

The Holocaust and the Survival of Tragedy

Samuel Hux

I have read and heard it said that the fact and specter of the Holocaust have rendered morally obsolete the traditional notion of Tragedy, once considered mankind's most painfully noble mode of art. Tragedy assumed a morally ordered and rational universe—so the argument goes—which contained and structured in some ultimately reassuring way our reactions to the tragic event, no matter how painful. The Holocaust has destroyed that universe, or that orderly conception; consequently, Tragedy cannot speak to us of our particular dislocations, the Holocaust included. Individual works may work for us, but as something other than Tragedy: melodrama, minor psychological intuitions, pure form moving like music. *If* they work as Tragedy, they do so as the still-pleasing archaic form of another age, revealing that older peoples had their depths too, even though they hadn't experienced the terrible knowledge we have. If this isn't condescension, it's as close as a patronizing respect can come.

I should not want to get things backward: I indulge no inane belief that the Holocaust was not one of the most terrifying and soul-sickening events in history. Nor do I wish to make absurd priorities: The least significant fact about the Holocaust may be its effect upon literary modes and criticism. But I would like to suggest that the particular obituary for Tragedy is nonsense. It does poor service both to the noble idea of Tragedy and to the brutal fact of the Holocaust; it trivializes the first and makes the second merely mystifying.

It is almost unbearable that we should learn *anything* from the Holocaust, that such suffering, on a scale to defy the imagination and with a precision to pierce the heart, should serve to make us wise; it is intolerable that it should not, or that we should draw from it a false wisdom. If the Holocaust forces one to question the shape of the moral universe (and how could it not?), it need not compel us to assign traditional Tragedy to the

museum; for Tragedy is the mode of art, I suggest, most skeptical of an orderly arrangement of things-as-they-are and most capable of saying something consequential about the Holocaust. But not, let it be noted, something reassuring. The Holocaust is, among a thousand things, one immense story revealing precisely the major theme of traditional Tragedy: the fragility of human culture before the state of nature. Human culture—that supreme and necessary fiction, which is all the more fragile because it never quite *is*, is always *becoming*; realizing itself, when it does, as an intimation, like the promise of divine revelation, through our covenant with the future. This requires some elaboration.

The rationally ordered world Aristotle assumes in *The Poetics* is the body of *the literary work itself*, ordered so that—as in his prize example, *Oedipus Rex*—if this happens, then so will that, with aesthetic inevitability. A decision made with noble purpose and faulty knowledge to find out the slayer of Laius and remove the plague from Thebes will lead through “reversal of situation” and “recognition scene” to predictable catastrophe. I know no plot so tight and ordered. But when all is over, one question is left unanswered in a kind of resounding silence: Oedipus was chosen from birth to grow up to murder his father and sexually violate his mother—*why*? In service of what necessity in the moral universe? The necessity just *is*; the arbitrary cosmic decision has simply *been made*; and on and on back into obscurity. What's knowable is the *expense*. I am too timid to presume that Aristotle was oblivious to the profounder questions resonating in the play, whose aesthetic parts he analyzes for us. Hegel, in his aesthetic lectures, makes no motions toward a merely formal analysis of tragic plot; he is frankly after a tragic vision of experience. But his theories too yield ultimately to some darker unknowable.

In a tragic plot two “ethical forces,” which singly are justifiable, are pushed into collision by their single-minded proponents (for instance, Antigone and Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*), who are then mangled in the

SAMUEL HUX, a frequent contributor, teaches English at York College (CUNY). In connection with this article Mr. Hux wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Nathan Golden (1904-1976).

process. The audience witnessing this tragic collision, although "rudely shaken" by the fates of the protagonists, is reconciled to their destruction as a signal that the "Eternal Justice" that can accommodate both conflicting "ethical forces" has reasserted itself. Although Hegel does not employ the famous triadic language in his aesthetic lectures, he is clearly using that methodology to order his commentary: one conflicting dramatic agent embodying a thesis, the other its antithesis, and the cathartic return of Eternal Justice the synthesis. What happens in dramatic miniature is what happens as History unravels, as the Idea realizes itself through Time. If this means that History itself is tragic, there is nothing very shocking in that; not if Tragedy is the abrogated conflict revealing Eternal Justice—and if one can sustain this Olympian view.

