Global Plague, Local Pain:
Mourning the Tragedy of Covid

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Abstract:

The recent pandemic, originating in China but eventually spreading to every continent, highlighted the connections and tensions between the global and local, the collective experience and individual suffering. These tensions between the generic and the particular animate traditional dramatic tragedy. This paper therefore draws on the key features of Aristotle's ideas of tragedy – hamartia, anagnorisis, catharsis – to attempt to "read" the tragedy of Covid. Our responses to the global pandemic both conformed to traditional tragic practices and also deconstructed them. But this resistance to tragic pattern and intelligibility positions the Covid event para-doxically in line with many tragedies, both dramatic and historical, in our past. Ultimately, it is argued, the tragic tradition carries a moral and political force. Setting individual events within a wider pattern of narrative has the merit of making intelligible what seems particular. It makes it recognisable and therefore grievable.

Keywords: Covid, Tragedy, Hamartia, Recognition, Mourning

In June 2022, I went down with Covid for the first time in more than two years of the pandemic. I suffered the usual symptoms of those who have already been safely vaccinated: sore throat, headache, fatigue, slight fever. Lying on the sofa I thought how strange it felt that the virus which had damaged the world economy and closed down country after country, from China to Europe, from New Zealand to the USA, had somehow settled now in my own throat. There could be, I reflected, no more graphic an illustration of the global/local nature of the pandemic, the coming together of the general and the particular, than the intimate feeling of harbouring the world's first truly global plague in your own tonsils.

According to Elaine Scarry, understanding another's suffering is as challenging as accessing a "deep subterranean fact" or an "interstellar event". Pain marks the crucial demarcation between an intimate form of knowledge and an estranging bewilderment. "For the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty'", she observes. "For the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt'" (Scarry, 1985, pp. 3, 4). She goes on to elaborate these distinctions. The sufferer finds that physical pain not only cannot be expressed but also shatters language, reducing the sufferer to some prior state which might be considered more immediate and intense than anything accessible to verbalised cognition. Meanwhile the person who witnesses that suffering in another individual is brought to confront his or her necessary distance from that experience and his or her inability ever to fully inhabit or know it on a rational or expressible level. And yet that act of witness can also be an act of imagination as well as of doubt. Pain unmakes the world but attempting to imagine another's pain remakes it.

Scarry's observations on pain, language and the act of witnessing go to the heart of what is at stake in the tragic tradition. Drawing on Sophocles' play *Philoctetes*, Scarry herself considered the relation between agony and language, the reduction of Philoc-

tetes to incoherent cries when the pain of his infected foot becomes more severe. But on a wider level, the distinctions she identifies between experience versus explanation, or between sufferer and witness, are central to thinking about both tragedies on the stage and also the tragic crises of our times. For tragedies like traumatic events "simultaneously defy and demand our witness", according to Cathy Caruth (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). They appeal to our capacity for compassion, for pity and fear when witnessing the suffering of another (Halliwell, 1987, p. 44). Yet at the same time they remind us that we can never fully share that suffering and indeed that there might be degrees of troubling pleasure or at least fascinated curiosity and enjoyment in the very act of viewing the experience of another (Strindberg, 1998, pp. 57-58; Nuttall 2011). Tragedy thus demarcates sharply the experience of the individual from the collective, the local from the global, the immediate from the abstract, while appealing to just such a human capacity to cross such boundaries through sympathy and imagination. Indeed, as George Eliot put it at the end of *Middlemarch*, which rethought tragic representation in the new "medium" of the novel, "the growing good of the world" is partly dependent upon small acts of sympathy and compassion, on the "unhistoric acts" of recognising that other ordinary people have an "equivalent centre of self" to our own (Eliot, 1965, pp. 896; 243). So tragedy, I contend, is traditionally the form in which societies register their sense of grief, responsibility, collective compassion and individual relief at survival and through which they seek a kind of moral wisdom. It is the form in which they express their desire for explanation and their bewilderment at not knowing, while potentially "remaking the world" through their sympathetic act of watching.

