

The Philosophy Of Tragedy: *Macbeth* Considered From Two Contrasting Ethical Perspectives



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This cover page shows an image of Macbeth from a stained glass window in the Palau Güell, Barcelona, from a photograph taken by the author in August 2022.

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

The dissertation considers the overlaps between philosophy and literature. The area of philosophy is moral philosophy and the type of literature is tragedy: in particular, *Macbeth*. Within moral philosophy, two contrasting systems are explored: existentialism, and the moral realism of Iris Murdoch.

An underlying theme of all of these topics is the role of subjectivity: of man's relationship with the objective or the universal. Not surprisingly given the foregoing, links with Buddhist philosophy crop up at various points in the analysis.

Existentialism is outlined, and highlighted as the pre-eminent link between philosophy and literature, partly due to its focus on subjectivity.

Iris Murdoch's moral realist philosophy is summarised as a move away from the subjectivism of existentialism, by focusing on a metaphor of vision rather than of choice. Murdoch posits that we need to pay attention to other people, and foregrounds the role of love in this attention. Her insights find reflection in more contemporary philosophies such as the ethics of care.

The philosophy of tragedy is then reviewed historiographically and the special role of catharsis is identified. The paper outlines the tragic theories of Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bradley (a Shakespeare scholar) and Camus. Drawing on postmodern ideas or political convictions, more recent philosophers and literary critics have pushed back against the traditional ('systemic') interpretation of tragedy. Tragedy is then contrasted with comedy and a possible route towards emancipation of the tragic hero is highlighted: tragic suffering might be a question of attitude.

Macbeth is then subjected to two analyses: the extent to which it can be seen as an existentialist play; and the extent to which it can illustrate Murdoch's moral realism. The place of love in moral philosophy is highlighted as an area for further research.

The dissertation concludes by positing that tragedy is finally uplifting and asserting that our attitude towards suffering could emancipate us from the absurdity of the human condition.

1. Introduction

1.1 Philosophy and literature

This dissertation is grounded in the interstices and overlaps between philosophy and literature. Since there would be a lot to say about that, I focus on tragedy as an area where the two disciplines converge. Thinkers have been intrigued by tragedy for as long as philosophy has existed, as evidenced by the title of a recent book.¹ But although I will highlight some of their ideas, this paper is not a historiography of tragedy.

Instead, I take one play, *Macbeth*,² and do two things with it: I use it to illustrate those theoretical ideas about tragedy; and I consider it in the light of two particular moral philosophies: existentialism and moral realism. I do not say that these are the only or best ways to think about the play: the remainder of this section explains my motives in more detail.

Riffing on Whitehead's famous dictum, Levinas wrote 'it sometimes seems to me that the whole of philosophy is only a meditation on Shakespeare'.³ *Macbeth* is my favourite play, and is a timeless classic, but it seems particularly relevant today: Joel Cohen made a 2021 film version. Further, the meme of the morally indecisive man pushed into trouble by a nagging wife finds echoes in commentaries about Boris Johnson and is also the basis for the Q-Anon conspiracy theory about the Clintons. We could even regard President Putin as an alienated, isolated figure bent on wreaking death without regard for humanity. *Macbeth* asks why what happens to us, happens: how does the past explain the future? This foundational question of course underpins much of philosophy, politics and cultural theory.

Existentialism is something of a faded star nowadays, although phenomenology still shines bright in Paris, where I live. Nonetheless, when taken as a moral philosophy rather than, for example, a politics, existentialism spans the fields of literature and philosophy. And, as we shall see, *Macbeth* is in many ways existentialist in outlook. Existentialism is fundamentally concerned with the extent to which we can break free of the past to create our own future. Moreover, the angst and the absurdity of life that are characteristic

¹ Julian Young, *The Philosophy Of Tragedy: From Plato To Žižek* (Cambridge UP, 2016).

² William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. AR Braunmuller, (New Cambridge Shakespeare series, Cambridge UP, 1997). As the primary text, in-line citations are used when referencing the script.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time And The Other And Additional Essays* (1947), trans. RA Cohen (Duquesne UP, 1987), p. 72.

of existentialism seem to be on full display recently: faced first with a global pandemic and now with a possible Third World War, we experience the dread and the powerlessness that existentialism postulates. Life indeed seems to be absurd, we have so little control over it. Perhaps it really is ‘a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing’ (V.5.26-31).

As for moral realism, I highlight the work of Iris Murdoch, whose philosophy is only now starting to be taken as seriously as her literature. On the whole, philosophers write poor fiction but, in addition to Murdoch, several French philosophers were acclaimed for their literary works: Bergson, Camus and Sartre were awarded Nobel prizes for literature. Murdoch spent her career writing between philosophy and literature, and wrote the first book in any language about Sartre.⁴ Initially attracted by his philosophy, she grew critical of existentialism: her contrasting approach will therefore serve as a counterpoint.⁵

The central preoccupation of Murdoch’s philosophy is the definition of the Good, with a view to conducting ourselves in its light. This neoplatonic inquiry is, I believe, foregrounded by *Macbeth*, as by tragedy generally. Macbeth, at the start of the play, is a valiant warrior, apparently beloved by his wife (see later) and by his king, and with a bright future: all he needs to do is trust in the path.⁶ I do not say Macbeth is a ‘good man’, merely that he could have walked a path towards goodness. But something goes wrong, he takes a wrong turn or is led astray, and pays the ultimate price. My aim in this paper is to assess this *déchéance* through both existentialism and Murdochian moral realism.

Murdoch claimed that the aim of philosophy was to clarify, whereas the aim of literature was to mystify.⁷ And yet, in the final analysis, it is the novelist who is ‘the greatest truth-teller’.⁸ These two statements are not incompatible if we accept that the path to truth might sometimes go through dark and twisting terrain. There may be truths that philosophy is not best-placed to uncover, especially in the domain of ethics, and all the more so if one postulates a transcendent truth, like a Platonic form, that is almost mystical. As Empson said, ‘probably a half-magical idea is the quickest way to the

⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (Bowes & Bowes, 1953).

⁵ Although I am not claiming that moral realism is the opposite of existentialism.

⁶ Mixing rationalism and realism, a Buddhist might say “trust the heart-mind”.

⁷ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists And Mystics: Writings On Philosophy And Literature* (Allen Lane, 1999), p.5.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. xvi.

truth'.⁹ Literature is an art form that uses words; as such it is somehow natural and human: philosophy is 'counter-natural', it 'disturbs the mass of semi-aesthetic conceptual habits on which we normally rely'.¹⁰ A work of literature allows the author to draw our *attention* to the way things *really are*, perhaps allowing us to approach a truth that pure philosophy (especially of the analytic kind) finds hard to talk about. (The words in italics have specific meanings that we will come back to later.) If truth is a star, philosophy might be like trying to look directly at it: literature might see it more clearly by looking slightly away.

1.2 Subjectivity

Macbeth is a play that is fundamentally concerned with liminality, with boundaries between what is, and what is imagined. The concept of boundaries also recurs at many levels in the philosophical discussion that follows in this dissertation, hence *Macbeth* appeared to be a possible test-case around which to situate them. For example, we shall be called upon to distinguish tragedy from comedy. We shall inquire whether a tragedy is something objective or whether it is bound up in the response of the audience to the action. In examining moral philosophies, we shall be asking whether it is relevant to shine the light on the individual, or on some kind of objective fact.

In short, the issues raised in this dissertation reflect, or perhaps arise out of, a distinction between subjectivity and its opposite (however we choose to define it). The purpose of this sub-section is therefore to explore the notion of subjectivity and its tentative place in philosophy. Such an exposition will enable me to refer later in the dissertation to examples where tensions arise because of this dichotomy: where the question being asked is indeed, 'where should we shine the light'?

As is the case with the philosophy of tragedy, the starting point of subjectivity is probably Aristotle, the first Western philosopher to introduce the notion of the empirical self, the 'rational soul' capable of processing thought. St Augustine and Descartes famously formulated the doctrines of personality and the self. Epistemology is the project of arguing from the rather limited standpoint of the self to some kind of objective knowledge: by deduction in the case of Descartes; by transcendental argument in the case of Kant. At least one thing appeared to be clear: only God knew what was objectively true and we mortals could only glimpse towards it. In terms of moral philosophy, a first approach could therefore be simply to act as the scriptures dictated.

⁹ William Empson, *Some Versions Of Pastoral* (1935) (Peregrine Books, 1966), p. 20.

¹⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists*, p. 8.

A second approach was imagined by Hegel, who conjectured an 'absolute consciousness' within which all oppositions are reconciled. We will see below how Hegel interprets tragedy as the reconciliation of conflicting values. There is, though, an extent to which Hegel's focus on the universal tends to lose sight of the subjective, and it was to put the subject back in focus that Kierkegaard insisted on the irreducibility of the subjective nature of the 'existing individual's' human life. It is from this special use of the word *Existenz* that we get the later term 'existentialism'.

Once we killed God, however, according to Nietzsche, it became harder to understand what objective reality, or truth, might look like. All claims to authority were to be seen as power games. We should rather focus on what we could describe, the phenomena we could observe. With luck and training, we could use eidetic intuition to argue from our observations to some kind of universal, or 'essence' as the phenomenologists called it. In any event, a distinction is drawn, ontological and epistemological, between an immanent element, which we could call consciousness, and transcendent objects. Again, a boundary is imagined. We can also begin to see here another boundary: that between existence (fundamentally subjective and human) and essence (which could be anything from a Platonic form to a Hegelian absolute or a phenomenological universal).

I address existentialism in more detail shortly, but it is relevant to note here that this philosophy grew out of phenomenology through the claim that consciousness has a kind of being quite different from all other things, and also to note that existentialism places the emphasis on existence rather than essence. Existentialism also insists that our own lived experience is the necessary starting point for thinking about ethics: as such, it is a philosophy of subjectivity.