Perhaps one can sustain that view while studiously contemplating the broad sweep of the World Spirit and the World Historical Individual and so on. But not when contemplating events on stage, which are just as intractable as in experienced life, where it does one poorly to be told his sufferings are thetical and antithetical moments giving birth to the synthetical. What impresses one on stage or in life is the *human expense*. Rumbling philosophical epics of the inexorability of history, intellectually thrilling in their scope, have a tendency when revealed in the observable and costly event to seem a pattern of insanity: the conception of a clever maniac who speaks the language of the sane. Again, the dark unknowable.

Now, it seems to me this was what Nietzsche was talking about in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche: the third of those great theorists of Tragedy, whose works any subsequent theories are to some degree commentary upon or correction of. Nietzsche: whom everyone senses has something to say to our century.

In Tragedy the irrational speaks rationally and the rational speaks irrationally; we hear the voices and we're moved. The difference between the Dionysian and the Apollonian is that between the frenzied and the sober, the indiscriminate and the individuated, the raw and the cooked; at its most inclusive, the state of nature and the civilized order. A tragic drama is as if the terrifying and compelling life-death of Dionysus had been reconceived by Apollo, god of art and reason: the dark but fascinating content and the graceful form sustaining a tension one against the other.

Without the structured story, delineation of character, grounding of events in the realm of individuated human action (the Apollonian aspects) being interposed between the viewer and the profounder content of the drama (the primordial Dionysiac rhythm of things beneath civilized order), the viewer could not remain "unshattered" by the "echoes of innumerable cries of weal and woe sounding out of the 'vast spaces of cosmic night'"—these are the cries that threaten the "paltry glass bell of his individuality." Yet the fine order and aesthetic discrimination do not quite subdue the Dionysiac rhythms to their purpose. Persisting in the

obscure regions of the viewer's mind is the terrifying (and, to the *young* Nietzsche, attractive) vision of those "vast spaces," for as the drama moves toward closing, "the Dionysiac element triumphs once again: ...the Apollonian drama is projected into a sphere where it begins to speak with Dionysiac wisdom, thereby denying itself and its Apollonian concreteness."

I am somewhat embarrassed by all this: the claptrap language and sentiment of German romanticism, the worshipfulness toward the Dionysian terror. Were Nietzsche's Dionysian vision a kind of Edenic metaphor one might applaud or be nonplussed by his innocence, but it's not a *garden* he has in mind; rather a kind of Hobbesian *jungle*, although less prosaic, less the image of upright predators at one another and more the fluid and slippery poetic image of weird rhythms, compelling lusts, psychedelic currents of feelings and blood urges, wonderful agonies and dreadful joys. But for all the silly vatarism, Nietzsche was on to the truth about the tragic mode of art, was right about how it works on stage and upon audience: the "vast spaces of cosmic night" overcoming the play's orderly and temporarily reassuring structure, or making that structure speak to our hearing the grammarless language of disorder.

That we can hear, although not applaud as Nietzsche suggests we grudgingly should, means we know the "Dionysian" is there, has ontological standing although not a place, a thing. Its many constituents are what the many images from the world's literature and thought have been meant to suggest: Hobbes's State of Nature, Freud's Id, Melville's white whale, the "monomaniac incarnation" of the "intangible malignity that has been from the beginning," the various religious visions of a fallen and unredeemed world not unlike Melville's "palsied universe [which] lies before us a leper." Such images help us to order things in our minds, give us a language with which to generalize. But they are not directly what we *experience*.

There are the things we do to one another—rapes, murders, sadistic rampages, killing harms conceived as tender care; things our bodies do to us—early death and late, idiocy, genetic gifts of crippled organs, blindness in children, cancers, medical syndromes too many to count; things our minds do to us—suicide, madness, lonely fear, nameless despair when hope would seem rational; even the ways our higher capacities turn against us, momentarily deprive us of a world, and leave us a memory of that moment so that the world is never fully to be trusted—as when a familiar landscape, with a shift of light, becomes strange, shocking, even repulsive, like the negative of a photograph, and seldom again a sure source of comfort.

