. It juxtaposes those differences in his ambiguous relationships to the people of the polis: if Sophie is a stranger to him, than he is a global cosmopolitan who comes to a local burg and, inexplicably, feels like he belongs; if she is his wife, he is a

local citizen who accedes to the globe and feels equal affinity for everybody on it. In the second case, he is a *kosmou polîtes* in the Stoics' phrase—a "citizen of the world"—who adheres to Seneca's prescription: to "look neither to this corner nor to that, but to measure the boundaries of our nation by the sun" (18). Refusing to privilege the local over the global, he proves Martha Nussbaum's assertion that, "becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business" (15).

If Ryder is a global cosmopolitan, then his insight into the townspeople's minds makes claims to transcendence; it demonstrates his freedom from the constraints of subjectivity. By the same token, their resistance to him becomes an insistence on their specificity. "Yes, you're a brilliant musician," one of them concedes, "one of the most gifted in the world. But nevertheless, even an expert of your caliber needs to apply his knowledge to a particular set of local conditions. Each community has its own history, its own special needs" (187). Asserting their difference from him, the townspeople remind Ryder that his claim to universality is false—that what looks like mimesis to an artist can look like solipsism to the people around him.

Ryder's absorption in the stories of the local people appears in this context as a desire to know; his attention to their problems becomes an effort to see past what *might be* in order to know *what is*. He wants to understand them better, to know their history and share their desires, so that he can demonstrate his sensitivity to their local customs. With this desire, he testifies to what Rey Chow describes as western culture's "fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage, and all such figures", which represents a nostalgia for authentic knowledge, "a desire to hold onto an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own 'fake' experience. It is a desire for being 'non-

duped,' which," as Chow suggests, "is a not-too-innocent desire to seize control" (qtd. in Fuss, 9).

And just as Ryder wants unlimited access to the townspeople's knowledge, they want the same of him, for similar reasons. They want to escape their limited perspectives and to see all that he sees, to know something that is somehow better than what they already know. They try to envision the colorful life that the artist lives inside his head, and they want to be part of it. One of the townspeople imagines what Ryder will do when he gets a moment alone with his piano:

> You will wander amidst your sublime musical ideas. You will examine this one, shake your head, put it back. Beautiful as it is, it isn't quite what you were looking for. Ha! How beautiful it must be to be inside your head, Mr. Ryder! How I would love to accompany you on the journey you will embark on the moment your fingers touch the keys. But of course, you will go where I can't possibly follow. How I envy you, sir! (345)

Picturing Ryder's mind as a repository of riches, much as Rorty pictures Nabokov's, the townspeople hope to become part of it—to identify with it. Through their identification, they hope to make their small world bigger, more beautiful, less lonely.

Their hopes are realized, as Ryder's are, in ways that are illusory. Ryder never shows the townspeople anything they didn't already know, and all that he discovers in them is the illusion of knowledge. Seeing into the minds of the townspeople as he sees into Stephan in the car, he experiences the achievement of a trifold impossibility: he resolves the problem of Other Minds, he leaps the mimetic gap, and he possesses the knowledge that belongs to a culture not his own. He accomplishes the feat that Bruce

Robbins posits as central to postmodern civility: he registers "the existence of the global or trans-national domain as a matter of personal significance," and he does so in the way that Robbins prescribes:

> if a case for cosmopolitanism *can* be made, meaning a case for some mode of global belonging that does not merely reflect global capital, but that will be necessary in order to *understand and act upon* global capital, such a case will perhaps only be made, or made real to us, within the shared vocabulary of everyday over-commitment, overload, harriedness.

Ryder demonstrates this principle in its most extreme form, Robbins continues, raising "harriedness into a sort of ontological principle, a description of Being itself" (*VBJN*, 4).