During the postwar period in which philosophers' search for meaning seemed to take on more importance, it could be said that on both sides of the English Channel claims to objectivity were met with increasing scepticism. On the French side, Sartre was convinced that man was free to choose his own moral path. On the English side, Hare believed that we should take moral utterances as nothing more than prescriptions: to declare that something is wrong is not to state that it has some property of 'wrongness' but to prescribe its avoidance under certain circumstances. As with existentialism, morality was not a question of finding out truths about the world, it was a matter of choosing which values would guide your life. It was in reaction to these two campaigns to place subjectivity at the heart of morality that Iris Murdoch strove to find a place for some kind of sovereign Good.

The purpose of this sub-section has been to oppose subjectivity (broadly speaking, the individual's view of his place in the world) with its opposite (which I hesitate to call objectivity: rather we could use words such as universal, absolute, transcendent or real).

The relevance of the distinction should become clear as this paper progresses but in overview it is one frame of analysis for tragedy, and thus for *Macbeth*, it helps to explain the origins of existentialism, it underlies some of the differences between competing moral philosophies, and it led Murdoch to her rather unusual definition of goodness.

2. Existentialism

2.1 Definition and ambit

On the question what is existentialism, Bakewell says, ‘some books about existentialism never try to answer the question, as it is hard to define’¹¹ and proceeds by listing instead what existentialists do:

Existentialists concern themselves with individual, concrete, human existence ... I am free, and therefore I am responsible for everything I do, a dizzying fact which causes an anxiety inseparable from human existence itself ... human existence is thus *ambiguous*: at once boxed in by *borders* and yet *transcendent* and exhilarating.¹²

On a trite level of comparison, *Macbeth* is a play concerned with the individual existence of its anti-hero, who discovers his responsibility for his actions in an exhilarating descent into anxiety and suffering. On another level, we can also say that *Macbeth* is fundamentally concerned with ambiguity, with a transcendence of bordering or binary concepts. Like existentialism, the play asks; given the past, how much control can we can hope to have over our future? It might push the analysis to straining point to say that the tensions of the play are designed to explore the fundamental opposition between concept and life, but to the extent that this is tenable we can see why it appeals to me as the pre-eminent existentialist tragedy.

To go one step further than Bakewell, a good place to develop an outline of existentialism is the lecture/essay Sartre gave in 1946, known in English as “Existentialism Is A Humanism”.¹³ It has to be said that the essay is not perfect: Kaufmann notes that ‘it has been widely mistaken for the definitive statement of

¹¹ Sarah Bakewell, *At The Existentialist Café* (Other Press, 2017), p. 33.

¹² Ibid., p. 34, emphasis mine.

¹³ In Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism* (Citadel, 1965).

existentialism [...but] the definition and many of the arguments invite criticism'¹⁴ but it is at least readable, compared to many of Sartre's other philosophical *oeuvres*.

In the short essay, Sartre defends existentialism against some charges that had been brought against it: on the one hand by communists, who labelled it a bourgeois philosophy; and on the other by Christians, who felt it denied the seriousness of human undertaking. Both sides in effect charged Sartre with having ignored human solidarity by considering man an isolated being.¹⁵ 'By existentialism we mean a doctrine which [...] declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity.'¹⁶ Sartre wants to insist on the humanity of existentialism.

Noting that manufactured things such as a paper-knife are based on a concept, Sartre says that the production of the paper-cutter precedes its existence. Certain philosophers such as Kant believed that man has a human nature and that his very humanity is a concept: in this sense the essence of man also precedes his existence. Sartre, however, represents an atheistic existentialism, according to which there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence: man.¹⁷ 'Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself [and this principle is also] what is called subjectivity',¹⁸ which implies that every man is responsible for himself, for his own individuality, and also for all men. This moral point recalls Kant, for in choosing his own self, he also chooses his fellow humans, because 'we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all.'¹⁹

In what seems a paradoxical ploy for someone trying to market a new philosophy, Sartre says that existentialism is characterised by anguish, forlornness and despair. Anguish is the result of the moral responsibility noted above: it arises because 'for every man, everything happens as if all mankind had its eyes fixed on him and were guiding itself by what he does'.²⁰ Forlornness arises because man is condemned to choose. Since the atheist existentialist believes that God does not exist, his responsibility is profound:

¹⁴ Walter Kaufmann *Existentialism From Dostoevsky To Sartre* (Meridian, 1956), p. 223.

¹⁵ Sartre refers to a particular complaint that the existentialists had forgotten 'the smile of a child'. This reminds us of Lady Macbeth's line that she would rather dash her smiling child's brains out than renege on the regicidal pact (I.7.56).

¹⁶ Sartre, "Humanism", p. 32.

¹⁷ It seems to follow that the same would be true of any animal.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

everything is permissible and therefore man is forlorn because there is nothing for him to cling to: 'we are alone, with no excuses'.²¹ This is why Sartre says that 'man is condemned to be free';²² because once thrown into the world he is responsible for everything he does. Despair is the result of making decisions with imperfect information, with probabilities, in the knowledge that the world will not conspire to favour my will. Anguish, forlornness and despair are words that are easily applied to Macbeth, a man who asserts his will, and fails.

In sum, man exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself; he is nothing other than the ensemble of his acts. Hence, 'what the existentialist says is that the coward makes himself cowardly, that the hero makes himself heroic.'²³ As I will suggest later, perhaps Macbeth suffers because he makes himself suffer: he could have chosen another path.

Sartre was talking about a real human, not a character in a play. As regards the latter, there may be a second level of analysis to be undertaken: why is the poet asking this particular character to make himself heroic? In a way that mirrors Sartre's ethical thinking, the literary critic Empson explains how a single person can be an embodiment of a wider whole: 'this member of the class is the whole class, or its defining property: this man has a magical importance to all men'.²⁴ Thus not only do a man's choices affect all other men in a moral sense, but Macbeth's choices embody, in some 'magical' way, all heroes, or all killers. Empson believed that 'literature is a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored'.²⁵ We will see shortly how the reconciliation of conflicts, and the difference between the subject and the universal, are also reflected in the philosophy of tragedy.

2.2 Existentialism as the pre-eminent link between philosophy and literature

The purpose of this sub-section is to explore further the link between philosophy and literature, and to suggest why that link may find its strongest expression in existentialism.

In the preface to his recent book, Alain Badiou declares, perhaps with just a *soupeçon* of Gallic pomposity, that there is a French philosophical moment of the second half of the

²¹ Ibid., p. 41.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁴ Empson, *Pastoral*, p.70.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

twentieth century that 'bears comparison to the examples of classical Greece and enlightenment Germany'.²⁶ At the heart of this 'moment' is the divergence between concept and interior life. Badiou explains that this split in French philosophy of the early twentieth century was manifested by Bergson's philosophy of vital interiority on the one side, and Brunschvicg's philosophy of the mathematically-based concept on the other. That is to say, a divergence between a philosophy of life and a philosophy of the concept. Badiou acknowledges that this dichotomy can be traced back to a split over the Cartesian heritage. It seems to me that a non-French writer might trace the division to Kant, and then outline the consequences of it in the contrast between the 'analytic' and the 'continental' styles of philosophy.

Badiou's project is to define the adventure of recent French philosophy as 'a conceptual battle around the question of the subject',²⁷ that is, 'to have done with the separation of concept and existence [...] to demonstrate that the concept is a living thing [...] not divorced from existence'.²⁸ This prompted a singular alliance between philosophy and literature, which has been one of the core characteristics of modern French philosophy. Indeed, Badiou claims that one of the goals of this philosophy has been to 'construct a new space from which to write, one where literature and philosophy would be indistinguishable'.²⁹

Given this explanation, we start to understand why French philosophers had a particular relationship to literature, indeed going back as far as Voltaire or Montaigne, but for our purposes especially in the time of the existentialists. Sartre discussed the relationship at length³⁰ and was also a novelist and playwright, as is Badiou; De Beauvoir wrote no treatise of philosophy as such; Camus used novels and plays to outline his approach; Lacan grounded his psychoanalytical approach in language.

On the anglophone side, the relationship between philosophy and literature has also been explored in recent years by scholars such as Stanley Cavell, who asked 'can philosophy become literature and still know itself?'³¹ More recently, Martha Nussbaum has written extensively on the relationship between philosophy and literature, especially

²⁶ Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, ed. and trans. B Bosteels, (Verso, 2012), p. li.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. liv.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. lxi.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. lviii.

³⁰ E.g. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Qu'est-ce que la littérature", in *Situations II* (Gallimard, 1948).

³¹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim Of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality And Tragedy* (OUP, 1999), p. 496.

in support of the claim that ‘only the style of a certain sort of narrative artist [...] can adequately state certain important truths about the world’.³² The type of knowledge Nussbaum is interested in is love, which, as we will shortly see, also underpins the Murdochian approach. Nussbaum says the problem with philosophical theory is that it wants to understand what love’s knowledge is, without ‘looking to see what is there’,³³ a phrase that also reminds us of Murdoch. Badiou has also written a recent book about love³⁴ and I will return to the theme of love later.

In short, we can posit that, although philosophy and literature have been linked since at least Aristotle, the relationship became instrumental as part of the project of recent French philosophy to devise a new form in which philosophy could work itself. Those thinkers who stuck to the conceptual, such as Althusser, were less likely to exploit literature as a form, whereas those followers of Bergson, particularly the French phenomenologists, were more interested in using literature as a medium of expression. It is not surprising, then, that existentialism is perhaps where the relationship between philosophy and literature is at its closest.