The tragic genre has identifiable structures in which to pattern our experience and thereby seek to express and understand it. Set out by Aristotle in his attempt to rationalise and make intelligible the dramatic tradition, the expected features of tragic plays have become well-known in the way we think about the definition of the literary or dramatic form. But these features are also evident in our

everyday experience and identifiable in the global and local phenomenon of the pandemic. There is the issue of the cause of – or responsibility for – the catastrophe that ensues, encapsulated in Aristotle's notion of *hamartia*. There is the playing out of the crisis or catastrophe through narrative which constitutes a form of explanation, or what might be described as the tragic plot (Aristotle's injunction that "well designed plot-structures ought not to begin or finish at arbitrary points, but to follow the principles indicated").[1] And then there is the expectation that the play should conclude with the act of recognition, or *anagnorisis*, implicitly both on the part of the protagonist and the audience. The experience of the Covid pandemic conformed to these Aristotelian features but also re-wrote them. We can thus use the expected features of the tragic genre to try to "read" the tragedy of Covid but we must also simultaneously attend to their deconstruction as tropes for understanding. And, indeed, in that deconstruction Covid paradoxically follows a recognisable trend in tragic drama, that of defying witness and shattering the rules and patterns for expressing suffering.

Hamartia of plague

Tragic plots revolve around the moment when the hero makes the wrong choice or what Aristotle calls the *hamartia,* sometimes wrongly translated as fatal flaw. There is then a very limited period of time between deed and consequences. As soon as Macbeth kills the king, he is damned and unnatural signs of turmoil, such as horses eating each other, follow that very same night. But in certain tragedies there is actually a considerable time lapse between transgression and consequence and indeed it is hard to pinpoint exactly the moment of *hamartia*. In *Oedipus Rex,* for example, Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother years before the play begins

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[1] *The Poetics of Aristotle*, p. 39, chapter 7.

with his journey towards discovery. And even then, those fateful decisions to murder and to marry were arguably not the first tragic choices in the story but were preceded by Oedipus's journey to the oracle at Delphi to find out his parentage, and that was in turn preceded by his parents' tragic choice to seek to destroy him at birth. There's also a case to be made about the tragedy of minor characters, those caught up in the tragic plot, as victims, collateral damage, unwilling participants. *Hamartia* can be dispersed across multiple parties, or indeed one person's *hamartia* can cause tragedy for many people. Agency and responsibility in tragic drama are highly complex, reflecting our continuing sense both of our culpability in world-changing situations and also our inability fully to control them.

And yet the consequences of the Oedipal *hamartia* are evident in the plague that form the opening crisis of the play. Imperceptible at first, the infection has spread inexorably as the pollution and incest at the heart of the city's government has festered undetected. Plague is thus cause and consequence of the play's action, both the source and the symptom, both the immediate catalyst and the longer-term environmental context for the catastrophe that ensues. Plague in tragedy functions, therefore, as a moral litmus. Angry Apollo shoots his plague-filled arrows down on the Greeks for ten days at the beginning of the *Iliad.* Mired in stalemate conflict, disease is a sign of moral corruption in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida.* Pandarus sets the tone with his "whoreson phthisic" and "rheum in [his] eyes" and he infects the whole camp, making their sick bodies now and in the future a sign of wider social sickness:

> …If you cannot weep, yet give some groans,
> Though not for me, yet for your aching bones…
> Till then I'll sweat and seek about for eases,
> And at that time bequeath you my diseases.[1]

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[1] *Troilus and Cressida*, 5.3.104, 107; 5.11.31.17-18, 23-24. *The Norton Shakespeare, based on the Oxford edition*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 1905, 1910-11.

Characters in tragic drama become sick because they have neglected to confront a sin at the very core of their community (*Hamlet*'s "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" leaving ambiguous whether that rottenness is located in the ghost's appearance or in the prince's "wax[ing] desperate with imagination").[1] Even Creon in *Antigone*, responsible for leaving his dead nephew unburied and allowing his niece to be buried alive, is told the news that the altars in his city are being polluted with the pieces of Polyneices' unburied body dropped by birds.[2] Sin is leading to disease and pollution. Human *hamartia* creates the conditions for sickness and infection.

