

*aesthetic* – reading of the whole of Book X and especially of the Myth of Er at the end, and not just of the notorious opening section about the banishment of poets, has convinced one commentator and at least one of his readers that this is not in fact Plato's final answer (Sinaiko 1998). In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* Iris Murdoch asks this question, too. What she says there, adumbrated in the remarks I have quoted and developed here, indicates that she thinks this may also be the deepest question about life itself.

#### Acknowledgment

To James Shelley, Brian Kierland, and especially Dom Lopes I am grateful for help with the ideas and their expression in this chapter.

## IMAGINING THE TRUTH

### An account of tragic pleasure

*James Shelley*

The problem of tragedy – sometimes called “the paradox of tragedy” – has been understood in various ways. I will understand it here simply as the problem of explaining why tragedy gives us the pleasure it does, given that it has the content it has. In what follows, I propose a series of constraints that I claim any adequate solution to the problem must satisfy, and then I develop a solution that satisfies those constraints. But I do not claim that the solution I develop uniquely satisfies the constraints I propose. I aim merely to narrow the field of contending solutions, and then to draw attention to an overlooked contender in that narrowed field.

#### I

I propose that an adequate solution to the problem must satisfy four constraints:

(1) *The solution must be of the pain–pleasure variety.* In his *Values of Art*, Malcolm Budd distinguishes between pain–pleasure and no-pain solutions to the problem of tragedy: pain–pleasure solutions posit complex hedonic responses to tragedy – responses that combine pain and pleasure, the pleasure presumably overbalancing the pain; no-pain solutions posit wholly pleasurable responses to tragedy (Budd 1995: 116–19). I am unsure what need there is for an argument on behalf of pain–pleasure solutions. It seems obvious that our experience of tragedy is not one of unalloyed pleasure. In fact, it is not clear that anyone has ever really disagreed. Budd controversially interprets Hume as giving a no-pain solution, and notes that Aristotle can be controversially interpreted as also giving one (Budd 1995: 110–16). Still, however plausible the claim that someone has given a no-pain solution, considerably less plausible will be the claim that they set out to do so. When Hume, for example, sets out to explain why tragedy pleases when it seems that it should not, he does not additionally set out to explain why tragedy does not pain when it seems it should. That tragedy does not pain is simply not a datum to be explained; if anything, it is an unforeseen consequence of explaining what is to be explained: tragic pleasure. This leads me to believe that if the

no-pain theorist does exist, he likely begins in the pain-pleasure camp, and only defects once he finds that he cannot explain why tragedy pleases without denying that it pains.

(2) *The pain and pleasure must be internally related.* Pain-pleasure solutions can be divided into two kinds: those asserting a mere concurrence of pain and pleasure, and those asserting a relation between them, whether causal or essential. Given that it is the content of tragedy that pains us, the search for a source of merely concurrent pleasure will likely focus on form, as it does, for example, in Santayana:

The agreeableness of the presentation is ... mixed with the horror of the thing; and the result is that while we are saddened by the truth, we are delighted by the vehicle that conveys it to us. The mixture of these emotions constitutes the peculiar flavour and poignancy of pathos.

(Santayana 1988: 138)

More recently, Mark Packer has argued that certain solutions to the problem – Aristotle's, in particular – fail because of the erroneous assumption "that a causal or intentional relation must hold between the positive and negative affects produced by tragic drama" (Packer 1989: 211). Packer's own solution locates the source of tragic pain in tragedy's presentation of "individual fictional characters and their particular plights" (Packer 1989: 216) and the source of tragic pleasure in the "organization, necessity and universality" that tragedy embodies (Packer 1989: 217). But I think an insuperable difficulty faces any such merely concurrent pain-pleasure solution. Insofar as the pain and pleasure of tragedy are merely concurrent, there is no reason to believe that the pleasure cannot be had independently of the pain, and so no reason to endure the pain to have the pleasure. Tragedy has no monopoly on agreeableness of presentation, nor on organization, necessity, and universality. So why submit ourselves to tragedy to experience the pleasures these afford? I think that Aristotle's assumption is right: the pleasure and pain of tragedy must be so related that the pleasure cannot be prised from the pain.