Ryder's harried ontology springs from his confusion between desire and identification. He arrives to the town believing that has no capacity to identify with its inhabitants, and no desires in relation to them—except that they stay out of his way and allow him to do his job. But as he comes to know their stories, he tries to imagine their history, and consequently, to secure their future; his identification with their suffering makes him want to alleviate it.[62] When his old friend on the subway tells him how the other women in town are mean to her and how her desire to have a family went unfulfilled—in short, how lonely she is—he identifies with her, and he begins to want for her what she wants for herself. He wants it so much, in fact, that he tries, however hopelessly, to get it for her. Compensating for a desire that is too weak to carry him towards his own goal, he wrings his identification instead, experiencing other people's emotions vicariously. He both exemplifies and defies Martha Nussbaum's description of

[62] As they narrate their histories to him, they become no longer foreign; as Hegel famously declares in the *Aesthetics*, "the Other has no history."

the global citizen as he is seen by his enemies—as "boring, flat, [and] lacking in love" (*FLC*, 17).

This description appears in Nussbaum's defense of global citizenship against what she sees as a resurgent nationalism. Nussbaum quotes from a *New York Times* op-ed piece that Richard Rorty wrote in 1994, rebuking the author's advocacy of "the emotion of national pride" and "a sense of national identity." These affects, she suggests, are more vices than virtues, because they mark the limits to which a citizen extends his sympathies. Noting that Rorty has written elsewhere on the importance of solidarity, she laments that in his writing on patriotism, he shows no interest in the experience of people who live outside of his national borders. He should, she suggests, encourage "a more international basis for political emotion and concern" (4); he should advocate an affect that is less like novelistic identification and more like tragic *eleos*. Without a consideration of the differences between the two, Rorty's account of nationalism breaks down at the same point as his reading of the novel: in both cases, a call for unlimited solidarity masks an assertion of solidarity's limits.

In the op-ed piece that Nussbaum cites, Rorty criticizes the political left—and, particularly, the academics within it—for not taking enough "pride in being citizens of a self-invited, self-reforming, enduring constitutional democracy." In their support for a "politics of difference," he writes, this left has become "unpatriotic"; it refuses "to rejoice in the country it inhabits." Rorty's call for patriotism reiterates the logic with which he reads the novel: it rejoices in an identification that is too easily won, with insufficient acknowledgement of who is excluded from it. He acknowledges that exclusion in a passing gesture whose brevity parallels his remark about Casaubon: "Cornel West can

still identify with a country that, by denying them decent schools and jobs, keeps so many black Americans humiliated and wretched". This suggestion—that an African-American scholar identifies himself an American, and takes some pride in that in some way—is certainly plausible, but it should be followed by a corollary discussion of the ways in which he might also dis-identify with his nation, and what those cross-identifications might say about his identity.[63] Rorty's discussion of patriotism remains superficial, first because it must be short enough to fit on the op-ed page, but second, because it relies upon a binary vocabulary of identification that it inherits from Freud. Rorty implies that a person relates to a country much as Freud says a child relates to his father: he either identifies, or he does not.

The realist novel reiterates this binary formulation in the identification and desire that it elicits, as it constructs a relationship between readers and protagonists that is essentially Oedipal. Freud contends that Oedipus is representative of every man, who learns to identify with his father through his desire for his mother. The child gains an identity, Freud writes, as he learns to distinguish between identification and desire: "in first case, one's father is what one would like to *be*, and in the second, he is what one would like to *have*" (47). That distinction is also essential to the realist novel, which teaches its reader to identify with the protagonist through her desire for some lost object; as it teaches us to identify with Dorothea, it fosters our desire to see her get whomever she wants the most.

