

Britton Harwood

"The Leaving of It"

Each of us, I take it, controls or is expected to control some specialized vocabulary. We get it with our occupations and our preoccupations. Thus, for at least some words, we know that they can have both a stricter meaning and a wider one. We sometimes learn this painfully. In a hardware store not long ago I embarrassed a clerk by talking about cement and concrete interchangeably. I could tell from a fellow shopper's expression that he was writing me off as a superannuated sissy. A lot of this is harmless enough, as when a small grandchild is looking at the Hudson with you and calls a ship a boat. Not so harmless often when a keyword is filed down until only a broad sense remains. For an English teacher the word "tragedy" is an egregious example. On the evening I began writing this paper, I read in the newspaper that David Axelrod had responded to detractors on MSNBC Thursday, saying that the defeat of the overhaul effort at the hands of disillusioned progressives would be "a tragic, tragic outcome." On the evening I finished a draft, another newspaper was quoting a football coach as saying, "It is tragic when a life is taken so young. He was a man just realizing his potential, not just in football, but in life." These two utterances use the word "tragic" in a broad sense which I'll call journalistic, "as expressing fatal or dreadful

events" that resemble "tragedy in respect of its matter" (OED adj., 2). These utterances seem unproblematic to me. For example, at a Cabinet meeting two days before President Nixon resigned, Vice President Ford, according to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, interrupted the President, who was trying to open a discussion on inflation, to repeat the Attorney General's view "that the whole [Watergate] episode is a real tragedy" (Final Days 388). On the Sunday following Mr. Nixon's resignation the New York Times titled its editorial, "Tragedy and Triumph," identifying the President's tragedy as his failure to understand why he had become unable to govern. Nothing in that, I think, escapes tragedy in the journalistic sense.

In a memoir, however, General Haig, who had been Chief of Staff, upped the ante by invoking Aeschylus: "I am not insensible to the central lesson of Watergate, that a seemingly trivial act can take on such Aeschylean significance as to threaten the balance of the world." If Aeschylus, like Sophocles and Shakespeare, has not given us examples of tragedy in a strict sense it would be hard to say where we might find them. Uses of the word to describe the resignation of the thirty-seventh president of the United States on August 9, 1974, tease us a little, and I am going to spend my time tonight assessing them, doing that by taking up Nixon's au revoir on the morning of his resignation to the three hundred or so members of his administration who had come to the East Room to hear him. The largest television audience recorded to that point was also

watching. The speech was, in sensu stricto, extemporaneous. He had no script or even notes but he had spent his last night in the White House alone in the Lincoln Sitting Room thinking about what he was going to say. The previous evening his speech to announce his forthcoming resignation had been drafted by Ray Price, although Nixon had revised it. Five drafts notwithstanding, notwithstanding its formal adequacy as apologia, it was generally received as DOA.¹ By contrast, Friday's farewell was widely perceived as heartfelt; and I shall conclude by coming back to that reaction. Before I do, I want to take up what I believe Aristotle would have called the mythos – the action or plot – of the farewell, looking at that in the light of what I understand to be the plot of tragedy in the strong sense. I am quoting from an essay of mine on Tennessee Williams that I published some 25 years ago: "In tragedy, a hero is aware that he is impinged upon, his existence threatened from without by the blind sweep of an Other. This sense of impingement is signified at the outset by, for example, the lameness with which gives Oedipus his name, by Ahab's missing leg, by Hamlet's "vicious mole of nature" (Hamlet 1.4.23).² The source of this annihilation, the nature of this sole and entire reality, is often layered as deep in the [the tragic text] as it is in the mind of the protagonist. Nearly eight hundred lines of Oedipus Rex have elapsed before Oedipus discloses the "desperate horrors" prophesied for him while he was still in Corinth. Most of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! is over before we learn that the adolescent Thomas Sutpen came to a sense of

himself simultaneously with being turned away from a front door and run off the road. We are three hundred pages into Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night before we learn of a moment when Dick Diver 'realized that he was the last hope of a decaying clan.' And it is the fifth act of Hamlet before we confront, with Hamlet, the man who has been making graves only since the day Hamlet was born. The hero tries to get out from under what threatens to digest meaning to its own absurdity, in the way that 'your worm is your only emperor for diet.' To be, which means to be conscious, is what he wants ('conception is a blessing,' says Hamlet), and the hero's purpose, as a tragedy begins, is to secure his being by securing his consciousness, by translating flesh into word, by projecting and reifying an idea. So the protagonist not only moves to a place he imagines to be safe - Oedipus' Thebes, Thomas Sutpen's hundred square miles of plantation in Absalom, Absalom!, Dick Diver's Tarnes in Scott Fitzgerald's Tender Is the Night, 'the pales and forts' of Wittenberg or Elsinore, perhaps - but knows that he enjoys this safety because he acts in consistency with his idea, because he acts on what we may call his ethic. For Agamemnon and Orestes, this means to be just, for Sutpen to be white, for the protagonist of Ibsen's Master Builder to make homes, for Dick Diver 'to be brave and wise.' Hamlet can be a man provided he can be reasonable.

