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A Note on Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Names

Throughout the running text, I have followed the East Asian convention in which the family name precedes the given name. This rule is reversed, however, in all bibliographical information, including that in footnotes, where the names are rendered in Western order. Also by convention, poets and writers are referred to by pseudonym rather than by family name, most notably in the cases of Sōseki and Bashō.

Preface

Tragedy is a dramatization of human fate. Whether the word "tragic" is used to describe disastrous incidents in real life or refers to a group of theatrical pieces dramatizing the fatal calamity of the protagonist, it signals horrifying events such as despair, loss, and death. But as the tragic is a matter of dramatization, namely a matter concerning the representation of human experience through a particular structure, it invites the audience to reflect upon the meaning of past events by organizing them into a narrative plot. One of the many issues that Aristotle addresses in his *Poetics* is how a poet should stage what has happened to an individual in order to achieve a powerful tragic effect. "The plot," Aristotle argues, "should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens."[1] And the concepts that he formulated—such as "mimesis," "error," and "katharsis"—have had great significant influence on both tragic theory and creative practice throughout European history.

But one might immediately want to call into question the universal applicability of Aristotle's account. In fact, one could contend, an understanding of the meaning of devastating experiences is heavily dependent upon social and historical context. And if this is true, each society should be entitled to have its own style of imagining human fate, which can be radically different from other cultural traditions. Indeed, there is a good deal of academic research based on this premise that explores minor cultural traditions of tragic art and their differences from Western tradition through a comparative method.[2] Persuasive as such an approach may seem, this multiculturalist stance is not the direct inspiration for the present study. Of course, it would be out of the question to

1 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 22.

2 To take only one recent example, see Lourens Minnema, *Tragic Views of the Human Condition: Cross-Cultural Comparisons between Views of Human Nature in Greek and Shakespearean Tragedy and the Mahābharāta and Bhagavadgītā* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

propose the European model of tragic literature as the singular norm of this genre. Yet it would be equally inappropriate to stress the essence of a given non-European tradition as the fixed "other" of European civilization. I will base my argument, instead, on a broader sociopolitical definition of tragic art that regards the impact of cultural transformations as integral to the tragic understanding of human experience.

Linking tragic literature with changing cultural conventions and social institutions offers the most feasible clarification of tragic art. It helps, among other things, to regard tragedy as a presentation of an experienced "gap" in a specific sociohistorical context. Jean-Pierre Vernant, one of the most celebrated theorists of tragic literature, claimed that the tragic sense is located in a "border zone" between the old and new meanings of human action. "The tragic turning point," he writes, "occurs when a gap develops at the heart of the social experience."[3] According to Vernant, conditions for the creation of tragic literature are favorable when the size of this gap is neither too wide nor too narrow. It should be reasonably wide so that legal and political thought on the one hand and mythical and heroic traditions on the other oppose each other, but it should also be narrow enough to suggest that the conflict of values is still painful and so that the clash of interests can be framed in a consistent narrative. From this viewpoint, the massive social changes that occurred in ancient Greece between the time of Solon and Plutarch created a remarkably promising environment for nurturing tragic drama, which explains in part why this particular period was a high point in the history of tragic art.

Raymond Williams is another influential theorist of tragic literature who emphasizes the conflict between old and new values in the historical setting of tragedy. Like Vernant, Williams considers the period of "historical transition" to be a particularly advantageous condition for tragic creation. The varieties of tragic experience, he argues, are "to be interpreted by reference to . . . changing conventions and institutions."[4] Each work of tragic literature, therefore, can be seen as an eloquent and sobering embodiment of the friction between the well-established beliefs of a culture and the moral convictions that the tragic protagonist deeply holds. This incompatibility between old and new codes of

3 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 27.