Identification and desire work in concert in this modern description of selfhood. They are, however, necessarily distinct, because it is through their opposition that the individual constructs his identity. Freud needs the separation between desire and

[63] Cf Diana Fuss: "Every identity is actually an identification come to light" (2).

identification to secure normative heterosexuality, and the novel needs it for similar reasons. It gives form to the world it represents by instructing its reader to identify with one character and consequently, to share her desires. Without that form-giving division, novelistic identification would become like tragic *eleos*, extending to every character whose desires are sometimes unfulfilled.[64]

Freud concedes, however, that this division is tenuous, and the novel supports that thesis. The Oedipal complex does not preclude moments in which a child might identify with the parent he desires, and the novel allows for similar deviations. In fact, it even invites them, encouraging a reader to behave as Rorty does when he expresses a passing sympathy with Casaubon—to momentarily extend his identification to the object of the protagonist's desire. But the novel, like Freud, does not allow that conflation of identification and desire to last for long: it links the happiness of the novel's ending to the happiness of its protagonist's fate by ensuring that the reader will identify with the protagonist wholly, and want whatever she wants.

This binarism obscures the varieties of kind and degree in which identification—like patriotism—can exist. Martha Nussbaum makes this point when she criticizes Rorty's failure to distinguish patriotism from jingoism, protecting one from the other by delineating their difference of degree. That criticism is fair, but it could lead to a larger conclusion. Rorty fails to make the distinction that Nussbaum sees because he describes patriotism in binary categories, with no shades in between, much as Freud constructs the

[64] The hero's excess of knowledge generates a corollary excess in his audience: we know from the beginning that Oedipus will suffer, and that everyone around him will as well; we do not ally ourselves with him in an identification that is exclusive of others. Rather, we feel an amorphous affect for all of the citizens in his polis. Their fates are inextricable from his, and his fate is, inevitably, bad.

poles of desire and identification.[65] In this way, Rorty follows Freud in missing the opportunity to address the epistemological questions that Diana Fuss poses in her *Identification Papers*:

> How might it change our understanding of the political, of the very nature of the social tie, to know that every identity claim ('I am not another') is based upon an identification (I desire to be another')? How might it change our understanding of identity if we were finally to take seriously the poststructuralist notion that our most impassioned identifications may incorporate nonidentity within them and that our most fervent disidentifications may already harbor the very identity they seek to deny? (10)

These are the questions that *The Unconsoled*—like tragedy—asks. Ryder manifests opaque desires and tangled identifications that look more like a blur than a balance; representing the poles of good and evil, he wonders which one he deserves, and whether "deserving" matters. He is like a tragic hero, who is superior to the citizens of the city from which he is, conversely, exiled. Embodying the hopes of the polis that excludes him, he stands at the limit point of identification and its opposite, working toward an identity within which he can live.

This project is aptly described in Nussbaum's conception of the global citizen, which she uses to imagine a post-national politics of inclusion. Referring to the logic of the Greek Stoics, Nussbaum suggests that we need not forsake local affiliations to maintain global ones. We should imagine ourselves living in concentric social circles,

[65] This is not entirely Rorty's fault; the constraints of the op-ed genre don't afford the necessary time and space to create a new vocabulary for patriotism. However, Rorty might have strengthened his argument by acknowledging what it does not do.

she contends, drawing on the Stoics' model, where our affiliations overlap. Sympathy, she argues, need not be a zero-sum game, because the global and the local are not opposites but contiguous categories, working together. We can identify ourselves as Americans while we recognize "certain basic features of human personhood that obviously also transcend national boundaries." This is recognition is both necessary and difficult, she contends:

> if we fail to educate children to cross those boundaries in their minds and imaginations, we are tacitly giving them the message that we don't really mean what we say. We say that respect should be accorded to humanity as such, but we really mean that Americans as such are worthy of special respect.

Nussbaum's argument for cosmopolitanism has found many detractors, but none of them have done justice to the subtle argument she makes for the confluence of the local and the global. Most of Nussbaum's respondents in *For Love of Country* suggest that her vision of cosmpolitanism is unrealistic in one way or another: it is overly rational (cf. Robert Pinsky and Sissela Bok), insufficiently historicized (cf. Judith Butler and Hilary Putnam), or simply too abstract to work (cf. Elaine Scarry).[66] These theorists' general consensus is that Nussbaum's formulation is too sterile, too willing to disregard the irrational ways that people feel about their homes and the people who live there.