So, I mean nothing very sophisticated by my appropriation of the "Dionysian," the abysmal. I mean, I think, what most people would mean. But excepting the artistry with which it's depicted, there's truly nothing very sophisticated about Tragedy. Tragedy is exceptionally elemental; it is always—a phrase I like whose source I've forgotten—"like the very oldest books": terrors are not explained away as temporary malfunctions but are perceived as a potent, dark side of life.

There is a theory of Tragedy beyond formal literary

criticism, implicit in all that's been said so far; and that theory has a certain quirky religious dimension to it, mostly unsaid so far.

Do we have (Aristotle) a plot of a noble character falling through error from high estate to low? That is incidental. A conflict (Hegel) of two goods made mutually exclusive by their protagonists? That too is incidental. Do we have, whatever the arrangement of events and character motivations, an image of civilized order, treasured but fragile, and an image of natural disorder, frightening, compelling, and potent—and the former at least for the moment helpless before the latter, the moment long enough for catastrophe? That is not incidental. A father's love, a daughter's loyalty, a doddering generosity of spirit, and the symbolic trappings of respect-worthy sovereignty are not enough to counter senile pride, innocent arrogance, ravenous greed, and anarchy. Yet at the end of *Lear* one cherishes traditional family feeling and social order as images of fragile civilization, wants them back again, only more enlightened, against all that urges against them. Intellect, integrity, and political responsibility mean nothing in *Oedipus Rex* to the necessities of those "vast spaces of cosmic night," but we honor the king for his mind, honesty, and civic-ness, which, ironically, help to do him in.

Tragedy is a celebration of human culture that does not blink at the fact of the delicacy of that culture before the "state of nature." Civilization is always losing in Tragedy—and always being honored; the "state of nature" is always winning in Tragedy—and never being applauded.

Consequently, Tragedy is an image of our frustration—of a particularly painful sort. Civilization, as it achieves articulateness in its creative works, wants to find order in some natural state of things, something fundamental to appeal to and emulate. It does not want to be a pale, artificial, *unnatural* order posed against some "real," natural disorder. It would like to be an act of faith in the essential friendliness, so to speak, of the universe. It doesn't want to be some kind of vague Manichaeism: a creative human order versus a destructive nonhuman one.

The Tragic vision is not a consistent metaphysic, not a type of philosophy of culture that sees the natural state as evil and the civilized realm as good. It is instead a type of unsophisticated response (an elegant, justified "paranoia," if you like) to the fact that, in spite of all the best and most intelligent and faithfully hopeful intentions, things keep going horribly wrong. It is a *mood*, a residue of damaged desires. And it is an angry, impatient mood: What's wrong with that universe, which transcends our feeble human efforts at getting along, that it so easily turns against us? The attitude of the tragedian toward "Nature" is somewhat like one religious attitude toward the Divine—as when even the most pious may harbor a suspicion that the Creator is mad, so that his prayers become at times ashamed attempts to humor Him.

But I should underline *impatient*. One is impatient

with what he insists on expecting better of. And it is the fact that it's an impatient mood instead of a totalist reading of reality that keeps the Tragic vision from settling into an acceptance of things as they are or seem to be, into an accommodation to all the terrible limitations and sufferings in the human experience. If I may quote myself, the Tragic vision is not "an essentially conservative spirit.... Tragedy can arise... only out of the attempt to transcend limitations. And that attempt is akin to the utopian venture" (*Modern Occasions*, Spring, 1972). And that is what civilization is.

Civilization is utopian? Obviously I need some precision of definition, and obviously our civilization is very imprecise in the way it uses its own name. Often "civilization" and "culture" are used interchangeably; we can translate German *kultur* either way. Often by "culture" we mean a higher level of mental and aesthetic attainment within a given civilization ("He is a man of culture"). Often by "civilization" we mean a higher level of moral and technical attainment within the world's population ("It was nice to visit a primitive culture, but it's good to be back in civilization"). The presence or absence of a grammatical article can make a difference: "culture" may refer to the grace and knowledge human beings (sometimes) strive for; "a culture" can refer to...a civilization. But all this means that ultimately the words *are* interchangeable. Nonetheless, civilization-culture (to avoid clumsiness for the moment let's say *kultur*) may be perceived in two quite different ways.