3. Iris Murdoch’s moral realism

There are contingent reasons why I have chosen to consider Iris Murdoch’s moral philosophy in this paper (not least, her love of Shakespeare, her interest in tragedy and her profound knowledge of existentialism) but, more centrally, I am interested in the way she constructed an ethical approach that is not as entirely subjective as the existentialists’ but not totally objective either, because metaphysical. As commentators have noted, ‘both her fiction and her philosophy constitute a sustained argument against reductionist accounts of human life that omit the “valuing” aspect of subjectivity and consciousness’.³⁵

Running parallel to my foundational dichotomy of subjectivity/universality is the ethical impact of the distinction between facts and values. As Railton says, most contemporary philosophy is sceptical about moral claims: ‘it has been thought a mark of good sense to explain away any appearance of objectivity in moral discourse’³⁶ and thus arguments

³² Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* (OUP, 1990), p. 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

³⁴ Alain Badiou, *In Praise Of Love*, trans. P Bush (Serpent’s Tail, 2012).

³⁵ Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, eds. *Iris Murdoch And The Search For Human Goodness* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. xii.

³⁶ Peter Railton, “Moral Realism”, *The Philosophical Review*, 95:2 (1986), pp. 163-207.

about what is morally right boil down to value judgements, as we saw above with Hare, and with the existentialists.

Moral realists, however, believe that morality is not just a question of value-decisions: they want to find a connection to some underlying fact. Accordingly, moral realists believe (a) that there are some objective facts on which moral claims can be based, and (b) that at least some moral claims, insofar as they correctly reflect those facts, are true.

In her chapter “Metaphysics & Ethics”,³⁷ Murdoch contrasts two types of thinking about the origins of morality that she calls the Liberal view and the Natural Law view. Under the Liberal view, which she dates back to Hume and Kant, we picture the individual as able to think through the complete consciousness of his situation: he is free to choose and responsible for his choice. As she says, ‘the most systematic exposition of modern Liberal morality is existentialism’.³⁸ Under the Natural Law view, which paradoxically also originates in Kant, the individual is seen as glimpsing towards a reality that transcends him, so to discover what is morally good is to discover what that reality is. Consequently, the individual is not free to choose, he is only free to seek knowledge of his ‘real being’ and is then bound to the conduct that such knowledge dictates. Murdoch sides rather with the Natural Law view, as will be seen.

This opposition, of Natural Law with Liberal morality, is also on display in the differing explanations of the power of tragedy. Hegel, as we will see, applies the metaphysical thinking: there is a Spirit, man diverges from the Spirit at his own peril, and his inevitable fall shows the power of reconciliation. There was a schism, but Nature repaired it. On the other hand, thinking existentially, we can posit that Macbeth was always free to choose his destiny, that this freedom arises precisely because he is human, and that he could equally have chosen to release the grasp and drop the knife. Under this view, the tragedy arises not because Macbeth diverges from a Spirit that would have him behave honourably, but because he freely chooses a path of suffering.

Neither of these quite describes Murdoch’s understanding of morality, which is based on a metaphysical explanation related to the Natural Law approach, and is set out in three key essays.³⁹ In contrast to her opponents:

Murdoch stresses the reality of moral life. To acknowledge the reality of moral life is to recognise that the world contains such things as kindness, as foolishness, as

³⁷ In Murdoch, *Existentialists*, pp. 59-75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty Of Good* (1970) (Routledge, 2001).

mean-spiritedness [...] Goodness is sovereign, which is to say a real, if transcendent, aspect of the world.⁴⁰

Accordingly, Murdoch believes proposition (a) above: there are some facts about the world that we can use to back up moral claims. The question then becomes, how do we find those facts? Her contention is that we need to pay attention to what is really happening, in particular to other people, because when we pay attention we see that there is good in the world, almost like a Platonic ideal. This quasi mystical philosophy asks us to believe that there really is something 'out there' and the way to get to it is through a loving attention.

The idea of attention is one that Murdoch took from her reading of Simone Weil and involves something more than just focus. Attention, for both Weil and Murdoch, is a heavily moralised notion: to attend to something is to look at it lovingly, to look at it justly. And this is something that we need to learn how to do, because it is only by lovingly attending to things that we see them as they really are. This applies especially when we attend lovingly to other people. In short, attention is our way of latching onto a moral realm, glimpsing some kind of reality that is otherwise unattainable. What stops us most of the time is self-interest, that peculiarly human trait so dramatically illustrated by *Macbeth*. We spend so much time wrapped up in our own lives that we fail to see what is really going on in other people's.

One difficulty facing moral realists is that the facts for which they claim importance do not seem to be naturalistic: that is, they are not compatible with scientific findings, so they are to that extent 'metaphysical'. Moore set out a rather strong argument that moral terms did not refer to natural properties and so a proper account of moral claims would have to recognise that they purport to report non-natural facts.⁴¹ Murdoch does not have a problem with the word 'metaphysical', as the title of her 1992 work illustrates.⁴² It is, however, evident that a concept such as love is not susceptible to empirical observation (if it were, a lot of bad marriages could be avoided). With the definition of moral realism above, even if we were to accept Murdoch's view that there is a reality 'out there', a sovereign Good, we are still left with proposition (b): the problem of pinning a moral claim back to that fact, in order to determine its truth value. Murdoch asserts that we can do so through a loving gaze: 'the love which brings the right answer is an exercise of

⁴⁰ Anil Gomes, "Iris Murdoch And The Power Of Love", *TLS*, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/iris-murdoch-power-love/> accessed 28 April 2022.

⁴¹ GE Moore, *Principia Ethica*, (Cambridge UP, 1903).

⁴² Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics As A Guide To Morals* (Penguin, 1992).

justice and realism and really looking'.⁴³ This idea has parallels in Zen Buddhism, with its concept of Original Love⁴⁴ related to the idea of non-duality, and in the practice of *Metta* (loving kindness).

Milligan notes that 'there is a gulf between Murdoch's own way of writing about love and the way in which love is treated in contemporary analytic debates'.⁴⁵ Indeed, in my view, Murdoch does not sufficiently clarify her approach analytically, which may partly explain why she turned to literature as an alternative means of exposition. As Gomes says, there is 'a link between morality and fiction; both want us to recognise what can be the most difficult thing to see – the reality of other people'.⁴⁶ As we saw earlier, Nussbaum also believes that the philosophical treatise is not the clearest way to talk about love's knowledge.

Reflecting on Murdoch's moral realism, it begins to feel like a precursor of an ethics of care, developed by Carol Gilligan a decade later.⁴⁷ As further theorised by Joan Tronto, there are four ethical qualities of care, the first of which is attentiveness,⁴⁸ which seems to be close to Murdoch's 'attention'. The ethics of care has itself been characterised as a type of virtue ethics, and also likened to traditional Buddhist virtues such as compassion. Thus, even if we find Murdoch's moral realism difficult to swallow, we can perhaps endorse a hybrid of it, such as the ethics of care, as a way of putting loving attention into practice.

4. The philosophy of tragedy

Since Plato, philosophers have been thinking about the form and function of tragedy. This paper cannot give a full historiography: rather, in the following historically-structured overview I try to stick to my foundational dichotomy of subjectivity/objectivity.

⁴³ Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Which is somewhat the opposite of original sin. *Macbeth* has frequently been linked to the tale of Adam and Eve, making this Buddhist notion more interestingly pertinent.

⁴⁵ Tony Milligan, "Valuing Love And Valuing The Self In Iris Murdoch." *Convivium: revista de filosofía* (2013).

⁴⁶ Gomes, "Power Of Love".

⁴⁷ Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Harvard UP, 1982).

⁴⁸ Joan Tronto, "An Ethic Of Care", in Ann Cudd & Robin Andreasen eds., *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology* (Blackwell, 2005), pp. 251–263.

4.1 Two meanings of tragedy: subjectivity strikes again

The word 'tragedy' can be used in two different ways. Commonly, under what I call the 'subjective' sense, it is used to describe the 'melancholy, mysterious and fatal logic or illogic of existence'.⁴⁹ It was in this sense, for example, that Yeats mostly thought about tragedy; as a property of art and life generally. 'We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy'.⁵⁰ This almost existentialist outlook implies a sense of life that sees the human condition as inherently tragic.

A second meaning is what I will call the 'systemic' notion of tragedy; the classical, traditional, artistic genre, with its long history and dramatic genealogy. We could also perhaps see this as a universal or objective meaning.

The two notions of tragedy are amusingly brought into focus in *Educating Rita*. As Frank says, the headline 'Man Killed By Falling Tree' in a newspaper is not properly about tragedy. Rita interjects 'It is for the poor sod under the tree'.⁵¹ Rita is thinking subjectively, Frank systemically.

The question whether these two notions are indeed different has exercised philosophers and literary theorists in the last fifty years or so, since it exposes an underlying political structure, which was indeed also explored in Russell's play. To define tragedy as systemic is to exercise a power that can lead to the exclusion of certain groups of people. We will come back to this point shortly.

Another dichotomy that has interested philosophers is what makes tragedy pleasurable. Schelling called this the 'tragic effect'.⁵² Tragedy is catastrophic; and yet we pay money to go and see it. Thinkers have ascribed this paradox to the audience deriving either a specific kind of (possibly cathartic) pleasure or some form of knowledge. In this paper, I meld the two and suggest that there is a type of pleasure that comes from exercising our tragic muscles through art when we have no 'skin in the game'.

Strictly speaking, '[systemic] tragedy belongs only to art, where it occupies only a very small area'.⁵³ But not just any art: we don't talk about tragic paintings, even though

⁴⁹ BL Reid, *William Butler Yeats: The Lyric Of Tragedy* (U of Oklahoma Press, 1961), p. 4.

⁵⁰ WB Yeats, *The Autobiography Of William Butler Yeats* (Macmillan, 1938), p. 165.

⁵¹ Willy Russell, *Educating Rita, A Comedy* (Samuel French, 1981), pp. 40-41.

⁵² Friedrich Schelling, *The Philosophy Of Art* (1845) (U of Minnesota, 2008), p. 254.