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[66] Pinsky corroborates Bok, writing that Nussbaum presents a desirable view of the world, but one that "would be true only if people were not driven by emotions." Putnam shares these objections to the abstract quality of Nussbaum's argument, but he does so on the grounds of logic, noting that one can only appeal to a person's sympathies by knowing in advance—through cultural prescriptions—with what she sympathizes. He quotes Dickens and Primo Levi to illustrate the cultural logic which happens to work for him: "that someone is a fellow human being, a passenger to the grace, has moral weight for me; "citizen of the world" does not" (95).

This criticism seems to be simply a misreading, ignoring Nussbaum's stipulation of the special treatment that every parent justly extends to his children. Sissela Bok epitomizes this response, contending that Nussbaum would lead us to "conclude, with William Godwin, that if two persons are drowning and one is a relative of yours, then kinship (or presumably, nationality) should make no difference in your decision as to whom to try to rescue first" (*FLC*, 39). By this logic, Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism would lead us to speak to our children as Ryder speaks to his:

> Boris, I know you must be wondering. I mean, why it is we can't just settle down and live quietly, the three of us... Well, you have to understand, the reason I keep going on these trips, it's not because I don't love you dearly and want to be with you. In some ways, I'd like nothing better than to stay at home with you and Mother, live in an apartment like that one over there, anywhere. But you see, it's not so simple. I have to keep going on these trips because, you see, you can never tell when it's going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip, the one that's very very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world. (217)

Through the negative example of Ryder's bizarre logic, *The Unconsoled* refutes Bok's argument in much the same way that Nussbaum does. The novel reminds us that we should not be like its protagonist: we should care for our own children specially, under the assumption that other children's parents should do the same for them. We take more time with our own, not because they are empirically more valuable than others, but because they are entrusted to us. "It is good for children, on the whole," Nussbaum

writes, "that things work this way, and that is why our special care is good, rather than selfish" (13).

But these terms—special, care, good, selfish—gain meaning from local contexts, and Nussbaum's detractors make their best arguments where they point to the cultural contingency of values like these. They suggest that that what seems universal in one nation might mark the limits of universality in another; as Judith Butler writes,

> This has become especially clear to me in the field of lesbian and gay human rights, where *the* universal is a contested term, and where various cultures and various mainstream human rights groups voice doubt over whether lesbian and gay people ought properly to be included in 'the human' (46).

As Butler suggests, facts that seem obvious in one description of the world—like, for example, that queer people are human and therefore that their rights are protected under that category—are neither facts nor obvious in another. This description of the contingency of facts also describes the contingency of sympathy: as a given culture defines a citizen, it also defines how far it will go to imagine how other people feel. Working from this premise, texts like *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Wind Done Gone* contest the ways in which novels have contributed to those definitions through the identification that they elicit for some kinds of characters and withhold for others. Working from this premise as well, Nussbaum and Rorty consider how a global standard of sympathy can become consistent with every locality's freedom to distribute its sympathies as it chooses.

This conflict underlies the discussion that Ryder has with one of the citizens, over a brick wall that literally divides the town in half. Ryder runs into it as he tries to make his way to the recital quickly; running late, he is thwarted by the wall that halts his progress. As he tries and fails to find his way around it, a woman standing near him points to a spinner of postcards that feature the wall as a point of local pride, thinking he is a tourist admiring the sight. Ryder vents his annoyance at the provincialism of a town that would take pride in something so arbitrarily divisive, observing that,

> this wall is quite typical of this town. Utterly preposterous obstacles everywhere. And what do you do? Do you all get annoyed? Do you demand it's pulled down immediately so that people can go about their business? No, you put up with it for the best part of the century. You make postcards of it and believe its charming. This brick wall charming? What a monstrosity! I may well use this wall as a symbol, I've a good mind to, in my speech tonight! (388)

In this comically literal way, *The Unconsoled* represents the social divisions that are meaningful on the local level and absurd from a distance. It suggests that the boundaries that divide subjects from objects are as arbitrary as they are intractable. It represents what Vernant and Naquet call "the tragic message": that "precisely within the words that men exchange there exist areas of opacity and incommunicability." And yet, as it points to the impossibility of unification, the novel paradoxically unites its characters, its author and its reader in the suffering that their separation causes. In this way, too, it is like tragedy, as Vernant and Naquet continue: "It is only over the heads of the protagonists

that, between the author and the spectator, another dialogue is set up where language regains its ability to establish communication and, as it were, its transparency" (114).