Perceived one way *kultur* has a certain facticity, a kind of inertness, almost leaden. It's all there around me having little to do with me personally except that it surrounds me—schools, business, legal statutes, libraries, mores, etc., etc. I'm born into its midst without, obviously, having asked to be. At its best and least leaden it congeals into the stuff—if disputants within and without this journal will pardon me—of a "civil religion" not particularly engaging of my soul, no matter how demanding of my external loyalty. When I'm sick of civilization, it's that inert *kultur* I'm thinking of. Perceived another way *kultur* is vital, in motion. I *discover* it, and I am actively engaged with it—spiritual uncertainties, the grandeur of the law, art, economic alternatives, lively affections, etc., etc. When I'm sick of people who are sick of civilization, it's that vital *kultur* I'm thinking of. *The celebration of civilization in Tragedy is the honoring of the second kind of culture.*

But I mean a more refined distinction yet. *Kultur* perceived the first way already *is*; when I came to awareness it *was there*. *Kultur* perceived the second way has *never been*, except as a promise; and since I discover it in its promise, my engagement with it is like a demand upon it, so that it is doubly unfulfilled: has never been, is still becoming. Economic alternatives *are*, I know (exist in minds, inhabit books: present tense), and people make art; but the alternatives point to the future, and what art yearns for is always just ahead of us. (Need I add that political labels are not at issue here, liberals enamored of the future not excluding traditionalist conservatives? There are traditions to be conserved precisely because they never had a chance against past presents.)



Serban Chelariu

I have a mythical relationship with the “inert” *kultur*: Since I gain certain benefits from it, I agree pragmatically to the useful fiction that my acceptance of the membership that was thrust upon me at birth was a kind of signature. I’ve signed a social contract. But I’m merely a passive contractee, thankful enough for the benefits but not terribly excited by feelings of reciprocal responsibility to the culture, unless the first *kultur* seems truly to embody the virtue and vitality of the second, with which my relationship is a more complex and active affair. How should one describe it?

Richard John Neuhaus has made a distinction I would like to borrow. In *Time Toward Home* (chapter fourteen especially, but *passim*) he writes of social contracts and covenants—our social intercourse with the present and with the Future, one’s responsibility to the now and to the Hoped-For. The social contract needs to be enlivened by the covenant; indeed, the best elements in a contract partake imperfectly of the covenant and are “intuitions of the ultimate.” If the contract stands alone, there is no reason beyond a pragmatic need for protection and guesses at enlightened self-interest for one to give it his allegiance: It has no legitimacy in itself, it is a construct of the practical moment. As Neuhaus notes, covenantal thinking is now out of fashion, and contractual thinkers—left, right, and center—seldom feel the need of it. These contractual thinkers, when they are not tinkering pragmatists pulling things together for the moment and to hell with tomorrow, believe that the covenantless contract carries its own legitimacy and

sovereignty. The argument, for instance, that an ideal contract is the reflection of some “original position” in which men, operating behind a “veil of ignorance,” would not know what socio-political arrangements were to their better advantage and at the expense of others and would, therefore, “aim at a maximum of fairness or justice” if only out of hedging their bets. Rejecting that (John Rawls’s) notion of an “original position” as but one more Myth of the Return, Neuhaus argues for the Covenant with God who is the Power of the Future, His revelation not complete until then, the Human’s attachment to the covenant a “yearning” for the Kingdom Come.

My relationship to the vital *kultur* is, if you will, covenantal, not contractual. It can’t be contractual because the *vital* culture, unlike the *inert*, isn’t: It’s always becoming. And—speaking strictly personally now—that relationship can’t be contractual because I don’t think the vital *kultur* is a reflection of any “original position”; if I could “return,” I suspect I’d find not a garden but a jungle. And civilization is an attempt to go beyond.

At first I had in mind, simply, a revealing analogy: the civilization-becoming that Tragedy celebrates, and the gradual revelation of the Kingdom Come. But that’s not quite right. For “analogy” implies *likeness* between two different things. Nor do I mean precisely a kind of essential *equation*: civilization-becoming and Kingdom-Come-revealing being the same thing seen now under a secular aspect and now under a religious. I mean, rather, a curious and living relationship that is

somewhere between analogy and equation, that is now one and now the other. That is, the vital *kultur*, when viewed as an aesthetic notion, is like the Kingdom Come: It has beauty, order, a promising incompleteness so that it's alive and full of breath ("spirit" is the older word). When viewed as an ethical notion, the vital culture shares an essential oneness with the Kingdom Come: It compels behavior, it says that one cannot truly be a lover of beauty and act with a mean spirit. (And in any case I do not mean that asinine modern creation of the litterateur: culture as new religion, replacing old religion.)