⁵³ Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, p. 93.

Guernica could be said to portray a tragedy. Systemic tragedy arises only in literature, and really only in poetry (including drama). Real life is not tragic in the systemic sense: 'art offers some consolation, some sense, some form whereas the most dreadful ills of human life allow of none. Auschwitz is not a tragedy'.⁵⁴

As we shall see, systemic tragedy nevertheless relies on our knowledge and experience of subjective tragedy. Nietzsche explains:

No matter how deeply pity moves us, that pity saves us from the radical 'pity of things', even as the parable of myth saves us from the direct intuition of the cosmic idea, as idea and word save us from the undaunted pouring fourth of the unconscious will.⁵⁵

So systemic tragedy dramatises subjective tragedy: by reducing the chaos to a kind of temporary order, it gives us momentarily a shield to protect us from the absurdity of reality. The pity of systemic tragedy prepares us for (consoles us with?) the radical pity of the subjective tragedy that is human life. Pottle writes:

The greatest evil of man is [...] the haunting fear that he will be forced to admit that the universe is meaningless. The pity and terror with which tragedy deals are both reflections of this fear.⁵⁶

We note the existentialist thrust of the quote. Thus, tragic art operates as a kind of homeopathic ordering of disorder; it makes us feel, at least temporarily, that there is a purpose to our pain. 'By regarding patterned pity and terror, we are purged for the time being of our everyday or random pity and terror.'⁵⁷

To sum up, systemic tragedy is a like a Plasticine form: because of its artificiality, we are able to play with it, to explore its limits, and ultimately we are comforted by the aesthetic representation that allows us to exercise our 'tragic muscles' without any real consequences. This better prepares us for the tragedy of our own, subjective, experience. It is not a coincidence, as we shall now see, that the ritual slaughter of animals served a similar role in the ancient world, allowing spectators to identify their own mortality with that of the sacrificial goat.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 93, a very strong statement that exemplifies the immanent elitism of the 'systemic' definition.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, in Raymond Guess ed., *The Birth of Tragedy And Other Writings* (Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 128.

⁵⁶ FA Pottle, "Catharsis", *Yale Review*, 40:4 (1950), p. 631.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

4.2 Aristotle

In fact, the word 'tragedy' comes from the Ancient Greek *tragos*, meaning goat. Tragedy was singing, about a goat. The classical definition of (systemic) tragedy is found in Chapter VI of Aristotle's *Poetics*:

Tragedy is, then, an imitation of a noble and complete action [...] it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents.⁵⁸

Aristotle points out in Chapter XI what makes tragedy special. In particular, the plot needs to contain reversal (a change of fortune), recognition (a transition from ignorance to knowledge) and suffering (destructive or painful action). Furthermore, in order to be an imitation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the plot must show a person who is between the extremes of perfection and villainy, and the change of fortune must go 'from good to bad, and for this to take place not because of depravity but through some great miscalculation' by the main character.⁵⁹

Murdoch summarises:

We should not simply see the virtuous man overthrown or the bad man successful or the total villain destroyed, but rather the not especially good man brought down, not by evil or wickedness, but by some fault, frailty, or weakness of character.⁶⁰

Clearly, this fits the plot of *Macbeth* provided that the audience sees the regicide not as a result of some fundamental depravity on Macbeth's part, but as a miscalculation, a *hamartia*, the Greek word for failure, for missing the mark. This is why it is important that we initially see Macbeth first as a hero, and probably why Shakespeare has him led on by the witches and his wife: the murder needs to be out of character for him.

For Christians, of course, 'the rise and fall of him that stood in high degree was the incarnation of the tragic sense for a much deeper reason: it made explicit the universal drama of the fall of man.'⁶¹ This interpretation of tragedy in line with religious ideas has continued even through to very recent thinkers such as Eagleton (see below).

⁵⁸ Leon Golden, *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation And Commentary For Students Of Literature* (Prentice Hall, 1968), p. 13.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Chapter XIII.

⁶⁰ Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, p. 99.

⁶¹ George Steiner, *The Death Of Tragedy* (Knopf, 1963), p. 12.

Two key definitional elements remain then: pity/fear, and catharsis. Pity and fear come from the structure of the plot, says Aristotle in Chapter XIV. The tragic deed itself can either be done or finally not done, and this either knowing the relationship of the other party, or not. In *Macbeth*, the tragic deed is done knowingly: Macbeth and we are fully aware of whom he is killing. According to Aristotle's analysis, this is the third-best form of tragedy: 'better than this is the case where one does the deed in ignorance and after he has done it recognises his relationship to the other person'⁶² and best of all would be to hold back at the last minute, on recognising the other person, as in Euripides' *Iphigenia*.

4.3 'Catharsis' in tragedy

The most controversial term to appear in Chapter VI of the *Poetics* is 'catharsis'. One reason for this is that the *Poetics* is generally deductive, building on the earlier chapters, but Aristotle does not seem to anticipate the catharsis clause. Hardison argues that Aristotle's Greek is 'ambitious' and that other translations are possible. Nevertheless, he believes that the catharsis clause relates to the *function* of tragedy: that is, catharsis refers to what tragedy is supposed to do. Aristotle is clear that other forms of imitative art are supposed to deliver pleasure: 'catharsis should therefore be understood as the tragic variety of the pleasure associated with imitation in general'.⁶³ Thus, just as a poet might write a comedy to deliver amused pleasure, he writes a tragedy to deliver cathartic pleasure.

There are divergent views on whether catharsis refers to the emotions of the audience, or to the incidents of the plot: whether catharsis is subjective or objective. However, the *Poetics* is a technical manual concerned with the nature of tragedy, not with the response of the audience. In Chapter XIV, Aristotle says that 'since the poet should provide pleasure from pity and fear through imitation, it is apparent that this function must be worked into the incidents'.⁶⁴ Hence, the incidents of the plot need to lead to the sort of pleasure that comes from learning. When we watch tragedy, we learn something and that act of learning, according to Aristotle, will be pleasurable. This may be what is really meant by catharsis, and it reinforces the idea noted above that systemic tragedy is an educational plaything.

⁶² Golden, *Aristotle's Poetics*, p. 25.

⁶³ OB Hardison, in Golden, *Aristotle's Poetics*, p. 115.

⁶⁴ Golden, *Aristotle's Poetics*, p. 23.

Murdoch prefers to talk of consolation:⁶⁵ the purpose of tragic art is to console us. In real life, we do not get such consolation but it is probably the case that if the art form failed to console us, we would not pay to go and see it. We can get enough unconsolated tragedy by doomscrolling.

4.4 Hegel

‘Hegel’s account of tragedy is the most impressive since Aristotle’s’⁶⁶ and it gave rise to the ‘humanist’ way in which literary critics viewed tragedy until the postmodern period. Hegel wrote and lectured mainly about the Greek but also about the Shakespearean tragedies, generally preferring the former. These thoughts were not shaped into one overarching ‘theory of tragedy’ but led to the core concepts of tragic collision, ethical substance, and tragic reconciliation that I will now outline.

As for the Greek tragedies, Kaufmann has a helpful synthesis:

Hegel’s understanding of Greek tragedy far surpassed that of most of his detractors. He realized that at the center of the greatest tragedies [...] we find not a tragic hero but a tragic collision, and that the conflict is not between good and evil but between one-sided positions, each of which embodies some good.⁶⁷

We already know that tragedy deals with unhappiness but Hegel thinks that only suffering that comes from a tragic collision can appeal to our deeper mind (*Geist*), and it does so because it is itself a conflict of the ‘ethical substance’. By this, Hegel means the shared ethos of the community: for example the powers of personal love and honour. It is precisely because these powers have some universal value, they are common to all civilised men, that their exhibition in tragedy has the ability to elevate the drama to great art, he thinks.

In many works of art, these powers are in harmony. Hegel’s main point is to note that, in tragedy, we see them in collision. ‘The essentially tragic fact is the self-division and intestinal warfare of the ethical substance, not so much the war of good with evil as the war of good with good’.⁶⁸ What is noteworthy is that the competing powers are both rightful; the claim of each is justified:

⁶⁵ Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, p. 93.

⁶⁶ Young, *Plato to Žižek*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy And Philosophy* (Princeton UP, 1968), p. 201.

⁶⁸ AC Bradley, *Oxford Lectures On Poetry* (MacMillan, 1909), p. 69.

[...] but the right of each is pushed into a wrong, because it ignores the right of the other, and demands that absolute sway which belongs to neither alone, but to the whole of which each is but a part.⁶⁹

The end of the tragic conflict arises when the ethical substance asserts its overriding authority over the excessive pretensions of the competing powers such that both of their exclusive claims are denied: the powers themselves are not denied, merely their wrongful claims to exclusivity. Hegel calls this the 'necessary reconciliation (*Versöhnung*)'⁷⁰. This reconciliation can be seen as the tragic restitution and seems to align with Hegel's view on world history generally: the ethical spirit advances through this learning experience.

Turning to his comments on Shakespeare, Hegel has an interesting point about subjectivity. He says that 'modern' tragedy (by which he means anything after Euripides):

adopts [...] from the start the principle of subjectivity. Therefore, it takes for its proper subject-matter and content the subjective inner life of the character who is not, as in classical tragedy, merely an individual embodiment of the ethical powers.⁷¹

For example with *Hamlet* we are more interested in the hero's personality than in his dilemma. We do not feel that the Shakespearean tragic hero is driven by an ethical motivation: no ethical problem is being solved. Accordingly, Hegel claimed that 'art in its highest vocation is a thing of the past.'⁷² This notion of the death of tragedy was picked up by later writers such as George Steiner (whose book bears that title), fed a conservative intuition that 'things were better in the old days', and reinforced the idea that tragedy only referred to traditional stories of elites. We will see later that more recent theorists have pushed back against this notion.