(3) *The pleasure must be one of relief.* Aristotle is right, too, about the particular kind of pleasure to be explained. For the problem of tragedy is not the problem of explaining how tragedy might yield some pleasure or other: no problem I know of has its solution in an explanation of how tragedy might yield garden-variety formal or mimetic pleasure. The problem of tragedy is the problem of explaining how tragedy yields its proper pleasure, that is, tragic pleasure. Aristotle describes that pleasure as one of relief, and while I am not proposing that an adequate solution must describe tragic pleasure in precisely this way, I am proposing that the pleasure it explains must be so describable. At a minimum, this means that the pleasure must be backward-looking, since to take relief *in* one thing is always to take relief *from* some other. A further consequence is that the explanation of that pleasure must be backward-looking as well, since explaining a pleasure of relief requires reference both to the thing we take relief in and to the thing we take relief from. So a solution, for example, that describes tragic pleasure as a species of delight, and then concentrates merely on features inherent in

tragedy in explaining such pleasure, both fastens on the wrong pleasure and offers an explanation of a correspondingly wrong kind. But a solution, for example, that describes tragic pleasure as a pleasure of resignation, as Schopenhauer's does; or as a pleasure of consolation or comfort, as Nietzsche's does; or as a pleasure of liberation, as Freud's does; and then in explanation of that pleasure appeals both to tragedy itself and to the troubling situation from which tragedy delivers us – as Aristotle's, Schopenhauer's, Nietzsche's, and Freud's do – such a solution both fixes on the right kind of pleasure and offers an explanation of the correspondingly right kind.

(4) *The solution must be consistent with – if not explanatory of – the high value traditionally accorded the greatest tragedies.* Satisfying this final constraint may seem comparatively easy. But, if I understand him correctly, Budd thinks it difficult, perhaps impossible, that any pain-pleasure solution should do so. When I earlier noted Budd's distinction between no-pain and pain-pleasure solutions, I did not note his distinction of a third category – no-pleasure solutions – nor that his own solution falls within it. A no-pleasure solution is not a solution that denies that tragedy pleases us; rather, it is a solution that denies that pleasure plays a prominent role in explaining why we value tragedy. A no-pleasure solution, then, is not a solution to the problem of tragedy as I have defined it, but a solution to a broader problem that Budd refers to as "the problem of the nature and value of tragic experience" (Budd 1995: 116). In offering his own no-pleasure solution to this problem, I think that Budd provides one of the best explanations of the high esteem in which we traditionally hold the greatest tragedies. The high value we place on tragedy, he maintains, is in large part a function of the high value we place on the truth it makes available to us:

... the reason a spectator finds it intrinsically rewarding to submit herself to a process that involves her suffering over imagined tragedy is that she values acknowledging truths about possibilities inherent in human life, no matter how unpleasant they may be – truths that in everyday life, whenever possible, she is liable to push to the fringes of her consciousness.

(Budd 1995: 202)

I think that Budd is right to link our esteem for tragedy to its capacity to get us to own up to truths that we disown in everyday life. But why make this point in service of a no-pleasure solution? Budd never answers this question, but I suspect its answer lies in his inability to find a link between tragedy's capacity for asserting its painful truths and its capacity for pleasing. After all, given that the truths in question are so unpleasant that in everyday life we push them to the fringes of consciousness, why should they please when forced on us by tragedy? All the same, I think there are reasons for preferring a solution that managed somehow to link the two capacities. One reason appeals to our long history of thinking that pleasure must figure prominently in an account of tragedy's value. Budd, so far as I know, is among the first to maintain otherwise, and this raises the question

why so many philosophers – some with sharply varying notions of the role pleasure plays in our everyday lives – have agreed that pleasure plays a central role in our valuing tragedy when it does not. Of course they could all be wrong, but their all being so would itself require explanation, and this is something Budd does not undertake. A second concern is that it is not clear how a no-pleasure solution can make sense of the way we look forward to attending performances of tragedy. We believe that trips to the dentist are valuable: we are willing to part with money and to brave pain for the good dentistry provides. But we do not look forward to such trips. Why, if Budd's solution were correct, would our attitude toward attending tragedy be any different?

## II

I will take a step toward offering my own solution by considering Freud's essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming." Ritchie Robertson has recently dismissed this essay as "notoriously inadequate" because it "does nothing to explain the power of great art, although or because it deals with painful material, to give us a feeling of satisfaction, harmony, and uplift" (Robertson 1999: xxi). Whether Robertson is right depends on how strong a claim he is making. If the claim is simply that Freud ultimately fails to explain how art that deals with painful material might (among other things) please us, it is true enough. But if the claim is that Freud says nothing of use in explaining how art dealing with painful material might please us, then it is false, as I hope to show.