Transparency is not Ishiguro's signature style, but *The Unconsoled* represents moments like the ones that Vernant and Naquet describe, in which the reader experiences moral truths that are unequivocally rendered. Boris's plight, for example, leaves little room for interpretation; as Rorty writes in his review, "the reader finds himself getting more and more anxious, hoping that the author will provide help and consolation to somebody—if only to poor, miserable, confused, little Boris—before the novel ends." *The Unconsoled* invites its readers to notice that regardless of whatever differences might divide them—in terms of time, space, history and opinion—they share a common sympathy for the child, and they want his father to share it too. With the plight of the little boy who kicks a chair leg in a café for hours, waiting for the father who doesn't come, the novel evokes sympathy that feels inevitable. The injustice in this scene seems uncontroversial, inviting its reader into an imagined community of other readers, who share a common response.

With this invitation, *The Unconsoled* provides qualified support for Nussbaum's argument that citizenship can be imagined in global terms. It admits that the divisions between people will not be overcome, but suggests that the desire to overcome them is common, and that on both sides of the wall, that commonality provides some consolation.

The question remains: how much consolation is that, really? If the divisions between people will never be overcome, then the desire to overcome them is not only common, but utopian. In that light, any consolation might appear illusory—but it is not.

A utopian desire generates its own pleasures, which are not necessarily dependent upon their fulfillment, and Nussbaum's argument for global citizenship provides a case in point: Citizenship is *inherently* utopian, and that is exactly why it works. As Benedict Anderson suggests, even the smallest nation—a Greek polis, perhaps, or a town like the one Ishiguro creates—is held together by bonds that are rooted less in fact than in fiction.[67] The citizen draws on a shared narrative history, or a shared body of knowledge,[68] to imagine that he shares something in common with his neighbors. That act of imagination tautologically becomes the history they share, and they go in circles, reconstructing a community that is imagined *a priori*.

Plato inscribes this tautology in his definition of the citizen, which he creates with recourse to the metaphor of handwriting. He suggests that if a text is written in a tiny hand, a short-sighted reader might look to another version where the writing is larger, and read the meaning there instead. Like writing that is too small, he suggests, a citizen is hard to define because she is so particular. Consequently, if a philosopher wants to define a citizen, he must first define a polis, and scale the image down from there. This metaphor only holds, however, if every citizen is a perfect microcosm of the aggregate to which she belongs, and Plato recognizes as much. He suggests that he will return to this topic later, but he never manages to make time, and his argument proves persuasive even with the glaring hole he leaves in it. Just as tragedy's audiences were willing to live with mimesis that is never perfect, ancient citizens were willing to live with a state that is highly flawed. This is, of course, still true today: knowing that we can't attain what is

[67] "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (6).
[68] Historical novels function this way in postmodern culture, as I argue in Chapter Three.

best doesn't diminish our desire to attain what is good. With that in mind, there is no choice between a utopian model of citizenship and a realistic one—only the choice between one kind of utopia and another.

And that choice is so abstract that it is virtually impossible to make. Ishiguro makes it more concrete by creating a protagonist who is like a tragic hero, simultaneously too distant and too close. Through him, *The Unconsoled* rejects the kind of exclusive identification that realist novels elicit, opting instead to construct a more expansive kind of sympathy. Like *eleos* for the ancients, this kind of sympathy is not enough to dispel our *phobos*, and consequently, it is not wholly consoling. It does, however, construct something that is akin to tragic *katharsis* in novelistic terms: it represents the mundane pleasures that succeed grand sorrows—or, in the generic terms that Franco Moretti uses, it represents "the novelistic everyday" that survives in the aftermath of tragedy's extreme cases (249, 253).