4 Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006), 69.

behavior inevitably puts the tragic hero(ine) in a position that has never been experienced in the society in question:

> [T]ragedy seems to occur, neither in periods of real stability, nor in periods of open and decisive conflict. Its most common historical setting is the period preceding the substantial breakdown and transformation of an important culture. Its condition is the real tension between old and new: between received beliefs, embodied in institutions and responses, and newly and vividly experienced contradictions and possibilities.[5]

If certain established beliefs are simultaneously still active and deeply questioned, Williams continues, "the common process of dramatizing and resolving disorders and sufferings is intensified to the level which can be most readily recognized as tragedy."[6] Given that each cultural tradition, at stages of historical transition, has its own ways of imagining the incongruity between the institutionalized worldview and newly acquired personal sense of reality, and that this incongruity drives a dramatist to conceive a powerful tragic plot, then it is reasonable to believe that cultural transformation is a constitutive dimension of the tragic itself which, in the West and the non-West alike, has prompted the progress of this genre since its earliest stage up until today.

This approach to the tragic as a form of representing historical tensions will enable us to reevaluate the Western tradition of tragic drama as well as that in the non-West. To be sure, the literary form that has been elaborated within European tradition might not be the only possible way of putting the incongruity of values on stage. Yet it may well be one of the most sophisticated dramatic genres that the human race has invented, for the simple reason that an exceptionally complex and productive interaction between different social groups has emerged around the geographical area called Europe—or, more precisely, the Mediterranean. To admit this is not necessarily to succumb to Eurocentrism; it may well just acknowledge that the great tradition of tragic art can, at least partially, result from contingent factors such as geographical advantage rather than from the moral or cultural superiority of European civilization.

It is in line with this focus upon cultural transformation *inside* tragic drama that I will analyze, in part one of this study, four texts of Japanese tragic literature—the nō play *Semimaru*, the jōruri play *Sinjū Ten no Amijima*, Sōseki's

5 Ibid., 77–78.

6 Ibid., 78.

Kokoro, and Ōe Kenzaburō's novels in the 1990s—from both the premodern tradition and the modern era. If we look at the general history of medieval and early modern Japanese literature, there is a rich tradition of storytelling that represents highborn heroes suffering calamitous falls. Although these stories may seem somewhat different from European tragic narratives, they still fit into the category of tragedy due to the fact that the suffering of the protagonists is framed as a historically specific tension of values. And in the case of modern Japanese literature since the late nineteenth century, when the nation set out on the path of comprehensive modernization, the tragic quality of much writing becomes even more readily intelligible.[7]

On the other hand, though, one may assert that virtually every work in the history of Japanese literature can be seen as more or less tragic because Japan's history consists of a continual interplay of cultures which have constantly compelled the nation to struggle with conflicting human values. Indeed, the ideas that have had the most profound impact on Japanese culture have always been imported—mostly from Korea and China in ancient and medieval times, and from the West after modernization. Every time a new system of values or beliefs has arrived, people have experienced considerable difficulties in digesting its potency. As a result, from the earliest poetical and narrative works, such as *Tales of Ise* or *The Tale of Genji*, through modern novels and poems written by authors with Christian or Marxist commitments, there is hardly any literature which does not betray a sense of bewilderment at some incompatibility between old and new codes of conduct.

Rather than attempting to offer an exhaustive account of the development of tragedy throughout Japanese history, then, I have selected only four texts and for two reasons. First, I intend to bring into focus moments of remarkable social transition in which "beliefs can be both active and deeply questioned," as Williams would have put it. Each of the historical periods that produced the four tragic works discussed—the Muromachi period, the late Edo period, the early Meiji period, and our own epoch (that is, after 1995)—experienced seismic religious, economic, political, and social change, during which the various incongruities between conventional values and newly emergent

7 As the equivalent of the English word "tragedy," modern Japanese has the word *higeki*, which is apparently translated from the Chinese word *beiju*. (In both Japanese and Chinese, the term is a compound of characters with the meaning of "sad" and "drama") Like its European counterpart, the word *higeki* can be used to describe terrible events with devastating emotional power in real life, as well as to refer to classical theatrical work from Aeschylus through Brecht.

individual worldview became remarkably sharp, and which in turn provided excellent historical conditions for tragic creation.