This distinction and rich "instability" between analogy and equation should be borne in mind; for later in this exploration I shall be referring to vital *kultur* almost exclusively as a mode of yearning for the Kingdom Come without constantly reminding myself of, and boring the reader with, the fact that the former is richly complementary to, not simply another name for, the latter. But even now I would say that an engaged relationship to the vital *kultur*—seen aesthetically or ethically—has a certain religious force to it; and if not, the relationship is false. I don't mean fanaticism and militancy; we've had enough soldierly heralds of the future. I mean that moving and curious blend of passion and familiarity whereby what we agree are the higher virtues and values are not patronizingly excluded from what we facilely call the real world. I mean, for instance, the passionate familiarity of *Deuteronomy*:

And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

Not in the university lecture hall, not on educational television—or not that alone—but in the processes of the most quotidian existence. Utopian? All right then, utopian.

I suggested using the word *kultur* "to avoid clumsiness." But I also had another reason, given the context of this essay: to remind us of a just skepticism through use of the German. If Tragedy is a celebration of civilization, then isn't it indeed obsolete? For was it not a civilization of—how often we are reminded—extremely high attainment that committed the Holocaust? In which case it's that which Tragedy celebrates, not the Dionysian state of nature, which is the destructive force!

Hitler was a quarter-learned fanatic with a talent for simplification. Göring's vaunted love of art was not more than gluttonous acquisitiveness. "When I hear the word 'culture' I reach for my revolver" (whether to kill or to burgle is not clear). But what of men like Albert Speer, who, most commentators agree, should have known better; as if anyone shouldn't have. After Speer names of historical actors, as opposed to passive oppor-

tunists and timeservers, do not come easily unless one descends to Baldur von Schirach, Franz von Papen, Goebbels. Still, the image of the cultivated Nazi does not easily disappear. George Steiner (*Language and Silence*) wrote:

We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding or that his ear is gross is cant.

Well, it seems hard to say, really; there's something imposing upon the imagination in the leather-booted, black-uniformed, blond commandant with the nervous riding-crop, precise diction, and haughty demeanor toward the subhumans. But I wonder if a tremendous question isn't being begged. Why is it "cant"? There is a difference between a mannered refinement and an engaged relationship with the vital *kultur*! I mean that one can possess some elements of the vital culture as if they were inert: Goethe, Rilke, Bach, and Schubert—they are just there, like libraries, business, statutes, etc., etc. They have a certain facticity and no more. There are people who know that such attainments mark them with a certain polish and class—without the "attainments" striking very deeply inside. I have to contrast such people with one of my first memories of New York a dozen years ago: two gnarled octogenarians, overcoated in early fall, sitting in a Horn & Hardart's cafeteria over coffee late at night, crumpled *Times* and *Forwards* under their arms, a lending-library book or three on the table, arguing heatedly and affectionately (worlds would end if points were not grasped) about Old Testament prophecy and social democracy.

Or one thinks of the patriarch Mordecai Levy in André Schwarz-Bart's novel and monument, *The Last of the Just. Kristallnacht* 1938 in Germany, Nazis in the streets rampaging against Jewish property and life. A neighbor begs the Levys to give them something because "they're all worked up"—give them some books for the bonfire. No! Mordecai's tone "mingling violence and an incomprehensible note of despair." "He was suddenly tall against the door, and he held the iron bar high above his head, and his phylacteries and laces and prayer shawl fell to the floor in his anger. 'Because we never give up our books,' he cried with awesome strength. 'Never, never, never!'"

But this will not do—my argument, I mean. I seem to be merely stating a preference for Mordecai's and the octogenarians' quality of cultivation and merely assuming the Nazis' wasn't real: begging a question of my own. I seem to ignore that, just as it's obvious that Mordecai's relationship to his vital culture is covenantal, so might the commandant's be. That is, even if Goethe, Rilke are only polished ornaments for the commandant, he might perceive them as aspects of a larger *kultur* with which his relationship might seem covenantal: After all, the Third Reich, to last a millennium, suggests an intercourse with the future, with some Hoped-For, and it's possible to imagine the commandant speaking of his commitment with something like that

“deuteronomic” passion I mentioned earlier. So we’d best return to that argument of a few pages back.