Freud claims that we take pleasure in works of narrative fiction because they, like daydreams, present as fulfilled one or more of our unfulfilled desires. This may make it seem as if pleasure in narrative fiction just is pleasure in the contemplation of pleasant content – pleasure in the contemplation of a pleasant fictional world. But while Freud does not deny that we take such pleasure (he thinks that the pleasure we take in narrative fiction "probably arises from the confluence of many sources" [Freud 1959: 153]), his emphasis is less on the content of the fictional world than on the troubling situation from which contemplation of that world releases us. Wish-fulfillments are essentially "correction[s] of unsatisfying reality" (Freud 1959: 146), and "our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds" (Freud 1959: 153) – tensions between wishes or desires that the world be one way and the reality that it is some other. So narrative fiction relieves us from a world that is in tension with desire by replacing it with a world that is not.

Clearly this account cannot be made to apply to tragedy without serious accommodation, for the obvious reason that tragedy appears to be the very opposite of wish-fulfillment: in the fictional worlds tragedy portrays it is not desire but fear that appears to find fulfillment. Freud's strategy is to explain away this appearance. If we do not recognize tragedies as wish-fulfillments, this is because we have disowned the wishes they fulfill: the wishes that find fulfillment in tragedy tend to be sufficiently abhorrent to consciousness to have been banned from it.

So – to take the obvious example – we take pleasure in *Oedipus the King* because it liberates us from a world in which our unconscious oedipal desires are unsatisfied by giving us instead a world in which they are satisfied.

However resourceful this accommodation, I think that the fear-fulfilling appearance of tragedy cannot be explained away, at least not the way Freud attempts here. A glance at the argument of "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" will bring this out. At its center is a comparison between the content of daydreams and the content of popular narrative fiction. That daydreams are wish-fulfillments is obvious given their content. So to the degree that we find an overlap of content in works of popular fiction, we have reason to believe that they too are wish-fulfillments. And we do tend to find similar content in such works: we find "a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means"; we find that "the women in the novel invariably fall in love with the hero"; we find that "the other characters in the story are sharply divided into good and bad," such that "the 'good' ones are the [hero's] helpers, while the 'bad' ones are [his] enemies and rivals" (Freud 1959: 150). And, finally, there is the "one feature above all that cannot fail to strike us about the creations of these story-writers" – that the hero seems to have been placed "under the protection of a special Providence":

If, at the end of one chapter of my story, I leave the hero unconscious and bleeding from severe wounds, I am sure to find him at the beginning of the next being carefully nursed and on the way to recovery; and if the first volume closes with the ship he is on going down in a storm at sea, I am certain, at the opening of the second volume, to read of his miraculous rescue – a rescue without which the story could not proceed. The feeling of security with which I follow the hero throughout his perilous adventures is the same as the feeling with which a hero in real life throws himself into the water to save a drowning man or exposes himself to the enemy's fire in order to storm a battery. It is the true heroic feeling, which one of our best writers has expressed in the inimitable phrase: "Nothing can happen to *me!*" It seems to me, however, that through this revealing characteristic of invulnerability we can immediately recognize His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every daydream and of every story.

(Freud 1959: 149–50)

I have no complaint with the argument so far. I think it is a good argument to the conclusion that some works of narrative fiction are wish-fulfillments. But Freud wants to broaden this conclusion to encompass all imaginative writings. He concedes that he is "perfectly aware that very many imaginative writings are far removed from the model of the naïve day-dream," but yet finds that he cannot "suppress the suspicion that even the most extreme deviations from that model could be linked with it through an uninterrupted series of transitional cases" (Freud 1959: 150). I do not doubt Freud's suspicion, but you can grant it without

granting anything interesting about works deviating from the model of the naïve daydream: the most the truth of Freud's suspicion could show is that the line blurs between works we have reason to believe are wish-fulfillments and works for which we have no such reason. But the problem is not merely that Freud has failed to give us reason to believe that all works of narrative fiction are wish-fulfillments; the problem is that he has given us good reason to believe that some are not. For the content characteristic of tragedy does not merely deviate from the content characteristic of wish-fulfillment: the content characteristic of tragedy crucially opposes the content characteristic of wish-fulfillment. Consider the feature of wish-fulfillment that Freud makes so much of. If it counts as evidence toward a work's being a wish-fulfillment that its hero seems to have been placed "under the protection of a special Providence," that he is sure to evade disaster no matter how he flirts with it, that, in short, "nothing can happen to him," then it must count as evidence against a work's being a wish-fulfillment that its hero seems to have been placed – perhaps has been placed – under some divine condemnation, that he is sure to succumb to disaster no matter how he strives to avoid it, that there is, in short, nothing that cannot happen to him.