The origins of Covid were somewhat opaque and so inevitably conspiracy theories quickly developed to fill that gap. It's more comforting for people to be given explanations or even secret plots behind world events than it is to acknowledge the role of accident, unpredictability and lack of human control. Conspiracy theories work a little like tragic fate, with the lone conspiracy theorist similar to the soothsayer deciphering the riddling oracle. The truth is to be found hidden beneath the surface and it is somehow reassuring to the theorist to find confirmed their pre-existing distrust of the authorities that supposedly protect us. So, while the general consensus is that the virus emerged in the wild meat or "wet" markets in Wuhan, suspicion focused upon the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where bat coronaviruses are studied, and specifically the human tampering with different strains and proteins of viruses known as "gain of function" research (Dance 2021). Could a supervirus, artificially created in the lab, have accidentally escaped into the community? Was this the Frankenstein-like consequence of interfering with nature, made all the more insidious and powerful because of the efforts to deny it and hush it up? China had delayed

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[1] *Hamlet*, 1.4.67, 64. *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 1684.

[2] Teiresias to Creon: "Sickness has come upon us, and the cause / Is you: Our altars and our sacred hearths / Are all polluted by the dogs and birds / That have been gorging on the fallen body / Of Polyneices": *Antigone*, translated by H.D.F. Kitto (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 35, lines 1014-18.

the quarantining of Wuhan until the 3ʳᵈ week in January, although "Patient Zero", a 70-year old man, fell ill on 1ˢᵗ December (Honigsbaum, 2020, p. 133). Similarly, Oedipus's miasma festers and spreads because it has been hidden, "pollution inbred in this very land", as his brother-in-law Creon says.[1] And for conspiracy theorists any denial is only interpreted as a cover-up, proving all the more powerfully the plots of our rulers.

But you don't need conspiracy theories about lab leaks to interpret Covid-19 as a consequence of our worldwide environmental hubris. Transgressing further and further upon the wild, whether exploring in the bat caves around Wuhan or selling wild animals like wolf cubs and crocodiles at food markets there or chopping down the rainforest in the Amazon, we are perhaps even more guilty of trespass in the twenty-first century then Philoctetes was when he stepped into the holy sanctuary of the goddess Chryse and was inflicted with an unhealable wound on his leg as punishment. Zoonotic diseases – viruses that leap from animals to humans, the spread of infectious diseases between species – are only going to increase with environmental destruction and have not come without warning from veterinary ecologists. Indeed, according to Mark Honigsbaum in *The Pandemic Century*, even at the time of the first SARS outbreak in 2003 scientists could see that "the consumption of exotic sources of protein, urban overcrowding, international jet travel, and the growing interconnectivity of global markets presented" the perfect conditions for a rapidly spreading worldwide plague (Honigsbaum, 2020, p. 136). Natural equilibriums are being upended by human activity and will only get disordered with climate change. In Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Ulysses sets out the classic Early Modern beliefs about the "discord" that follows if you disrupt the moral and political order and "take but degree away":

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[1] *Oedipus the King*, translated by Oliver Taplin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 18, line 97.

> When the planets
> In evil mixture to disorder wander,
> What plagues, and what portents, what mutiny?
> What raging of the sea, shaking of earth?
> Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
> Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
> The unity and married calm of states
> Quite from their fixture. O when degree is shaked,
> Which is the ladder to all high designs,
> The enterprise is sick.[1]

One might see an entanglement of environmental, political and moral disorder lying behind the "sickness" of Covid-19, "diverting and cracking" the "unity and married calm of states" around the world.

In a further tragic irony, of course, the environmental hubris that arguably caused the pandemic has harboured and bred further disasters in its wake, like the festering curses of the Furies. Covid has produced vast quantities of waste products: piles of PPE to be burnt; discarded masks; the plastic vials of testing equipment and vaccines (Mah, 2022). Meanwhile the brief hiatus in air travel, which some thought might have a positive impact on global carbon emissions, seems to have been forgotten quickly with flights in 2023 expected to reach almost 2019 levels .[2] Covid only distracted attention from the climate emergency; it didn't mitigate it at all.