More importantly, though, I should emphasize that my essential concern here is not only with a historical survey of the cultural phenomenon called tragedy, but with a more theoretical investigation into literary creation in relation to intellectual history, especially to the perception of human fate under shifting cultural conditions. Furthermore, the critical readings of the four quintessential tragic works will reveal that, throughout the history of Japanese literature, tragic events have been constantly understood in terms of a peculiar logic governing around the idea of "nature." Repeatedly, the protagonist of a tragic narrative has to endure exile, suicide, or execution, as if they find it more "natural" to accept their own cruel fate rather than attempt to change reality. The intense beauty that the audience experiences in appreciating this "natural" submission to destiny has often been interpreted as a reflection of a central feature of Japanese aesthetics. Indeed, entrenched over millennia by Buddhism and Confucianism, such passive acceptance of savage fate may have shaped broader cultural conventions, and is still palpable in the modern literary tradition of naturalism. Not surprisingly, the great majority of writers have cherished this age-old formula, enabling a work to defuse the tension between old and new values and to strengthen the established mode of feeling. However, the four tragic texts I have selected also highlight historical discontinuity, as the artist opposes institutionalized "natural" modes of thinking by molding them into a convincing tragic conflict.

It is relevant in this connection to note that an encounter between different cultures may not simply be random crossbreeding without any sense of direction. Williams's account of tragedy suggests that periods of historical transition (which encourage the production of great tragic art) are not simply times of active cultural hybridization, but are fertile moments at which to search for moral ideals. As Aristotle argues, tragedy should be regarded not just as the representation of fall and disgrace, but the "mimesis of an action that is admirable, complete, and possesses magnitude."[8] Tragic drama thus depicts the action of a person who possesses a distinct morality, and who is destined to suffer precisely because of his or her ethical resolution. In other words, tragic protagonists often steel themselves to endure the torments of reality because they are able to look beyond their cultural group's narrow standards of behavior. From this perspective, tragic drama is far from simply culture-bound: its significance

8 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 10.

lies in its ability to break down the boundaries of cultural difference in search of more comprehensive ideals.

To conceive of tragedy as a collision between a particular cultural tradition and universal human ideals, however, would be unduly humanist. Such a perspective is apparently based on the outdated idea that a free individual is capable of conquering historical difficulties and demonstrating to the audience the real possibility of human emancipation. Indeed, one might argue that such an optimistic belief in human progress is exactly what tragic art is meant to disrupt. But it is crucial here to avoid the error of placing a creative work of imagination in a rigid dichotomy between universality and cultural diversity. Seen through in a proper historical lens, a tragic action motivated by comprehensive morality is to be regarded as a tentative venture, often merely a desperate attempt in times of cultural crisis. It would be reasonable to argue, therefore, that universal human values can supply the motivating force for the creation of a tragic plot, just because the hope of actually attaining said values is quite uncertain.

Some of the recent debate on the theme of tragedy is intended as an intervention into an exaggerated pluralism inspired by the recent trend of cultural relativism or, more specifically, by postmodern theory. In the introduction to his formidable examination of the idea of tragedy, Terry Eagleton warns that "where tragedy is concerned, the question of universality cannot be sidestepped by a glib particularism."[9] Eagleton draws on the theory of Sebastiano Timpanaro to suggest that despite the left-historicist suspicion of universals, tragedies repeatedly deal with "love, aging, disease, fear of one's own death and sorrow for the death of others, the brevity and frailty of human existence, the contrast between the weakness of humanity and the apparent infinity of the cosmos."[10] Even though there is a diffuse range of cultural styles in which human suffering is depicted, there are aspects of suffering that, according to Eagleton, "are also rooted in our species-being." To the extent that these immutable human conditions are the vital components of tragic art, tragedy is particularly counter-relativist.[11]

A proper acknowledgement of this universal moment in tragic literature will spare us from the trouble of a simplistic attack on Eurocentrism.

9 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), xvi.

10 Ibid., xiii.

11 When Aristotle argued that poetry (unlike history) was "philosophical," he had in mind that imaginative fiction "tends to express universals," prompting the audience to reflect upon the most fundamental questions for every human being. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 16.

Indeed, once we stop eternalizing Japanese literary tradition as an exotic set of cultural practices, we will immediately recognize its obvious correspondence with European tradition. For example, the supposedly unique Japanese sense of nature seems to share with European literature "the tragedy of passive suffering," which Williams perceived in European romanticism and naturalism.[12] One could argue, by extension, that other non-European cultures may have gone through similar historical phases, which have been overlooked or overestimated due to the binary system of explanation in comparative method. Part of the purpose of my approach is therefore to open up a common ground for cultural dialogue beyond the scope of the conventional framework of comparative literature.