On the one hand, the social contract, intercourse with the Now; on the other, covenant. I would like to redefine the terms slightly for the sake of some distinctions. Both contract and covenant are Myths, the figurative and imaginative renderings of truths too consequential to be merely literal. But they are still quite different kinds of Myth. The covenant is, as I’ve suggested earlier, “utopian”; the “kingdom” the covenanter yearns for does not exist, mundanely, and never has, is no place in history no matter how many the intimations, is always the Hoped-For. In a valuable essay on “Varieties of Literary Utopias” (*Daedalus*, Spring, 1965) Northrup Frye defined utopia as “a speculative myth; it is designed to contain or provide a vision for one’s social ideas”; it “presents an imaginative vision of the *telos* or end at which social life aims” (taking “social” in its broad cultural application, obviously). Opposed in its nature to the utopian myth is the “contract myth.” The first looks to a future, the second looks to the past in order to justify a present arrangement of things. The contract myth “presents an account of the origins of society” in order to explain and gain allegiance for “the present facts of society.” It is not greatly different, it seems to me, from “ideology” as Karl Mannheim used the word in *Ideology and Utopia*: an intellectual framework representing the outlook of those in control and bent upon preserving order—their order. The utopian myth is an exploratory intercourse with the Future; the contract myth is a justification of the Now.

So where does the commandant fit into this? On the one hand, Nazidom embraced a contract myth, with its account of the origins of (Aryan) society and its presentation of the “facts” of that society it was committed, most brutally, to preserve. That was its “Now.” But if a Now wants to perpetuate and refine itself, even unto the millennium, it needs to emphasize a certain unfulfillment, it needs to stress a necessary commitment to a Hoped-For. As Neuhaus says in another context, the

social contract needs the covenant, or it remains sterile and directionless. Unfortunately, the devil knows this too; he seems to listen more attentively than we do.

So what we’re left with here, or seem to be, is a definition of the commandant’s vision that fulfills in significant ways what I’ve called a vital *kultur* and a covenantal, utopian relationship to it. But: a couple more distinctions yet. A covenant with the Future that is a yearning for what does not exist and never has, except in a few “intuitions of the ultimate,” is one thing: a covenant that may include some contract of the moment. A covenant with the future that “justifies” and gives a certain metaphysical classiness to a polity that *does* exist is quite another thing: a “covenant” that is no more than a contract myth in a different tense. Put it another way: a “covenant” with the present merely projected into the future. So that rather than merely the Hoped-For justifying what is, what is “justifies” and defines the Hoped-For.

Furthermore, there are covenants and there are covenants; which is a way of saying that there is only one Covenant available to us, and any other is crippled and crippling parody. In the West that means some form of the Judeo-Christian Covenant. Nor do I mean that’s the only one *historically* available to us, since there are any number of imitations and forgeries: I mean something a great deal more important.

A covenant is *with* some source of authority, sovereignty, whose completeness the covenanter yearns to see revealed in the Future, some source that gives meaning to the longing and sets limits to human action. If the source is merely the polity-that-is, I’m not very satisfied; how did *it* become the source? The source is the Divine, covenant means with the Divine, or else, as Dostoevski put it, “everything is permissible”—except of course what the polity-that-is simply *pronounces* not permissible.

“Authority” with capital “A” must be the question

“. . . if Tragedy is a celebration of human culture, it is not irrelevant to our post-Holocaust world . . .”

of largest moment in serious human thought. Even when one speaks of, say, the Authority of ancient and lasting *custom* (as I am given to doing), he suspects, indeed he knows, that he's being very selective about what is "custom" and what isn't, and is saying *God* in a bet-hedging manner, or perhaps in a manner that protects his credentials in an intellectually secularist age. He might wonder how much of an act of faith is required to say *God*—or whether the saying is itself an act of faith. Perhaps the acceptance of the benefits of that Authority that says that certain acts are legitimate and others not *is* faith, if only of a passive kind. I begin to sink above my head; whether into a definition of faith or into theological confusion I do not know.