In any event, when we consider *Macbeth* in the light of the above, the play seems at first sight simply to represent a conflict between good and evil, and so no tragedy at all. The main interest is indeed in the twisted personality of the hero. This is why we have to find some spiritual good in Macbeth; not so much as to counterbalance the evil he undertakes, but enough that we have the impression of 'spiritual waste'. And indeed we find it early in the play; we are introduced to Macbeth as a valiant warrior, well-liked,

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 72

⁷⁰ GWF Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (1835), trans. TM Knox (Clarendon Press, 1975), Vol II, p. 1193.

⁷¹ Ibid., p 1223.

⁷² Ibid., Vol I, p. 11.

with an imagination to rival a poet's, with a strong conscience and a powerful and courageous determination. Again, I do not say this makes Macbeth a good man: what we are looking for here is something to feed the 'spiritual waste' that Hegel refers to. The tragic force of *Macbeth* depends, then, on our seeing the play as more than a conflict between good and evil, with eternal justice ultimately favouring the good: we need to see just enough good in our hero that we start to lose sight of the borders between good and evil, in this play focused on liminality. Indeed, we find ourselves grudgingly admiring him, sympathising with him and we come to see in him 'the waste of forces on which [we] place a spiritual value'.⁷³

There is another way to reconcile *Macbeth* with Hegel, using his idea that reconciliation makes tragedy a learning experience. To counter the subjective focus of the play, Hegel suggests that the audience be shown the individual himself recognising the tragic reconciliation with his destiny, learning that he will be made to pay. In the older tragedies, he felt this was not necessary because the poet was more focused on objectivity in the first place.⁷⁴ In *Macbeth*, we see this learning point in V.8, when our hero realises he has been tricked and almost yields to Macduff, only to realise he will end up 'baited with the rabble's curse' and thus decides to fight to the death, ('lay on, Macduff'), knowing he cannot win.

As noted above, it was Hegel's fetishisation of objectivity that led indirectly to existentialism, and existentialism's over-reliance on subjectivity that caused Murdoch to come up with her own moral theory.

4.5 Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer's notion of tragedy is relevant because he points to the metaphysical nature of tragedy, because he thinks about Shakespeare a lot, and because he is a forefather of existentialism. Samuel Johnson famously criticised Shakespeare for the absence of apparent justice but Schopenhauer says this reflects a misconception of tragedy. For Schopenhauer, 'the true sense of tragedy is the deeper insight, that it is not his own individual sins that the hero atones for, but original sin, i.e. the crime of existence itself'.⁷⁵ We can agree that Johnson was missing the point: if there had been

⁷³ Bradley, *Oxford Lectures*, p. 88.

⁷⁴ I disagree: we have already seen that Aristotle made recognition a part of the definition of tragedy.

⁷⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Representation* (1818) (Dover Publications, 1969), p. 254.

justice for Desdemona, there would not have been a tragedy. It is not justice that the audience seeks in a tragedy; perhaps indeed it is injustice. Schopenhauer describes

[...] characters [of ordinary morality] [...] so situated with regard to one another that their position forces them, knowingly and with their eyes open, to do one another the greatest injury, without any one of them being entirely in the wrong.⁷⁶

This concept does not seem so easily to fit Macbeth, who is not a character of ordinary morality, and is quite obviously entirely in the wrong from the moment he kills Duncan. Moreover, the ending of the play does seem to provide a form of justice, albeit belated. The state, under the new reign of Duncan's rightful heir, Malcolm, is now 'free' (V.9.21), as though removing the Macbeths from the world was all that was needed. However, the point Schopenhauer is making is one of trajectory: as Murdoch puts it, 'people committing awful crimes with their eyes open because they have somehow taken a path which makes these crimes into an inevitable duty'.⁷⁷ This is perhaps the real tragedy of *Macbeth*: once he launches his missile strike, there can be neither recall nor change of path: 'I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more / Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (III.4.136-8). Artistically, this makes the play gripping but Shakespeare employs another device to reel us further in: we find ourselves dragged into the murder along with the killer. From the outset, we are strangely drawn to Macbeth, somehow on his side through the temptation and the crime, and we then live the terrible guilt with him throughout the rest of the play. As Jorgensen says, 'it is, one trusts, our one opportunity to experience the act of murder'.⁷⁸

4.6 Nietzsche

Nietzsche, devotee of Schopenhauer and proto-existentialist *par excellence*, considered tragedy in his highly-criticised first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*.⁷⁹ Here, Nietzsche asks how the Greeks were able to be enthusiastic about life, despite the 'contradictions' revealed by their myths. As with Schelling and Hölderlin, he found the answer in their art, and *Birth* outlines the philosophic, mythical and historic sources of Greek tragedy. Nietzsche postulates a grounding of tragic art in two archetypal Greek deities, Dionysus and Apollo. Dionysiac impulses are those of music, intoxication, enchantment, transformation: they are full of wisdom but it is a kind of folk-knowledge, or blood-

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, p. 118.

⁷⁸ Paul A Jorgensen, *William Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (Twayne, 1985), p. 84.

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *Birth*.

knowledge. 'The Dionysiac is the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess', says Guess,⁸⁰ all of which sounds rather like *Macbeth*. Apollonian urges, by contrast, are more cerebral, they reflect the use of reason, they limit and order and codify the world. We are reminded of the subjective/objective dichotomy but the mapping is not obvious and perhaps not relevant. In any event, Nietzsche's point was that Attic tragedy arises from the synthesis of the two.

It is worth noting here that classical scholars have claimed that comedy (discussed below) descends from Dionysiac impulses. Indeed, the earliest comedies, those of Aristophanes, model themselves on Dionysiac rituals. Simplistically, then, it seems that Nietzsche discerns tragedy in the melding of Apollonian impulses with the inherently comedic Dionysiac ones.

Nietzsche says that Greek tragedy is 'a Dionysian chorus which discharges itself over and over again in an Apolline world of images',⁸¹ or conversely that it is an 'Apolline embodiment of Dionysiac insights and effects'.⁸² If this sounds at first obscure, it helps to remember the distinction drawn above between subjective and systemic tragedy. Subjective tragedy is Dionysiac; intuitive, blood-rooted folk tragedy. Nietzsche argues that the Apollonian spirit, being the ordering, 'plastic' spirit, transforms the 'terrors and horrors of existence' and makes them bearable by reducing them to formal dramatic art. This mirrors the suggestion made above, that dramatic (systemic) tragedy is a training ground for the tragedy of the human condition. After all, 'we possess art lest we perish of the truth'.⁸³

But Dionysus has the last voice: 'Apolline deception is revealed for what it is: a persistent veiling [...] of the true Dionysiac effect'.⁸⁴ Nietzsche seems to be addressing the residual emotion of tragedy, perhaps indeed catharsis. For Nietzsche, however, it is more ecstatic than that: in the Dionysiac form, 'nature, alienated, inimical, or subjugated, celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind'.⁸⁵ What we make of this is, like much of Nietzsche, up to the reader. 'Reconciliation' reminds us of Hegel.

⁸⁰ Ibid., "Introduction", p. xi.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 44.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, §822 (1888), trans. W Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1968), p. 435.

⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *Birth*, p. 103.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

In my view, he means that the tragic hero is destroyed but we are finally uplifted because 'tragedy calls out: "We believe in eternal life."' ⁸⁶ Thus, comedy, in accepting the imperfect as normal, is the true pessimist and tragedy is in the end optimistic.

There is also a way in which Macbeth is an example of Nietzsche's 'will to power', indeed he is a kind of Nietzschean superman. Bradley (whose own ideas on tragedy will be highlighted in the following paragraphs) writes, 'what a frightful clearness of self-consciousness in this descent to hell, and yet what a furious force in the instinct of life and self-assertion that drives him on!' ⁸⁷

4.7 Bradley

When Dollimore writes that 'no theory of tragedy has been more influential for interpreting the drama of the early seventeenth century than A.C. Bradley's', ⁸⁸ we need to understand that this is not an endorsement of it. Bradley represents the high-water mark of the traditional, Hegelian, concept of tragedy.

The first element of tragedy is its hero. Bradley notes that no Shakespeare play at the end of which the hero is alive is seen as a tragedy. We are therefore dealing with 'a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death'. ⁸⁹ Shakespeare's hero is always a person of high degree. Moreover, the suffering and calamity are exceptional, unexpected, and contrasted with previous happiness or glory. In a nod to Aristotle, Bradley points out that it is the suffering that leads to pity and the fall of the hero that leads to fear. For medieval audiences, the reversal of fortune 'made them feel that man is blind and helpless, the plaything of an inscrutable power.' ⁹⁰ Again, we sense the loss of control and are reminded of existentialism.

For Bradley, the second element of tragedy, as essential as the first, is the sense of agency: the tragic hero is the author of his own downfall, but it does not stem from a mere psychological flaw, nor from the plot so much as from the action itself. In short, there is a causal connection between character, deed and catastrophe. Moreover, revealing his debt to Hegel, Bradley says there is something particular about

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

⁸⁷ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures On Hamlet, Othello, King Lear And Macbeth* (1904) (Penguin, 1991), p. 362.

⁸⁸ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology And Power In The Drama Of Shakespeare And His Contemporaries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 53.

⁸⁹ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes: 'a marked one-sidedness ... a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction'.⁹¹ We certainly see this tragic trait in Macbeth: it is at once part of his greatness, and ultimately fatal to him.

Hegel spoke of reconciliation: the key point for Bradley is conflict; he notes that most tragic heroes are engaged in some external conflict with another person or group but that this alone is not sufficient to explain their tragic sense. More important is the hero's *internal* conflict: thus although Macbeth's ambition is externally in conflict with his loyalty to Duncan's court, it is Shakespeare's attention to the inner conflict within Macbeth's soul that makes the play a great tragedy.