It is surely tempting to portray a non-European literary tradition as "fundamentally different" from the European canon by expounding on aesthetic categories and notions that have been never used in Europe. In his rigorous study *Don Juan East/West*, Takayuki Yokota-Murakami offers detailed readings of premodern Japanese literary texts alongside Western models of love narrative in order to unmask the "myth," "metaphysics," and "disguised Eurocentrism" of Western comparative literature. But over the last two decades, while countless studies with similar ambitions have been published that interrogate the ideological use of universalism, many critics seem to have run to the opposite extreme. Now that notions of "diversity" and "difference" have founded a new critical orthodoxy around postmodern antifoundationalism, an admiration for non-Western cultural values that is itself stimulated by European deconstructionism looks very much ambiguous. With hindsight, then, it seems ironic that Yokota-Murakami's argument sounds most incisive when he sounds least confident:

> [My book] was meant to be an attempt to compare conceptions of sexuality from which, so I presumed, both Don Juan and *iro-otoko* [that is, (Edo) the Japanese dandy] have sprung. Although I am now problematizing this kind of a universalist proposition, I have retained, in the title of this book, the sense of comparison (Western Don Juan and Eastern Don Juan) in order to show that I was, and still am, embedded in the paradigm that the above-mentioned epistemological break [namely, the rearrange-

12 On the "mechanical" treatment of human fate, Williams writes, "suffering is passive because man can only endure and can never really change his world." Williams, *Modern Tragedy* 94.

> ment of sexuality according to a Western model] involved, and that I can problematize it only from within, in an awkward, limited manner.[13]

As this perceptive comment suggests, it would be detrimental for a comparative reading to both place its own theoretical position simplistically outside the range of universal applicability and to credulously embrace a universalist creed that suppresses cultural diversity. A study of non-European cultural traditions needs, instead, a carefully balanced approach that is both inclusive and comprehensive. And such premise applies particularly to the analysis of tragic literature, which requires close attention both to the specific tension between a cultural tradition and a wider picture of human progress.

All this helps us set out a more cogent reason why a multiculturalist stance cannot serve as the central guiding principle for this study. It is all the more important, as part of my concern is to illuminate contemporary controversies over cultural diversity by locating them in the theoretical framework of tragic conflict. Indeed, the theoretical dilemma between the despotic rule of universalism and the chaotic state of cultural relativism is one of the most demanding predicaments of our own time—and one to which our intellect is largely confined. This critical awareness sets the stage for the discussions in part two and part three, where I reconsider modern Japanese intellectual history and a series of creative literary practices.

Part two is directly engaged with cross-examining the logic of culture in modern Japanese discourse. In many ways, though, it is a continuation of part one's study of tragic art, since what I will examine in this section are the ways in which some key notions such as "culture," "nature," "nation," the "past," and the "female" are deployed to shape a particular sense of collective identity—an identity that thereby prompts people to respond (or conform) to the historical situation of their own time. One thing that is striking about the configuration of cultural identity in modern Japan is that the notion of culture has played two contrasting roles depending on historical circumstances. Once used as an icon of the healthy critique of a uniform standard in favor of plurality, the word "culture" was turned to a rather exclusive and oppressive symbol of the cult of national identity. But it is equally important to note that such a dramatic reversal in the implication of the idea of culture is, again, modeled on the logic of European romanticism that, in its hostility toward modern industries and

13 Takayuki Yokota-Murakami, *Don Juan East/West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 110.

Enlightenment rationality, urges modern subjects to identify with organic communities that are closely united by natural bonds.