But this I do know: A "covenant" that permits *any* act in fulfillment of the polity-that-is projected futureward is a cruel parody. A true Covenant is not only a yearning for the Future but an acceptance of certain limitations on human action because the limitations are "known" to be Authoritative. The limitations in *the* Covenant we have available are something like the Commandments in their literal and figurative meanings—with which the commandant was not very conversant in his actions. And of course there is a name for the refusal to accept the limitations: It is "sin." The insistent secularist flaunting his credentials generally doesn't like such talk, preferring to say either that certain acts are legitimate and others not because the acceptance of some ethical hierarchy gives "good" results or that some things are permitted and others not by the "nature of things." He generally avoids saying *God* because it doesn't seem to him very intellectually respectable, it being more so to assume that a source of limiting Authority *just is!* without our getting slushy and archaic; it just is. A more respect-worthy secularist objection to covenantalism is the one I've been trying to counter: that it can be used to justify horrors, as the Grand Inquisitor of Castile, for instance, did. But the point of course is that that's *not* covenantalism; it's a prefiguration, one of too many, of what the Nazis did in the name of a future that was but a projection futureward of the polity-that-is.

The *kultur* that the commandant so fiercely committed himself to was *not*, then, a *vital* civilization as I have used that phrase. It was not the culture that Tragedy celebrates even in its fragility. Since everything is permissible in its service; it was no more than the state of nature superficially imitating the state of law, the institutionalization of the abysmal, the S.S. state, the Dionysian realm made a reign.

This is to say, then, that if Tragedy is a celebration of human culture, it is *not* irrelevant to our post-Holocaust world, in spite of a common "wisdom"—much more fixed on the commandant than on Mordecai—which has it that the Holocaust was the ironic story of civilization destroying the innocent with sophisticated means unimaginable to the savage: *Look what civilized man did!* But surely the point is that what *civilized* man did was suffer, and sometimes survive, with the most incredible dignity. We should not still be confusing having-sophisticated-

means with being-civilized. The Holocaust is the most immense story of our times of the fragility of vital, covenantal *kultur* before the power of darkness (as one might have called it in another age. Remember that Satan also was a keen and witty conversationalist, conversant in a refined sort of way with the arts, quite becoming in his social person: almost the epitome of the man of polished, inert cultivation. *Er konnte Apollinisch sprechen*).

Perhaps the word "celebration" is slightly out of whack in this context, its suggestion of resilient joy amidst despair too demanding. One's moral fatigue is too enormous for very much utterance when one contemplates this tragic historical event in our own century. And that's a shame, for the achievement of the victims deserves honoring to a degree that little else does.

A curious word here "achievement"; but what then was it? One of the many virtues of Terrence Des Pres's *The Survivor* is that it corrects those several hard-nosed examinations of victims' psychic complicity and other things we long thought necessary in our search for the "real lesson of the concentration camps."

The assumption that there was no moral or social order in the concentration camps is wrong. Except peripherally and for brief periods similar to the "initial collapse" of individuals, the general condition we call chaos or anomie—what philosophers designate as "the state of nature"—did not exist, certainly it did not prevail. Through innumerable small acts of humanness, most of them covert but everywhere in evidence, survivors were able to maintain societal structures workable enough to keep themselves alive and morally sane.

Given this point of view, it's curious that Des Pres argues throughout for a kind of *biological* urge to persist as a better explanation of endurance and of dignity than anything *cultural*: "when men and women must face months and years of death-threat they endure less through cultural than through biological imperatives." One needn't deny some animal urge to live in order to be bothered by *this* application; it could explain, too easily, anything—even the behavior of a camp guard. But it is consistent with a conclusion he draws from the maintenance of some degree of moral order by the victims: "The 'state of nature,' it turns out, is not natural" and "must be imposed by force."

Which misses the point.

The "state of nature" was there, all around the victims, in the Nazi world. As Kenneth Burke said in *Permanence and Change*, "men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the end of an abyss"—which is *what* the victims did, *where* they did. An achievement. No libraries or concert halls, of course, within the barbed wire, although Bach was played just outside; but a fragile civilization was there with a covenant, like a sign upon the hand and like frontlets between the eyes.

What is terrible is that the traditional notion of Tragedy has *not*, because its experience has *not*, become obsolete.