If tragedy appears to be the opposite of wish-fulfillment, then this is because it is. Why think, then, that "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" is of use in explaining how tragedy might please us? I think it is of use precisely because tragedy is the opposite of wish-fulfillment. My hypothesis is that if you take Freud's account of the pleasure of wish-fulfillment and invert it at the right point, you will have the basis of a solution to the problem of tragedy that will satisfy the four constraints proposed above. Freud, if I have understood him, believes that wish-fulfillment pleases us by resolving a tension between desire and reality. But a tension between desire and reality is, in principle, resolvable in either of two directions. Wish-fulfillment pleases us by resolving the tension in favor of desire: it liberates us from a world in which desire has been thwarted by reality by replacing it with a situation in which desire prevails. Tragedy pleases us, I conjecture, by resolving that same tension, though in reality's favor: it liberates us from a world in which reality has been thwarted by desire by replacing it with a world in which reality prevails.

### III

I will try to lend both clarity and plausibility to this conjecture by explaining what this talk about desire and reality thwarting one another comes to, conceding from the start that the explanation will proceed at a regrettably abstract level.

Both desire and reality constrain belief. To say that reality constrains belief is simply to say that belief is constrained by what is the case, or, more precisely, by what is the case according to the best available evidence (I shall ignore this qualification in the future, as nothing here rides on it). But the fact of self-deception implies that we cannot explain all belief by appeal to this constraint: in cases of self-deception we believe the world to be a certain way not because it is but

because we desire it to so be (Mele 1987: 125). That reality constrains belief I take to be uncontroversial; that desire additionally does, I take to be no more controversial than the existence of self-deception.

I will say that beliefs are *troubled* to the degree that these two constraints oppose one another. Troubled beliefs present a continuum, running from those in which the truth-constraint clearly prevails to those in which the desire-constraint clearly does. I will call belief of the former kind *truth-prevalent* and belief of the latter kind *desire-prevalent* (insofar as they are false, which in the normal case they are, desire-prevalent beliefs are self-deceptive). I see no reason to believe that troubled beliefs divide without remainder into these two kinds: between them we will presumably find a series of cases in which neither constraint clearly prevails.

Troubled beliefs, then, are beliefs that we are under some constraint or pressure not to have. We resist having them, with a resistance proportional to the strength of the non-prevailing or thwarted constraint. The pleasures proper to wish-fulfillment and tragedy, I propose, are the pleasures of being relieved of such pressure – the pleasures of being able to give in to that which, in everyday life, we have been resisting. I propose that the pleasure proper to wish-fulfillment is the pleasure of giving into the pressure exerted by desires on truth-prevalent beliefs. Wish-fulfillment relieves us from the pressures of thwarted desires by replacing a world in which the truth prevails over those desires with a world in which it does not. I propose that the pleasure proper to tragedy is the pleasure of giving into the pressure exerted by reality on a desire-prevalent belief. Tragedy relieves us from the pressures of thwarted truths by replacing a world in which desire prevails over those truths with a world in which this does not happen.

With this in mind I want to return to Budd's remark about the value of tragedy, cited in the opening section of this chapter:

... the reason a spectator finds it intrinsically rewarding to submit herself to a process that involves her suffering over imagined tragedy is that she values acknowledging truths about possibilities inherent in human life, no matter how unpleasant they may be – truths that in everyday life, whenever possible, she is liable to push to the fringes of her consciousness.

(Budd 1995: 202)

Budd, we recall, makes this remark in service of his no-pleasure solution to the problem of the value of tragedy, convinced, it seems, that tragedy's alleged capacity for pleasing cannot be linked with its capacity for bringing to consciousness "truths about possibilities inherent in human life" that are so unpleasant that we have pushed them from it. I have now asserted a link between the two. We take pleasure in the truths tragedy forces into consciousness precisely because we have been forcing those truths from consciousness. It is because we have been resisting such truths in everyday life that we take such relief in being able to give in to them in tragedy.

There is, however, this asymmetry between tragedy and wish-fulfillment. The reason that truth does not prevail over desire in wish-fulfilling fictional worlds is that desire faces no opposition there. The truths that thwart desire in the everyday world are replaced in wish-fulfilling fictional worlds by fictional truths that are in concert with desire. The reason that desire does not prevail over truth in tragic fictional worlds, however, is not that truth is unopposed there. The desires that thwart truth in the everyday world are not replaced in tragic fictional worlds by fictional desires that are in concert with the truth. Desire, unlike truth, holds constant across the fictional/nonfictional divide. So in tragic worlds truth prevails though not unopposed – it prevails over the very desires that prevailed over it in the everyday world. So whereas the move from engagement in the everyday world to engagement in a wish-fulfilling world is a move from a troubling situation to a non-troubling one, the move from engagement in the everyday world to engagement in tragedy is a move from one troubling situation to another. Thus whereas the relief of wish-fulfillment may be likened to the relief of temporarily laying down a burden, the relief of tragedy is more like the relief of temporarily shifting a burden, say, from one set of muscles to another. This difference between tragedy and wish-fulfillment may help to explain the comparative ease with which we depart from everyday contexts to wish-fulfilling as opposed to tragic contexts. It may also help to explain the comparative popularity of wish-fulfillment over tragedy.