Bradley postulates an ultimate power lying behind the tragic universe, which can only be approached through our experience with the drama. This again is Hegelian, but with an added twist of mysticism, and is perhaps what Lady Macbeth refers to as 'metaphysical aid' (I.5.27). Tragedy gestures towards, without ever fully revealing, an ultimate order of things, indeed a kind of mystical realm, accessible only as 'a pressentiment, formless but haunting and even profound'.⁹² In tragic catastrophe, we witness 'the violent self-restitution of the divided spiritual unity'.⁹³ For example, at the end of *King Lear*, we are left neither depressed nor despairing but with 'a sense of law and beauty [...] a consciousness of greatness in pain, and of solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom'.⁹⁴ In summary, through tragedy we experience 'a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and waste'.⁹⁵ The sense of waste arises not from the fact that evil is being driven out by the ultimate good, but because the violent self-restitution necessitates the waste of good: the good in Macbeth is wasted as part of the process of reconciliation of the spiritual unity.

4.8 Camus

At the start of the twentieth century, then, the Bradleyan idea had prevailed, namely of

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁹² Ibid., p. 38.

⁹³ Bradley, *Oxford Lectures*, p. 91.

⁹⁴ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 279.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

[...] tragedy as a universal form, embodying the specially noble experience of elite individuals who create their own doom within an overarching framework of mysterious inevitability.⁹⁶

However, approaches to literary criticism took a more theoretical, and a more political, turn in the second half of the twentieth century. Camus represents an inflection point, as he is no longer prepared to endorse the elevation of classical, systemic tragedy. A (reluctant) founder of existentialism, he outlined his views on tragedy in a 1955 lecture.⁹⁷ His account initially echoes Hegel's: he agrees that tragedy is 'first and foremost tension, since it is the conflict, in a frenzied immobility, between two powers each of which wears the double mask of good and evil'.⁹⁸ These two powers are 'man and his desire for power, and [...] the divine principle reflected by the world.'⁹⁹ Since we know that the world will prevail over the man, we conclude that hubris is the 'tragic flaw'. There will always be fate, just waiting to limit human pride and ambition, 'a limit that must not be transgressed'¹⁰⁰ because we can never be masters of the universe.

However, since the ancient tragedies pitted freedom against fate, with fate inevitably triumphing, Camus suggested we need new tragedies, new paradigms of the struggle for liberty. He believed that we need to 'keep alive our power of revolt',¹⁰¹ because this was part of his political project and his wider *oeuvre*. Camus asks us to become warriors for freedom, to show that revolution can prevail over fate. Unfortunately, his own attempt at a new tragedy, *The Misunderstanding*,¹⁰² was widely seen as a dramatic failure.

4.9 Tragedy in recent literary criticism

A further sustained attack on the old approach to tragedy was launched by Raymond Williams, who objected to the underlying assumption of a permanent, universal and essentially unchanging human nature. Williams instead held that tragedy was not a

⁹⁶ Alan Sinfield, Ed., *Macbeth: Contemporary Critical Essays* (St Martin's Press, 1992), p. 2.

⁹⁷ Albert Camus, "On The Future Of Tragedy", in *Lyrical And Critical Essays*, trans. E Kennedy (Knopf, 1968), pp. 295–310.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

¹⁰² Albert Camus, *The Misunderstanding*, trans. G Ley (Gallimard, 1943).

permanent concept, rather, 'the varieties of tragic experience are to be interpreted by reference to the changing conventions and institutions'.¹⁰³ Like Camus, Williams saw a need for a rebirth of tragedy, one that turned away from universalist ideals. In fact, his is a radical move that reconnects the two meanings of tragedy referred to earlier and suggests that tragedy befalls ordinary people, not just kings. This idea was suggested as early as 1949 by Arthur Miller ('I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were'),¹⁰⁴ whose *Death Of A Salesman* could be considered a modern tragedy centred on an ordinary man. There is no shortage of novelistic examples to support the claim: for example, *The Mayor Of Casterbridge*, *Thérèse Raquin* and *The Grapes Of Wrath*. Bradley would not have deemed these tragedies *au sens propre* but I suspect few readers would fail to recognise the tragic elements in each.

The project to re-interpret tragedy through a materialist lens was continued by Jonathan Dollimore, whose *Radical Tragedy* brought cultural materialist criticism fully into the field of literary studies. In this work, Dollimore 'rescues tragedy from [the prevailing] sterile ideology'.¹⁰⁵ One of the ways he does this is to insist that even Jacobean drama used tragedy to challenge authority rather than to confirm it, a point I will come back to. *Macbeth* contains examples that can be cited to support this argument; for example Terry Eagleton considered the three witches 'the heroines of the piece' because they 'expose [the] hierarchical social order for what it is [...] the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare'.¹⁰⁶

Like Williams and Dollimore, Eagleton wants to reclaim tragedy for the left. His *Sweet Violence*¹⁰⁷ is a magisterial but challenging work that asks us to reconsider tragedy as an exemplary of Wittgenstein's family resemblances: a combination of overlapping features rather than an invariable set of forms or contents. Eagleton also has a theological project, according to which tragedy shows us all that is human in relation to God, an idea that Hegel might have accepted even if Eagleton essentially demolishes the Hegelian construction of tragedy that we saw above. One of the ways that Eagleton forms a

¹⁰³ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (1966) (Broadview Encore Editions, 2006), p. 69.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted by David Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell And The Claim Of Literature* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2013), p. 224.

¹⁰⁵ Terry Eagleton, foreword to Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. xi.

¹⁰⁶ Cited in Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. lv.

¹⁰⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence, The Idea Of The Tragic* (Blackwell, 2003)

junction between Marxism and Christianity is through what he calls ‘the law of love’¹⁰⁸, and we have already seen how love is the centrepiece of Irish Murdoch’s philosophy, as well as a topic of interest to Nussbaum and Badiou. Tony Milligan’s work focuses on the philosophical and political dimensions of love, and Raimond Gaita’s recent book draws on the work of Weil and Murdoch in an attempt to create a vision of common humanity through love.¹⁰⁹ In planning this paper, I had not anticipated that love would be such an important topic and it seems that the place of love in moral philosophy could be a fertile area for further research.

5. Comedy and tragedy

In this section, I consider a literary genre that is closely related and yet antithetical to tragedy: comedy. Both dramatic forms were exploited by the Greek poets, although tragedy was always seen as the superior genre: ‘the summit of poetical art, both on account of the greatness of its effect and the difficulty of its achievement’.¹¹⁰ If at first it seems obvious that, as Dante observed, tragedy and comedy move in contrary directions, I want to explore the idea that they are more ambiguously linked, and to posit that, if we look closely within a tragedy, there is perhaps a small box marked ‘in emergency break glass’ and comedy is what is inside the box. All it takes is a change of mindset by the tragic hero to see in the absurdity of his life an emancipation from suffering such that even a Sisyphus can choose to laugh.

The ancient Greeks institutionalised comedy and performed it as a direct contrast to tragedy. Both forms illustrate life as a journey through a tangle of conflicting systems, where success depends on making the right decision in ambiguity, or possibly on chance alone. In Greek comedy, the chorus of 24 is twice the size required for tragedy, and the Greek comedic form also takes a liberty that classical tragedy never allows itself: the *parabasis*, in which the chorus turns to address the audience directly. Perhaps comedy relies on there being an audience, whereas tragedy would be the same even to an empty amphitheatre.

Unlike tragedy, the topic of comedy has not interested philosophers much, perhaps because, since Plato, humour has had a rather bad reputation. Plato believed that laughter overrode rational self-control and was often malicious in nature. Aristotle gives

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁰⁹ Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love And Truth And Justice* (Routledge, 2013).

¹¹⁰ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 326.

a definition of comedy in his *Poetics*, noting that it relies on the ridiculous, and on the absence of pain, whereas tragedy concerns the serious and the painful. However, Aristotle never discusses comedy in detail, at least not in works that have survived.

From the 18th century, comedy started to be taken more seriously by thinkers such as Kant, who posited that laughter, like music or games of chance, caused pleasure by the shifting of ideas in the mind. Schopenhauer further developed the incongruity between a concept and our actual experience of the thing in real life (we might say between the objective and the subjective). Kierkegaard also located the essence of the comical in the mismatch between what is expected and what is experienced. Of course, not all incongruity is comic; ‘the coming of Birnam Wood to Dunsinane ... is unquestionably incongruous, but no one in the play or the audience thinks it is funny’.¹¹¹ Santayana even thought that incongruity could not be enjoyable, in a quote that calls to mind *Macbeth*:

We have a prosaic background of common sense and everyday reality; upon this background an unexpected idea suddenly impinges. But the thing is a futility. The comic accident falsifies the nature before us, starts a wrong analogy in the mind, a suggestion that cannot be carried out.¹¹²

Like tragedy, comedy is based on contradiction, but Kierkegaard sees the contradiction in tragedy as suffering whereas in comedy it is painless:

The comic *grasp* brings out the contradiction, or lets it become manifest, by having the way out in mind; that is why the contradiction is painless. The tragic *grasp* sees the contradiction and despairs over the way out.¹¹³

Two connected points arise: the idea of the ‘grasp’ and the idea that comedy points to a ‘way out’. I explore these ideas at the close of this section.

Like Kierkegaard, Auden defines comedy in terms of contradiction: ‘a contradiction in the relation of the individual or the personal to the universe or the impersonal which does not involve the spectator ... in suffering or pity’.¹¹⁴ (We note again the opposition of objective and subjective). When we compare this to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, we see that pity (the sacrificial goat) is necessary for tragedy and inimical to comedy.

¹¹¹ Robert W. Corrigan, *Comedy: Meaning And Form* (Chandler, 1965), p. 6.

¹¹² George Santayana, *The Sense Of Beauty* (Scribner’s, 1896).

¹¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed/trans Alastair Hannay (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 432-433, emphasis mine.