Narratives of Covid

Aristotle famously pointed to the importance of the tragic plot. Every tragedy should have a beginning, a middle and an end; well-constructed plots should not end in random. Tragic narratives are

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[1] *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.109-110; 1.3.94-103. *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 1847.
[2] "Covid-19 Air Travel Recovery", *OAG: Flight Database and Statistics*: https://www.oag.com/coronavirus-airline-schedules-data. Accessed 20th January 2023.

formulated to order, explain or understand inexplicable catastrophe and suffering. They attempt to name the unnameable, combining memory, commemoration, dramatic storytelling and feeling to powerful effect. Homer might create the large epic poem describing the siege of Troy, but Greek tragedies were made up of "large cuts taken from Homer's mighty dinners", finding within the large tragic event, little tragic stories of different individuals caught up in that wider conflict (Athenaeus, 1969, p. 75). One might, in this context, think of a comparison with "reading" the tragedy of 9/11, where the whole catastrophe was triggered by those planes flying into the World Trade Center but contained within it there were multiple tragic narratives: individual choices and lives lost on that day as well as individuals affected by subsequent events happening in the name of 9/11 (Wallace, 2019, pp. 21-28). But just as in tragic drama where events exceed the neat Aristotelian structure and its expectations, so the need to impose a narrative pattern upon events as a form of explanation or comfort is so often thwarted by our experience of excessive, inexplicable suffering, injustice or chaotic violence.

The tragic plot of Covid was arguably an algorithm. There was the trackable time lag between infection, presentation of symptoms, hospitalisation, and death. There was the R number (rate of infection) which, when it rose above 1, indicated the exponential spread of the disease. The pandemic could be understood statistically or even as a graph. We were told in the early days to practise "social distancing" in order to "flatten the curve". We were reduced, accordingly, to statistics and patterns. But individual fear was exacerbated by the sense that no graphs or predictions seemed able to control the future. Country after country closed down, air travel ceased, stock markets crashed. Mary Shelley's prophetic novel *The Last Man* (1826) envisaged just such a global pandemic, an "invincible monster", moving inexorably from Asia to the West and eventually wiping out the human race:

> Nature, our mother and our friend, had turned on us a brow of menace. She shewed us plainly, that, though she permitted us to assign her laws and subdue her apparent powers, yet, if she put forth but a finger, we must quake. She could take our globe, fringed with mountains, girded by the atmosphere, containing the condition of our being, and all that man's mind could invent or his force achieve; she could take the ball in her hand, and cast it into space, where life would be drunk up, and man and all his efforts forever annihilated (Shalley, 1994, p. 232).

Nature, for Shelley, thus takes on ambiguous force, both protecting and annihilating us. On the one hand, the algorithms and statistics of Covid amounted to an instance of Timothy Morton's *hyperobject,* dwarfing the human scale of comprehension (Morton, 2013). But on the other hand, we could read them as society's attempts to understand and contains the virus, an Aristotelian tragic pattern which was then overwhelmed by the even greater *hyperobject* of the pandemic itself.

Covid exposed the incommensurability of global statistics and individual stories. As epidemiologists pointed out, the virus behaves with scientific objectivity, immune to politics and morals, however much politicians might want to wish it away or manipulate it for political ends. Covid doesn't understand national borders, as many quipped at the time. And yet the pandemic revealed the divisive nature of our current politics, the inequality of our world and the very different experiences of individuals suffering its consequences. We only have to look at the disparity of access to vaccines between the wealthiest countries and the Global South, or indeed, in Britain, the mortality rates of the middle or upper classes and the poorest in the country, those workers on the frontline, those of ethnic minority background who were disproportionately affected by Covid. There was a tragic incommensurability between science and politics, between the seemingly inexorable spread of the virus and the stories we tell. Dr Stockmann, in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the*

People, is adamant that the scientific truth behind the contamination of the town's Baths is paramount and simple, only to find that the politics and economics of the town complicate the urgency of his message. "As a doctor and a man of science, you regard this matter of the water-supply as something quite on its own", says the editor of the local newspaper to him. "It probably hasn't struck you that it's tied up with a lot of other things". The poison, the editor goes on to elaborate, is due to the "swamp that our whole community is standing rotting on" (Ibsen, 1960, pp. 25-26).