In the novel's concluding scenes, Ryder is left standing in the aftermath of his professional failure and his filial abandonment. Still, he finds pleasure circling the city on a tram, discovering camaraderie with a local electrician and eating from the buffet that is surprisingly (and inexplicably) served. He fills his plate at the common table and anticipates his return to his seat, where he plans to continue his conversation with his affable seatmate. "I could see him now," Ryder reflects happily over the hot plate,

> still eating his croissant, obviously in no hurry to get off of the tram. In fact, he looked set to go on sitting there for a long time to come. And with the tram running a continuous circuit, if the two of us were enjoying our conversation, he was just the sort to delay getting off until the next time

> his stop came around. The buffet too was clearly here to stay for some time yet, so that we would be able to break off from our conversation every now and then to replenish our plates. I could see us repeatedly persuading each other to have more. 'Go on! Just one more sausage! Here, give me your plate, I'll get it for you.' We could go on sitting there together, eating, exchanging views on football and whatever else took our fancy, while outside the sun rose higher and higher in the sky, brightening the streets and our side of the carriage (534).

On its final page, *The Unconsoled* affirms the value of everyday life, even as it is lived under duress. Savoring the company of strangers, Ryder suggests that although his readers might also fail to get everything—or anything—that they want, they can still find a hot breakfast and enjoy it in the company of other ordinary people like him, who fail to get what they want sometimes, too.

This qualified affirmation parallels the one that Nietzsche attributes to tragedy. Every tragic work, he points out, concludes in the aftermath of high drama, with a song from the members of the chorus. Their evident survival stands against the hero's fall, offering a "metaphysical consolation" to a spectator who knows that he has more in common with those ordinary people, joined together, than he does with the solitary hero who suffers. Identifying with the collective who survives in the end, Nietzsche suggests, tragedy's spectator understands that, "whatever superficial changes may occur, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and joyful." The chorus provides an enduring imagined community, "living ineradicably beyond all civilization, as it were, remaining the same for ever, regardless of the changing generations and the path of history" (39).

Like the nation as Benedict Anderson describes it, it offers consolation with its capacity for endurance; it puts the most unreasonable injustices within a frame that makes sense by promising to live to tell the tale to others, who promise to listen.

As Nietzsche recalls, the chorus survives at the end of the tragedy, reminding the audience as Ryder's breakfast does that everyday life goes on, even after the worst has happened. *The Unconsoled* represents that tragic vision tragicomically, concluding with the message that Nietzsche attributes to tragedy: "saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems, the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types" (299)

Ryder's communion on public transportation provides consolation that is more tentative than that. His unreliability as a narrator leaves open the possibility that the coziness he describes is merely a figment of his imagination—that the electrician is less pleased to sit next to him than he is pleased to sit next to the electrician, and that the artist is more alone than he knows. The novel leaves this question open to conclude on a typically ambiguous note: Ryder fills his coffee cup and holds his "generously laden plate" as he makes his way back to his seat. It reiterates the antithesis that structures the novel, suggesting two possibilities. Either Ryder is the sole citizen of a fantasy world that he creates, and the novel ends with a confirmation of how alone he really is, or he finds a real community on the tram, and the novel ends with an affirmation of the solace that strangers can provide.

With that ambiguous ending, *The Unconsoled* incorporates tragic forms into a novelistic tradition, as Franco Moretti describes them. Moretti differentiates the genres

on the basis of the truths that they inscribe: novelistic form, he suggests, discovers truth in everyday life, while tragic form discovers it in a singular moment of crisis.[69] "Crisis as the moment of truth," he writes, articulating the thesis that he reads in tragedy:

> Only when engaged in a conflict to the death do social actors manifest their real nature. Hence the epistemological superiority of exceptional over ordinary circumstances: 'Exception,' writes Carl Schmitt in 1922, 'is more interesting than the normal case. The latter proves nothing, the former everything."