¹¹⁴ W. H. Auden, *Lectures On Shakespeare* (Princeton UP, 2000), p. 23.

As authors faced the real tragedies of the twentieth century, the gap between comedy and tragedy closed again; consider *Dr Strangelove* for example. Adorno notes that ‘a withering away of the alternative between lightheartedness and seriousness, between the tragic and the comic, almost between life and death, is becoming evident in contemporary art’.¹¹⁵

None of this is to say that comedy has not been used to support philosophical contentions. Rabelais, following Aristotle, sees laughter as ‘*le propre de l’homme*’ and associates it with conviviality and the intellectual companionship of wit and philosophical dialogue.¹¹⁶ Laughter has also been seen as a sign of play, and both demonstrate a disinterested attitude toward something that could otherwise be too much to bear, much in the way that I have suggested tragedy does. In *Macbeth*, the Porter’s speeches in II.3 illustrate the use of comedy as a counterpoint to the tense drama developing on stage, perhaps indeed as a way of making sure the audience remains somehow detached from the terror of the killings.

In tragedy, we tend to find heroism, idealism, ideas of honour, even of patriarchy and militarism. Comedy, on the other hand, embodies an anti-heroic, more pragmatic attitude towards life’s contradictions. In the comic spirit, ‘no matter how many times a man is knocked down, he somehow manages to pull himself up and keep going’.¹¹⁷ Through his refusal to be beaten, the comic hero resolves his conflicts happily and things get back to normal. We know from the outset that the tragic hero is enslaved to his anxiety: he has no option but to die, bringing the conflict to a definitive end.

Comedy and tragedy are thus both value-dependent. In tragedy, the audience has to share the values that the playwright inherently places on valour, courage and meritocracy in order to understand why the tragic hero must fall. Comedy draws our attention to the limits of these values, perhaps by exaggeration or ridicule, in a way that makes life seem indeed less tragic. Authors since Chekhov have ingeniously used the comic form to serious effect: ‘their belief that life is a *grand guignol*, but with less sense ... employs the ludicrousness of comedy to show that life is itself absurd’.¹¹⁸ Here we start to see the interference patterns between comedy, tragedy and existentialism: it

¹¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, “35. Is Art Lighthearted?” in *Notes To Literature* (Columbia UP, 2019), p. 253.

¹¹⁶ G.M. Masters and T.C. McMasters, *Rabelaisian Dialectic And The Platonic-Hermetic Tradition* (SUNY Press, 1969), p. 32.

¹¹⁷ Corrigan, *Comedy*, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

seems that both genres can be used to explore the absurdity of life that existentialism posits, but the difference comes from the attitude of the character to his *mainmise*.

This is why I postulate that the trick for the tragic hero would be to seek the comedy in his situation, because then he would find the way out, the emancipation. As Lyotard points out,¹¹⁹ *mancipium* refers to the gesture of taking hold of someone, and also to the person who is seized, for example a slave. 'The slave does not belong to itself [...] it is in the hands of another'.¹²⁰ I referred above to the comic/tragic grasp: Macbeth is a slave to the tragic grasp; he is incapable of resisting the force that propels him to his destruction. How can we help Macbeth find emancipation? He could start by trying to bring the subjective back into focus. Objectively, Sisyphus has a terrible life: indeed, objectively, all life is absurd. Somehow though, if we are able to pull the focus back to ourselves, to the continuities that we are able to maintain with our fellow sufferers, we may be able to break out of the tragic conflict. Murakami famously wrote that 'pain is inevitable, suffering is optional',¹²¹ a rehash of an old Buddhist line. If Macbeth suffers, it is perhaps because he chooses to.

6. *Macbeth* in the light of the two philosophies

6.1 As an existentialist play

Shakespeare generally wrote about the human condition and *Macbeth* in particular revolves around a man struggling with existential angst. One might imagine, given the many commentaries that have been written on the play, that its existentialist outlook would have received plenty of attention. Oddly, my literature review showed this not to be the case. Only one rather old article addresses this issue directly.¹²²

Obviously, Shakespeare was not an existentialist. The Elizabethans generally saw man as part of a larger system with its own order. Violation of that order was thought to lead to divine punishment; and on a basic level, this is indeed what happens to Macbeth. He

¹¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, "Mainmise", *Philosophy Today*, 36:4 (1992), p. 419-427.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 419.

¹²¹ Haruki Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running, A Memoir*, trans. P Gabriel (Vintage, 2009), p. 44.

¹²² Robert G Collmer, "An Existentialist Approach To *Macbeth*", *The Personalist*, 41:4 (1960), pp. 484-491.

does a terrible thing and he pays the ultimate price. However, Shakespeare did not espouse any systematic ideology, and may indeed have had subversive intentions, as we have seen Dollimore claim. In any event, he let his characters develop according to their own psychology. This broadens the options for criticism of the plays, for example Freud wrote about *Macbeth*.¹²³ So it is not anachronistic to look for ways in which *Macbeth* could be read as existentialist, for example in how the characters behave, or in how the play comments on the human predicament.

We have already seen that existentialism eludes definition, not least because immanent to the philosophy itself is a Kierkegaardian prejudice against all systematising. However, we can fairly easily pick six yardsticks of existentialism and use them to measure up *Macbeth*. Since this is not a sophisticated analytical method, I will use numbered paragraphs and not develop these issues very far, stating first the existentialist tenet and then the application to the play.

1. According to existentialist philosophy, man is condemned to make his own choices in life. Shakespeare gives Macbeth this awful freedom. Macbeth could have become a good king: nobody forces him to act as he does, nobody misleads him, he chooses his own path. (The witches do not give him the full picture but nothing they say is untrue.) Contemplating the damnation that must follow from Duncan's murder, in one of his most famous soliloquies and one which points up the play as a tragedy, he says:

And Pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'er-leaps itself
And falls on th' other. (I.7.21-28)

In this passage our hero recognises his choice between pity and pride, perhaps even as 'a moment in the cosmic struggle with which he is continuous and which is duplicated in his own being',¹²⁴ but in any event showing that he understands the forces that are at work and must make an entirely subjective choice. Once

¹²³ Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met With In Psycho-Analytic Work", in *The Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud*, Vol XIV (1914-1916), p. 309-333.

¹²⁴ Catherine Belsey, "Subjectivity And The Soliloquy", in Sinfield, *Macbeth*, p. 88. This comment calls to mind Empson's 'magical importance' noted in §2.1.

decided, he knows he will not change his mind: 'I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.' (I.7.79-80)

2. Existentialism posits that reason is impotent and the human being unstable. *Macbeth* is a play that turns reason inside out ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (I.1.11)) and predictions that appear logically impossible nevertheless come to pass. Macbeth ends up foregoing reason and his wife loses her head entirely.
3. Existentialism suggests a leap of faith of some sort. A man has to undertake what Heidegger called a 'resolute decision' and becomes bound by the actions he takes in consequence. Macbeth seems to adhere to Kierkegaard's notion that life must not be lived timidly or one will 'never experience putting everything together on one thing, never achieve the idea of an infinite self-consistency'.¹²⁵ He stares into the abyss and leaps, hoping that 'this blow / Might be the be-all and end-all — here'. (I.7.5)
4. Existentialism predicts that this leap into nothingness results in terrible isolation but, unfortunately, authentic experience can only be grasped in such 'boundary situations' where man stands totally alienated. Macbeth progresses from respected and sociable hero to completely isolated tyrant, losing even his queen: 'honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have' (V.3.25-6). Although existentialism recognises the power of alienation, the existentialist authors did not endorse the taking of decisions in total isolation. Rather, as Jaspers argued, without other people, there is no humanity; only nothingness.
5. God is dead. In what could be described as existential nihilism, Macbeth feels abandoned by God: after the murder of Duncan he cries, 'But wherefore could I not pronounce "Amen"? / I had most need of blessing, and "Amen" / Stuck in my throat.' (II.2.30-32)
6. Existentialism depicts the human existence as *Sein-zum-Tod*; death awaits us all and life itself is absurd anyway. And yet 'death is the springboard of an absolute hope, as it is the invitation to an absolute despair'.¹²⁶ Macbeth is obsessed by death but, as the first witch predicted, scorns it and then finally succumbs almost

¹²⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, (1849), trans. Howard Hong (Harvard UP, 1980), p. 99.

¹²⁶ Harold John Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (Routledge, 1952), p.82.

willingly to it, as though he accepts its unavoidability: 'I have lived long enough' (V.3.22). The play also connects death with the passage of time, in Macbeth's famous soliloquy after his wife's death:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. (V.5.19-23)

In this short sub-section, I have done nothing other than demonstrate the obvious: *Macbeth* is an existentialism-compatible play and Macbeth is the proto-existentialist hero, perfectly illustrating what happens when we use our freedom to choose, experiencing all the *angoisse* that results from that freedom, and alienating himself entirely until he finally shuffles off his mortal coil.

6.2 *Macbeth* in the light of Murdochian realism

However, a more interesting analysis could unpick some of the contingencies in the play's narrative. In the first place, although Macbeth is an existential man, his ethical choices would obviously not have been underwritten by any of the existential philosophers. We noted Sartre's claim that existentialism was a humanism dependent on considering other people, and that 'nothing can be good for us without being good for all.'¹²⁷ In this sense, Macbeth takes his subjectivity too far in that he only considers his own 'vaulting ambition'. Where he goes wrong is in assuming that he is entirely free to choose to act the way he does. What happens if we follow Murdoch and replace the metaphor of choice by one of vision?

Macbeth does have some capacity for moral vision: he recognises that he should 'against [Duncan's] murderer shut the door / Not bear the knife myself' (I.7.15-16). Indeed, he tells Lady Macbeth that 'we will proceed no further in this business' (I.7.31). However, he then allows himself to be persuaded that the personal gain makes it worth the cost. Its solipsism is what makes this calculus go horrendously wrong.