As the pandemic unfolded, readers turned to plague literature from the past to try to make sense of their experience. Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* helped to reframe the experience of lockdown. Camus's *La Peste* spoke to the early forms of denial and repression associated with an infectious disease running rife through a community and the futile efforts of individuals to avoid their demise. But mostly what became apparent was that pandemic literature itself is haunted by the past, by the traces of traditional culture through which it tries to make sense of catastrophe. Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 novel, *Station Eleven*, does this most strikingly, depicting the impact of a devastating global virus through the experience of a group of travelling players who survive and perform Shakespeare and classical music. The beauty and "spell" of Shakespeare reminds both actors and audience of the value of culture and briefly allows them to escape their current horror through the memory of former "elegance":

> A few of the actors thought Shakespeare would be more relatable if they dressed in the same patched and faded clothing their audience wore, but Kirsten thought it meant something to see Titania in a gown, Hamlet in a shirt and tie (Mandel, 2014, p. 151).

But besides beauty, Shakespeare also offers reassuring examples of precedent to characters in Mandel's novel. Plague closed the theatres several times in Shakespeare's day and *A Midsummer's*

Night's Dream's Titania, queen of the fairies played by one of the protagonists, Kristen, speaks both of the pestilence of 1594 and of the futuristic one of the novel (approximately, 2040), as well as 2020 when the novel enjoyed an even greater popularity: "Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain, as in revenge, have sucked up from the sea contagious fogs" (Mandel, 2014, p. 57). Yet, besides *Station Eleven*, one can see examples of retrieving fragments from the past to "shore up against the ruin" of catastrophe in Ling Ma's novel *Severance*, in which the main character takes photos of New York steeped in the canonical tradition of street photography. Referencing William Eggleston, Stephen Shore and Nan Goldin, Ling Ma's protagonist seeks to continue to make sense of her city within the long history of photographic witness even as Zombie-like horror of the plague takes hold of the world and reduces its victims to a terrifying fog of dementia, erasing them from within (Ma, 2018, pp. 193-195).

Even the extremely bleak *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, which also attracted more readers during Covid, draws upon biblical syntax, setting catastrophe within a religious apocalyptic tradition (McCarthy, 2006; Noble, 2020, pp. 98-106).

Corrupting tragedy, plague narratives both follow the genre and constantly modify it. Indeed, disease deconstructs and eradicates existing reliable structures whether they be physical bodies, society's law and order or even narrative patterns related to literary genre. At the beginning of *Station Eleven*, the actor Arthur Leander collapses and dies on stage halfway through performing *King Lear*; the curtain is brought down and the production closed. But the memory of the play and its extended, torturous, spiraling plot structure ("He hates him much / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer") continues to haunt the whole novel, from the enigmatic, attenuated father/daughter relationship between Arthur and Kristen, to the unexpected acts of kindness between strangers (like the servant tending to Gloucester's blinded eye: *King Lear* 3.7.110-111) to the unravelling of character and identity under pressure ("it

was becoming more difficult to hold on to himself").[1] If Lear exceeds its tragic structure through its "overliving" (Wilson, 2005, pp. 113-128) and its dramatisation of the paradox "the worst is not / So long as we can say 'this is the worst'", so *Station Eleven* evokes and exceeds even that precedent, eroding the human dimensions of tragic plots through the erasure of catastrophe.[2]

As the Chinese are discovering with their ongoing difficulties of easing out of lockdown, it is hard to declare that Covid is over and that the pandemic has run its course. There is no simple narrative pattern to the disease but rather it runs through peaks and troughs, the graphs dipping and spiking but no longer a feature on the nightly news. "Is this the promised end?", Kent asks in *King Lear,* on seeing the horror of the aged king walking onto the stage with his dead daughter in his arms. "Or image of that horror", is the reply from Edgar, pushing back once again that promised satisfaction of a conclusion.[3] With Long Covid still affecting 2.8% of the UK population and 7.5% of the US population but the news agenda now moved on to the war in Ukraine, the global energy crisis and economic hardship, the pandemic is a forgotten, unresolved tragedy, like Ling Ma's Zombie limbo, without the necessary recognition or memory as I will go on to explain (O'Mahoney, 2023).