The strong similarity between this ideological configuration of cultural identity as antirational (which eventually led the nation to fascism in the early twentieth century) on the one hand, and the characterization of Japanese cultural tradition as the "other" of European civilization on the other gives us another reason to pay critical attention to contemporary discursive practice. Such critical reconsideration is not an easy task, mainly because theoretical developments in the late twentieth century are still too deeply embedded in our ways of thinking to be analyzed objectively. There are dozens of excellent historical studies about the introduction of European thought in Meiji Japan, and also about the local discursive formation that followed, but scarcely any attention has been paid to the second, analogous historical process in the late twentieth century.[14] To be sure, theoretical approaches developed in this latter period have made valuable contributions to contemporary theory as a whole, especially in terms of challenging the plausibility of an absolute ground. Nonetheless, as the major principle of the dominant frame of thought has shifted from "progress" to "diversity," the stress on difference has become more and more dogmatic, showing a sinister resemblance, as some Marxist critics have been quick to point out,[15] to the global market—where cultural commodities never attract attention without producing exotic flavor. Notably in contemporary Japan, where critics and scholars tend to lack a dialectical perspective, intellectuals seem remarkably uninformed about the fact that praise of "difference" can itself be a uniform standard.

A recurrent theme in this study, accordingly, is how one should reassess the gains and losses of post-70s theory. As anti-universalist arguments rightly

14 This pattern of discursive formation can be easily grasped because, curiously enough, the process was apparently *repeated*. Modern Japanese literary and intellectual history followed this track over the period leading up to the Pacific War, and did so once more after the war from the late 1960s until today. In both cases, the discursive formation seemed to be driven by a collaboration between a domestic ideology (nationalistic drive) and a global "sea change" in the structure of thinking.

15 For critical interventions in English-speaking countries, see, to list only the major works, Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997); idem, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London; New York: Verso, 1998); Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989).

noticed decades ago, it is humiliating for a cultural minority to be impelled to conform to a fixed standard decided by a dominant culture. But it is equally humiliating to be impelled to demonstrate only cultural differences, as if minor cultures are eternally out of touch with the historical progression of mankind. I have little doubt, then, that the reassessment of supposedly untenable ideas such as universality, rationality, solidarity, and so forth is imperative, not least in order to make dialogue between modernity and postmodernity productive again. If the critical undertakings that older liberals embarked upon half a century ago have been long abandoned, such visions ought to be taken up again. This is the reason why, in my readings of Japanese literature, I will intentionally try to make the most of seemingly "outdated" models of reading (proposed, in many cases, by Marxist theoreticians) rather than supporting more "nuanced" readings inspired by contemporary theories such as semiotics and post-structuralism. Once more, though, what matters is not discrediting the gains of pluralism, but striking the right balance between cultural pluralism and universal values.

The same premise persists in part three, where I resume the exploration of Japanese literary history to examine the significant link between cultural practice and perceptions of historical reality. Three sections in this part turn to poetic works from different periods—Bashō's haiku, realist war poems, and Ōe Kenzaburō's latest piece—to explore the ways in which our reconsideration of Japanese cultural transformation fits into contemporary critical discourse, especially those theories which employ such key terms as the "pastoral," "trauma," and "narrative." Again, my interpretations will add new layers to our study of tragedy, because even when these artists are not directly engaged in creating tragic narrative plots, they are manifestly struggling to fashion a new literary form, thereby challenging conventional ways of imagining historical reality as "destiny." In my view, works created by great realist poets and novelists constitute an alternative to traditional naturalism, offering a new form of representation that depicts nature as a register of historical contradictions rather than as an unchanging background that corroborates seemingly timeless and harmonious human values. The book concludes with a brief remark describing how such ingenious literary creations can practically anticipate a new image of human relations to come.

For those readers who expect to discover a unique sensibility in the Japanese tradition of tragic art that is completely different from the Western narrative tradition, this book will be a disappointment. The ambition of this book is, instead, to concentrate on cultural changes in non-Western traditions

and focus on the contradictions during particular historical periods that have enabled men and women to strive towards human freedom in the future. Over a couple of decades, artistic traditions in the non-West that have searched for universal ideals have been generally underrated. This is partly because the acknowledgement of peripheral cultures has been predominantly promoted by an anti-essentialist impulse. Despite their good intentions, "critical" theorists have tended to take peripheral cultures out of historical context and label them an abstract "other." Conservative critics in the West do not hold non-Western universalism in high regard either, since they dismiss it as a copy of European Enlightenment thought. Both of these misguided positions are based on the same presumption: that non-Western cultures have no experience of historical transformation. The non-West, they seem to contend, is eternally trapped by an unchanging cultural essence—an idea strikingly similar to the notion that man dwells in the domain of pristine nature. This study will show that Japanese cultural tradition is far from self-sufficient, and that it is still in the process of constant enlargement in terms of social norms, religious faith, sexual politics, and so on. This book will also encourage the view that every culture—marginal and dominant alike—contributes to the improvement of common human values through its own historical struggle. Only by providing a boldly dialectical perspective that regards historical development as a dynamic interaction between diversity and progress can one read the signs of such struggle in authentic literary productions, and interpret them as part of the universal search for truly human relationships.