But while there is this asymmetry, and it seems to favor wish-fulfillment, it is balanced by a second asymmetry, one that seems to favor tragedy. Although wish-fulfillment substitutes non-troubling fictional truths for troubling real truths, we do not actually get to believe those substitute fictional truths, nor (more importantly) do we actually get to disbelieve the real truths they have replaced. Wish-fulfillment replaces – or perhaps, more accurately, displaces – a troubling *belief* with an opposing, non-troubling *make-belief*. So we are not actually but merely imaginatively liberated from that troubling belief. And though the relief afforded by this imaginative liberation is real enough, it is not comparable, I think, to the relief afforded by actually being liberated from troubled belief. Tragedy, as noted, replaces a troubling falsehood with a no less troubling truth, but it is a truth that we actually get to believe, and the falsehood it replaces is a falsehood that we actually get to disbelieve. Tragedy – so long as its spell lasts – replaces belief not with make-belief, but with belief. This difference between tragedy and wish-fulfillment may help to explain the comparative power of the former.

Both asymmetries point to a question regarding tragedy corresponding to which there is no question regarding wish-fulfillment: how does tragedy secure the prevalence of truths over the very desires that, in everyday life, prevail over those truths? How, in other words, does tragedy secure our belief in truths that we are unable to believe in everyday life?

This question deserves a much more complicated answer than the one I am about to give, in spite of the fact that the answer I am about to give begins with the admission that things are more complicated than I have let on. Just now I said that in tragic worlds truth prevails over the very desires that prevailed over it in

the everyday world. But this cannot be true. Tragedies are works of fiction. Tragic worlds – the worlds tragedies prescribe that we imagine – are fictional worlds, and so are composed of fictional, not real, truths (Walton 1990: 41–3). So it cannot be true that real truths prevail over real desires in fictional worlds, since there are no real truths in fictional worlds. I also said, just now, that tragedy replaces belief not with make-belief, but with belief. But this too now appears suspect, for similar reasons. Tragic worlds consist of fictional truths, and fictional truths are objects not of belief but of make-belief (Walton 1990: 39–41). It thus seems that it cannot be true that tragedy replaces belief with belief.

When I said the things that now appear suspect, if not patently false, I was speaking loosely. Speaking strictly, in tragic worlds it is not a real truth but a fictional one that prevails over our desires, and we do not, of course, believe but make-believe that fictional truth. But the fictional truth that prevails over our desires is the same in content as a truth over which those very desires have been prevailing in everyday life: we make-believe that *p*, where *p* is a true proposition that our desires have been preventing us from believing.

These considerations, I suggest, will lie at the heart of a complete answer to the complicated question at hand. For however resistant we are to believing certain propositions, we are surely less resistant to imagining them to be true. And all that tragedy *ostensibly* asks of us is that we imagine, and where is the harm in that? We know that nothing that happens in a performance or reading of a tragedy is real. We know, in particular, that the calamities that engulf tragic heroes will not spill across the fictional/nonfictional divide to engulf us. What we do not suspect is that tragedy has linked our assenting to the fictional truth of certain propositions to our assenting to their truth. Suppose that a particular tragedy prescribes that we assent to the fictional truth of the proposition that a good man, acting in accordance with his best judgment, acts in a way that leads, unforeseeably though with astonishing ease, to his own destruction. In assenting to this fictional truth, we assent to the fictional truth of the proposition that a good man, acting in accordance with his best judgment, *may* act in a way that thus leads to his own destruction. At the same time we see that there is nothing fiction-specific about the relation between the man, his actions, and the destruction they unforeseeably bring. For we see the man performing the actions, and the actions leading to the destruction, all in accordance with the standards of probability and necessity at work in our own world (Aristotle 1987: 40). And though there may be fiction-specific elements to the man and to his destruction, they are not fiction-specific in ways that prevent our seeing the man as genuinely human and our seeing his destruction as a genuine – and terribly near – human possibility. And so we assent, in spite of ourselves, to the truth of the proposition that such a man, acting in accordance with his best judgment, may act in a way that thus leads to his own destruction.

In this way, tragedy may be said to smuggle assent to tragic propositions across the fiction/reality border. We find ourselves believing something that until now we had been unable to believe. And, if the central thesis of this chapter is correct, we find ourselves pleased to believe it.