Recognition or non-recognition

Recognition (ἀναγνωρις) is one of the key features of tragedy, according to Aristotle. This marks the moment, both for the character and for the audience, when potentially everyone realises that no man should be considered blessed until he sees his last days. For philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler, the recognition of "precariousness" or our "common human vulnerability" becomes one of the beneficial wisdoms of tragedy (Nussbaum,

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[1] *King Lear*, 5.3.312-314. *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 2552; *Station Eleven*, p. 194.

[2] *King Lear*, 4.1.28-29. *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 2527.

[3] *King Lear*, 5.3.262-3. *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 2551.

2003, pp. 10-26). When we see the protagonist of tragedy is a "man like ourselves" (Aristotle), when we respond to the face of the other, we can be opened up to "what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself" (Butler, 2004, p. 134). But recognition in Aristotle carries the double sense of the discovery of the unknown and the identification of the already known, so in tragedy it can entail both the process of acknowledgement (Butler, Cavell) and also the reinforcement of existing categories (Markell, 2003). Aristotle argued that the "change from ignorance to knowledge", which the act of recognition entailed, provoked both pity and fear that could be solidified into bonds of friendship or enmity .[1] Tragic fear, then, could provoke hostility, or at least, according to Patchen Markell, reinforce and perpetuate structures of inequality, subordination and dominance, making the world "intelligible" by "stratifying it" (Markell, 2003, pp. 1-2).[2]

Traditionally in tragedy, with recognition comes the time of lament. We think of Theseus in Euripides' play *Hippolytus* taking the gathered pieces of his son's dismembered body "in [his] arms", or Creon with his son Haemon at the close of *Antigone*.[3] Or Lear with Cordelia at the end of *King Lear*. At the close of that play, Lear might not be said to fully "acknowledge" his daughter's separate existence, according to Cavell, or to achieve real recognition of his situation (Lear dies in an "ecstasy" of hope, observed AC Bradley) (Bradley 1905:291) but at least he experiences the non-verbal, non-rational consolation of touch:

> Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.
> Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
> Look there, look there![4]

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[1] *The Poetics of Aristotle*, p. 43, chapter 10.

[2] For a more extensive discussion of the ambiguity of tragic recognition, see Jennifer Wallace, "Photography, Tragedy and Osama bin Laden: Looking at the Enemy", *Critical Quarterly*, 57.2 (2015), pp. 17-35.

[3] *Hippolytus*, translated by James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 79, line 1432; *Antigone*: p. 43, lines 1261-69.

[4] *King Lear*, 5.3.308-310. *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 2552.

Tragic recognition takes bodily rather than intellectual form, as characters absorb the information slowly. Pain and loss have to be felt along the heart, as the chorus sing in Robert Fagles' beautiful translation of the *Oresteia*:

> We cannot sleep, and drop by drop at the heart
> the pain of pain remembered comes again,
> and we resist, but ripeness comes as well.
> (Aeschylus, 1979, p. 109)

Only the through drip-drip of shared grief can we be said to reach some understanding, to "suffer into truth" as Fagles puts it, his translation of *pathei mathos* in the Greek.[1] The phrase means some sort of relationship between suffering and learning, although exactly how suffering leads to learning or how the two words are connected grammatically or philosophically is precisely what tragedy explores.

But Covid lockdown rules meant that people were unable to mourn. Elderly parents quarantined in care homes could only wave through a window. Those dying from Covid in hospital were attended only by hospital staff while families were forced to say goodbye to their relatives over Facetime, an experience I had with my own dying father. The last view many Covid victims would have had were of unknown nurses and doctors in full PPE. Medical masks, the sign – as Birgit Dawes has argued – of the very risk which they serve to prevent, "dissolv[ing] … the boundary between identity and alterity", also became like tragic masks, hiding individual identity in some larger ritualistic and performative collectivity, which tokens both a common vulnerability and a distancing fear (Dawes, 2021, p. 7). Those dying of Covid were and at the same time were not *recognised* in the tragic sense. Indeed, the double sense of estrangement and need for the acknowledgement of the human face was encapsulated in the decision by some hospital nurses and therapists to attach pictures of their unmasked faces to their chests, so

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[1] Fagles, p. 109, line 179; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1926), p. 18, line 177.

that they could be "seen" in printed, laminated form while their actual faces were obscured in alien type masks, goggles and plastic visors (See figure 1) (Asmelash and Ebrhahimji, 2020). Representation was more recognisable than the surreal reality of the crisis.