Murdoch believed that moral decisions demand attention to other people (as she put it, to what is 'real'). Of course, Macbeth faces a huge hurdle here because reality and artifice are deliberately and inextricably confused in the play. The play portrays Macbeth as not seeing things ordinarily: he sees ghosts, he sees a knife, he doesn't see other people for who they really are because he only thinks about himself. 'Man is a creature

¹²⁷ Sartre, "Humanism", p. 37.

who makes pictures of himself, and then comes to resemble the picture', as Murdoch says,¹²⁸ in another gesture towards Buddhist thought. But, as we have seen, Murdoch posits that way to perceive the true Good is through love.

In the play, one character does seem to possess this ability: Duncan. In I.6, he meets Lady Macbeth and in each of his three speeches to her, mentions love. He notes that 'the love that follows us sometime is our trouble / Which still we thank as love.' He claims that Macbeth's love for his wife brought him home faster than the court could follow, and says 'we love him highly'. Duncan seems to be the ideal Murdochian moral arbiter. Lemon notes that Shakespeare 'offers a model of love-based sovereignty in Duncan' and also 'its opposite through Macbeth: rule based in fear'.¹²⁹ (Of course, this may be Duncan's very vulnerability if one believes, with Machiavelli, that it is safer to be feared than loved.) If Duncan was a loving king at the start of the play, we notice that, in the final scene, Malcolm, new King of Scotland, is also moved by love:

We shall not spend a large expanse of time,
Before we reckon with your several loves,
And make us even with you. (V.9.27-29)

It seems that love only disappeared from view during Macbeth's reign. And yet we know Macbeth to be capable of love because we learn early of the intimate, symbiotic relationship he has with his wife. In his letter, he calls her 'my dearest partner of greatness' (I.5.9) and his first words to her are 'my dearest love' (I.5.57). Duncan calls Macbeth's affection for her 'sharp as his spur' (I.6.24). Harold Bloom famously (and ironically) called their marriage the happiest in Shakespeare,¹³⁰ although we understand that they have lost a child, so everything has not always been rosy for them.

We notice that, in I.4.27, Macbeth acknowledges his duty to Duncan and that he should be 'doing everything / Safe toward your love and honour'. It seems likely that he loves his fellow thane, Banquo, and perhaps even his country. In short, Macbeth knows about, and practices, love but he does not use it in an 'exercise of justice and realism and really looking', in Murdoch's phrase. The point is that Macbeth does have the possibility to learn about what is really happening, but he chooses not to pay attention.

¹²⁸ Murdoch, *Existentialists*, p. 75.

¹²⁹ Rebecca Lemon, "Sovereignty And Treason In Macbeth", in Nick Moschovakis, *Macbeth: New Critical Essays* (Routledge, 2008), p. 77.

¹³⁰ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention Of The Human* (Riverside Books, 1998) p. 357.

Murdoch's moral realism asks us to imagine that if only he had used love's knowledge to see the people around him, to look more attentively at Duncan, at Banquo, he could have seen things as they really were and made better moral decisions.

7. Conclusion

There is something gripping about tragedy, and not just in the sense of Lyotard's *mainmise*. Since Aristotle, philosophers have seen in the genre a microcosm of man's relationship to the universe, and a depth that, as explored above, comedy fails to achieve. Tragedy has perhaps been the artistic genre that has interested philosophers the most; a common ground for literature and philosophy.

One of the reasons for this is the subjective/ objective dichotomy that I outlined in §1.2 and illustrated from various angles. At a first level, we wonder whether tragedy arises out of the play, or out of the audience's reaction: if a tragic tree falls in an empty theatre, does it make a noise? On the one hand, if there is no audience, how can there be catharsis? On the other, if tragedy is indeed systemic, then surely it arises out of the action rather than the reaction.

On a deeper level, tragedy asks us to consider man's relationship to something greater, notably through the process of conflict. Man's inner motives are brought into conflict with wider ethical considerations, and tragedy seems most powerful when both have a valence of 'good': aspiration vs. loyalty; love vs. duty. A more profound story is being told than the fairy tale of good vs. evil, with good prevailing. This is about balance, about realignment, and about the reconciliation with some grander, perhaps even mystical force. Again, we perceive traces of Buddhist thought.

Digging yet deeper, tragedy brings into focus the nature of man's moral choices, if indeed he has any. There is a relentless drive towards death and destruction; we know from the start that the hero is doomed; and yet there is just enough contingency that we ask ourselves 'could it not have been otherwise'? Could their decision-making have been better informed? Why did Macbeth become so obsessed, so blind to the reality of what was going on around him?

We have seen, in §4.9, that the definition of tragedy has political ramifications. This paper is primarily concerned with moral philosophy and, as Hume pointed out, good political philosophy is not necessarily good moral philosophy. However, existentialism tries to be both, and in its characterisation of the human condition as inherently and universally absurd, it at least does not distinguish between commoners and kings: everyone's life is tragic in the non-systemic sense.

One of the purposes of tragedy is to teach us something. Literature is pointing towards some profound truth, just as philosophy also tries to elucidate it. Which of those methods is the more appropriate, the more accurate? As I outlined in §1.2, it depends on the credence that you lend to subjectivity. The magic of the poet is to let you live the subjective experience of the character, whereas the philosophers since Descartes told us that the private world was unknowable and inexpressible. The phenomenologists represented the first move to put the individual back in the frame, because they believed that we can at least compare two subjective experiences. The existentialists enthroned subjectivity, making man completely free of all universals: but this freedom came at a terrible price. *Angoisse*, the leap into the abyss, the isolation. It is not surprising that they turned to literature as a way of pointing up this awful vision. In fact, as we saw in §2.1, the existentialists did not believe that man was free to make moral choices without regard for other people, and there is of course nothing in their philosophy that Macbeth could call upon in his defence.

Philosophers in the second half of the twentieth century held little regard for existentialism, either because it did not seem like ‘real’, (read, ‘analytical’) philosophy at all, or because its removal of absolutes seemed to lead to moral subjectivism. And yet there is something about the way the existentialists described the world that we can all identify with: the absurdity of life; the smallness of man, even armed with all his powers of rationality, against the immutable force of the world. Indeed, this is exactly the world that the tragedians show us. Consider the following quote:

[...] the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and [...] no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. Outside and within man is *l'autre*, the ‘otherness’ of the world [...] It waits for us in ambush at the crossroads. It mocks and destroys us [...] we are punished far in excess of our guilt.¹³¹

That could be straight out of Sartre. In fact, it is Bradley again, describing tragic drama.

Macbeth can be read as an existentialist play, as we saw in §6.1. Perhaps Shakespeare had some kind of prescient intention for it to be so: Jacobean drama often tried to subvert, to emancipate, to throw off the categories of the past, to undermine ideology from within it.¹³²

One of the first philosophers to fall under the spell of existentialism, Iris Murdoch ended up privileging the literary form over the philosophic treatise, as many of the existentialists did. Initially frustrated by the fact that her fellow Oxford philosophers had

¹³¹ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 9.

¹³² Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*.

so little to say about the subjective, she later became disenchanted by the absence of objectivity in existentialism, forging her own path somewhere between the two. As discussed in §3, Murdoch believed that moral choices needed to be made with vision: only by paying attention to other people could we know what was ‘real’, and the easiest way to do that was through love. This is another link between morality and fiction: both want us to recognise the reality of other people, but both know that this can be the hardest thing to see.

Macbeth shows us what happens when when we fail to see what is really going on. Macbeth’s visions are not the ones Murdoch wants us to experience, they are self-obsessed fantasies. And one of the saddest twists is that he has around him people who showed him love; not only his wife but Duncan, that paragon of Murdochian virtue. Using love, Macbeth could have focused his attention outwards and made much better ethical decisions.

I have contrasted tragedy with comedy in §5 and suggested that the latter is ultimately pessimistic. In tragedy, despite the horrors we see on the stage, we emerge from the theatre uplifted. In comedy, we while away the time easily with laughter, but afterwards feel disappointed that our life compares unfavourably to what we just saw: we may even feel at the end of some of Shakespeare’s comedies that the characters themselves are not really happy at the end.

The reasons for this have been outlined in §4.1: art allows us to stare into the abyss but without the danger. We exercise our tragic muscles in an artificial trauma, and notice that our own lives are not as bad as Macbeth’s.

Moreover, as set out in §4 generally, we are uplifted when the ‘ethical substance’ reasserts its authority over the excessive pretensions of the conflicting forces on the stage. This is Nietzsche’s triumph of the Dionysiac urges, Aristotle’s catharsis, Hegel’s reconciliation. Bradley puts it best, ‘In the very excess of this suffering lies man’s claim to dignity [...] hence there is in the final moments of great tragedy [...] a fusion of *grief* and *joy*’.¹³³

In §5, I have suggested that there is perhaps a way out of tragedy, both for the characters on the stage, and for us as we face life’s relentless tragedy. I have claimed that comedy could be a way to emancipate us from the grip of the human condition, but perhaps what is really meant by this is that it is a question of attitude. Camus, although he said he was not an existentialist, points the way, which is to focus on the joy, not on the grief.

¹³³ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 10, emphasis mine.

'Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth'.¹³⁴ In fact, it seems that the trick is to give up hope, to move beyond desire, like the Buddha counselled. Camus tells us that 'the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.'¹³⁵

To come back to *Macbeth*, there is a hint of this at the end of the play although it arises too late for our hero. There is almost something of a Camusian rebellion in the defiance with which, even after his hope is gone, he faces his destiny in the final combat with Macduff. Even after all we have seen him do, Macbeth retains something of our sympathy. If only he had read the existentialists or Murdoch, he might have opened his grasp and dropped the knife; he might even have been happy.

¹³⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus And Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Vintage Books, 1991), p. 122.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

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