From this premise, Moretti concludes that modernity renders tragedy obsolete by creating protagonists who have a new problem, which "is neither blindness, nor passion, nor Fate, nor a conflicting value. It is, quite simply, *life*" (254).

A novelistic age, he suggests, rejects the notion that truth is found in the extraordinary events that disrupt the steady pace from one day to the next; rather, modernity sees truth precisely in the steadiness of the ordinary. Training its aesthetic attention on the mundane rather than the crises, the novel reverses the logical terms of tragedy: "Just as life appeared to be the gross and dull enemy of truth," for heroes from Antigone to Oedipus, "truth is now perceived as the uselessly cruel destroyer of life." To live with the truth in all of its cruelty—the truth that people will, inevitably, suffer and die—modern protagonists do not choose to live with a lie or a secret, Moretti suggests, but rather, with a "half-truth: the form truth takes when it accepts a *compromise with* life"

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[69] In this account of the relationship between genres, I follow Moretti, who advocates, "a Darwinian history of literature, where forms fight one another, are selected by their context, evolve and disappear like natural species... Of all the difficulties of modern tragedy... the greatest is its post-novelistic condition." (255)

(italics his, 256). They learn to accommodate—as Dorothea Brooke does, and as Lukács writes that all modern protagonists do—to the contingent truths of life.

*The Unconsoled* questions what is gained and lost in that compromise, which is reiterated in the conflict between the alternative realities it represents. The novel underlines its readers' need to reconcile those two meanings into a coherent truth, when there is life to carry us forward either way; it invites us to consider why we care whether Ryder's narration is trustworthy—whether it is true—as long as we see him eating happily in the end. In generic terms, *The Unconsoled* reflects the inheritance and the current experience of postmodernity: it reworks the form of the modern novel to narrate a tragic divide between truth and life—the global and the exception versus the local and the everyday.

Acknowledging that that divide is unbridgeable, The Unconsoled works through tragic dilemmas as Vernant and Naquet define them. "The tragic turning point" occurs, they write,

> when a gap develops at the heart of the social experience. It is wide enough for the opposition between legal and political thought on the one hand and the mythical and heroic traditions on the other to stand out quite clearly. Yet it is narrow enough for the conflict in values still to be a painful one and for the clash to continue to take place" (27)

Taking place at this liminal point between the mundane and the abstract, the particular and the general, *The Unconsoled* considers how to narrate a story that would truly imagine what other people feel, when to acknowledge their integrity is to acknowledge that we don't really know. Representing that insufficiency of sympathy as a failure that

inevitably asserts itself, in every real and fictional relationship between people, it reminds its readers the ways in which he fails, just as others do.

With this reminder, it binds its readers together just as tragedy bound its spectators, according to Kierkegaard: "Just when the sinner is about to sink under the general sin which he has taken upon himself [...] in that same moment of terror, consolation appears in the fact that it is a general sinfulness which has asserted itself, now also in him" (145). As Ryder's failures of sympathy work in concert with the reader's, *The Unconsoled* elicits affects that are like *eleos* and *phobos* combined; in their combination, it towards a consolation it is something like *katharsis*.

It suggests that although we will never perfectly understand what we are saying to each other, we might be able to live with that fact by developing something else, something more forgiving than knowledge. In philosophical terms, it represents a way of knowing that is compatible with emotional commitment, and it begins to narrate that form of knowledge to us. It suggests that we can respond to each other as Rorty responds to *The Unconsoled*: in the absence of understanding, we can express our "appreciative puzzlement." Or, it suggests that we can respond to each other as tragedy's audiences respond to its heroes: Sometimes, this is the best we can hope to get and to give to each other—and sometimes, it is enough.

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