Figure 1

In place of family funerals and the opportunity during the pandemic for real mourning and in order to confront the strangely attenuated tragedy of the virus, a community-generated monument to a hidden pandemic has grown up from the metaphorical grassroots in the UK. The Covid Memorial Wall stretches bet ween Westminster and Lambeth bridges along the River Thames in London directly opposite the Houses of Parliament (Figure 2). Red hearts were painted all along it and families from across the country come to claim a heart and write the name of their loved one lost to Covid. It is demotic, haphazard and uncontrolled, and even now it is unclear how long it will be permitted to remain. But

Figure 2

it follows a tradition of displaying the dead for lament and witness that goes back to Greek tragedy. Like the bodies rolled out on the *ekkyklema* in the theatre for the chorus and the audience to mourn, the wall's hearts, which stretch as far as the eye can see, force a public recognition of the more than 150,000 lives lost in the UK,

partly because of the wrong decisions or *hamartia* of the government opposite. This, it seems to me, is the British tragic site of Covid.

Generic intelligibility and the question of catharsis

According to one interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, his notion of catharsis marks the crucial break between the experience of tragedy in the world and the aesthetic enjoyment of tragedy in the theatre. If catharsis is translated as purging or "washing us free *of* the emotions", then the implication is that the spectator is detached from what is viewed and that he or she exploits that spectacle for therapeutic effect. This allows us, as Brecht believed, to leave the dramatic performance entertained, satisfied and ready to continue ordinary life unperturbed and unchanged (Brecht, 1964, p. 181). But if, on the other hand, catharsis is translated as purifying or "washing the emotions", then the implication is that watching tragedy doesn't detach us aesthetically from the suffering but rather it makes us more sensitive to future watching.[1] Catharsis in this case becomes more immersive and participatory – a process that we all collectively go through. The global pandemic might seem amenable to the second notion. While we cannot make sense of it yet, we might feel our continued sympathetic witnessing of it make us more attuned to thinking about it in the future.

The experiences of Covid are, in many ways, unthinkable and un-representable. They are hard to fathom partly because they are so recent; they have scarcely had time to settle from event into narrative, from experience into knowledge. They also have often removed individuals from the picture, making the pandemic seem not understandable on a human scale. This crisis, we might say, has *disfigured* our imaginations. It has removed the individual figures

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[1] *The Poetics of Aristotle*, p. 37, chapter 6. See Halliwell's commentary on this passage: pp. 89-90. The literal alternative translations from the Greek "δι᾽ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν" (1449b) are my own.

that make compassion possible – or it literally has prevented the natural processes of grief and mourning.

Yet, through the exploration of *hamartia*, dramatic plot and forms of recognition and lament, we can project the human scale back into the inhuman, global disaster. Thinking about our contemporary world involves a tussle between figural interpretation and disfiguration (Harries, 2007, pp. 103-114). Tragedy can be thought of as a figurative and figuring way of seeing, both in the sense of reminding us of the figure in history, with his or her own feelings and desires, and also in the Erich Auerbach sense of reading one historical event in light of another (Auerbach, 1959, p. 53). Setting individual stories into a wider, traditional pattern of narrative or theatre has the merit of making intelligible what seems particular. It makes it recognisable and therefore grievable.

Of course, despite Aristotle's analysis in the *Poetics*, tragic dramas are not strictly patterned. Classical tragedy acknowledges its own blindspots and resistances, and frequently does not conform to, or confine itself within, the pattern. So, reading the experiences of the pandemic now, *figuring* them again, in the tradition of tragedy is by no means to order them. But it is to pay attention to the wider narratives of our times and to think about the attempts to make week-to-week events intelligible through that patterning. This might be the start of action, informing and revising the structures of feelings and ideas of tragedy that respond to social disorder and recuperating a sense of what we all share, what we hold generically in common.

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