Part One

The Historical Development of the Tragic in Japanese Literature

CHAPTER 1

Approaching the Idea of Tragedy in the Non-West

On the opening page of *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner famously declares:

> All men are aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy as a form of drama is not universal. Oriental art knows violence, grief, and the stroke of natural or contrived disaster; the Japanese theatre is full of ferocity and ceremonial death. But that representation of personal suffering and heroism which we call tragic drama is distinctive of the Western tradition.[1]

The case for the uniqueness of Western tragic art which Steiner presents here stands in refreshing contrast with the relativist position widely shared by cultural critics today. What Steiner claims is that tragic art has shaped a fundamental aspect of Western civilization, and that this literary tradition is distinctively European. The implication is clear: even though other cultural traditions may have developed artistic representations of the tragic, they cannot match the Greco-Christian legacy of tragic drama. In a similar vein, Helen Gardner regards tragedy as "a European phenomenon." "Other civilizations," she remarks, "do not seem to have felt the urge to isolate the dark side for contemplation and to find meaning in the chances, changes and disasters of mortal life."[2] This exclusive acknowledgement of tragic depth in the European tradition, which was prevalent just half a century ago, would seem outrageous by the standards of twenty-first-century cultural criticism. Indeed, in an attempt to dispute this attitude, C. A. Gerstle points to premodern Japan and proposes that there is

1 George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 3.

2 Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 94.

an equally sophisticated theatrical tradition in Japanese classical literature. If regarded as a total theatrical experience, he argues, Japanese classical drama in *kabuki* and *nō* theater presents remarkably similar principles to those found in Greek tragedy.[3] Gerstle also draws attention to the conflict between self and other in *bunraku*, and submits that there the choice between passion and duty in the plot is no less humanistic than in Western drama.

To be sure, it is arguable that every cultural tradition has its own conception of human fate. The Chinese idea of *ming*, for example, can be interpreted as a reward for individual actions given by an inscrutable supernatural power. The Indian doctrine of *karma* concerns the idea of fate too, as it suggests that present and future conditions of life have a causal link with past behaviors, therefore an individual is personally responsible for their own destiny. One has good reason, then, to believe that each culture has its own version of tragic art.[4] But the trouble is that it is extremely difficult to do justice to the unique quality of tragic experience in such a variety of cultural traditions. In verifying the authenticity of non-Western art, we often resort to the notions such as "freedom," "justice," and "suffering" which have been elaborated in Europe. Even if we introduce local conceptions and aesthetic vocabularies in order to discuss the non-European sense of beauty, the ability of a specific piece of art to invite its audience to reflect upon questions relevant for every human being has to be taken into consideration.

Once we are aware of the inherent difficulty of acknowledging cultural diversity in tragic art, though, it is noticeable that apparently opposing groups of critics—conservative defenders of European canon and liberal authors in search of more inclusive models—express an uneasiness about the universality of tragic art. Thus, let us start by looking at the striking similarity between Steiner's and Gerstle's premises. As its title implies, Steiner's book is an attempt to demonstrate that tragedy has already lost its power as a creative literary form because the historical conditions for producing tragic drama have long ceased to exist. Tragedy, for Steiner, is a literary genre that peaked in Europe only once in its history, blooming around the seventeenth century and then withering during the course of modernization. One reason for this decline is the deterioration of language itself: modern words, Steiner maintains, are no longer

3 C. Andrew Gerstle, "The Concept of Tragedy in Japanese Drama," *Japan Review* 1 (1990).

4 For an account of the contrast between Greek and Indian views on punishment in tragic action, see Minnema, *Tragic Views of the Human Condition*, 354.