"The action of a tragedy is the hero's purposing to be good and then discovering he has always been bad, that his reward for

describing an ethic is to find himself guilty in precisely those terms.” The unspeakable tragic point is that human existence is itself at the expense of the sacred. The protagonist’s discovery of this – his anagnorisis – is by way of his crime, his hamartia. The mistranslation of hamartia as ‘tragic flaw’ has been a red herring for generations of students since the end of the 19th century. Hamlet himself spreads out a whole school of red herrings in order to confess without confessing: “I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.” (3.1.124-26). The thirty-sixth American president’s saving ethic, saving in the view of the American people as he at that point evidently still believes it to be, comes out as a compelling Verneinung or dénégation or denial. It is the denouement of his farewell.

One of the network reporters covering the White House called Nixon’s farewell speech teary and meandering. The alleged wandering seems to begin, perhaps, with the President’s reflection on the physical White House itself, the Residence as he habitually called it on the tapes: “I was thinking of it as we walked down this hall, and I was comparing it to some of the great houses of the world that I have been in. This isn’t the biggest house. Many, and most, in even smaller countries are much bigger. This isn’t the finest house. Many in Europe, and particularly in China, Asia, have paintings with great, great value, things that we just don’t have here, and probably will never have until we are a thousand years old or older. But this

is the best house. It is the best house because it has something far more important than numbers of people who serve, far more important than numbers of rooms or how big it is, far more important than numbers of magnificent pieces of art. But this is the best house. This house has a great heart, and that heart comes from those who serve."

The importance of the Residence for him can be fully appreciated only when we understand that he like other tragic protagonists is in flight, as we understand when he meanders to his parents. Of his father, he said "I think they would have called him sort of a little man, common man. . . . You know what he was? He was a streetcar motorman first, and then he was a farmer, and then he had a lemon ranch. It was the poorest lemon ranch in California, I can assure you. He sold it before they found oil on it. And then he was a grocer." Mr. Nixon might have found a model for his father in Fitzgerald's description of Jay Gatsby's father, who had come east for his son's funeral: "After a little while, Mr. Gatz [was coming out] of Gatsby's house] . . . , his mouth ajar, his face flushed slightly, his eyes leaking isolated and unpunctual tears. He had reached the age where death no longer has the quality of ghastly surprise, and when he looked around him now for the first time and saw the height and splendor of the hall and the great rooms opening out from it into other rooms, his grief began to be mixed with an awed pride."

The President goes on to meander, supposedly, about his mother: "and I think of her," he says, "two boys dying to

tuberculosis, nursing four others in order that she could take care of my own brother for three years in Arizona, and seeing each of them die, and when they died, it was like one of her own." Presumably many elected officials like Fitzgerald's Dr. Diver must go fix things that they don't "care a damn about," like a constituent's failing to get an expected Social Security check, because it had early become a habit [for them] to be loved, a habit formed for each of them perhaps "from the moment when he had realized that he was the last hope of a decaying clan." But how can that hope be satisfied without his making Ophelia a breeder of sinners, after the pattern of Gertrude? "The time is out of joint," says Hamlet. "O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right." (1.5.196-97). In the interest of full disclosure I will tell you that my late mother was also a saint.

Nixon is saying farewell, then, to what he calls "the best house" – best because the White House "has a great heart, and that heart comes from those who serve. I was rather sorry they didn't come down. We said goodbye to them upstairs." This staff, who always gave him "a lift," is the οἶκος, the household, chefs and ushers and chambermaids who appear to displace wife and daughters in his speech, as interviewers subsequently infuriate Nixon by pointing out – displaces at this point also the physical οἶκος, the focus of the famous prayer by John Adams now inscribed in a mantle in the State Dining Room: "I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this House, and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise

men ever rule under this roof." This inscription is an interesting piece of rhetoric in itself. Unless God has unaccountably ignored this prayer, the incumbent reader can make the rebuttable presumption of his or her own honesty and wisdom.

I have been arguing that we can identify a strict sense of the word "tragedy," usefully different from a broad or journalistic one. In David Frost's interviews of now the former President, Frost pressed the national need for a full explicit admission on Nixon's part. The latter conceded "Mistakes, yes. But for personal gain, never." "No one has been feathering his nest Not in this Administration, not one single man or woman." With those in power, personal gain often takes the form of bribery, of course. Nixon is insisting there has been no graft, no one has been paying off anyone in the administration. No Spiro Agnews remain. This ethic applies especially to him. Probably his most famous utterance ever was to some four hundred newspaper editors in the fall of 1973, the previous year: "People have got to know whether or not their President is a crook. Well, I'm not a crook. I've earned everything I've got." And in the peroration of his farewell to the staff he tells them, and gives no sign of embarrassment or irony, "No man or no woman came into this administration and left it with more of this world's goods than when he came in. No man or no woman ever profited at the public expense or the public till. That tells something about you." Like him, they've all earned everything they got,

"Mistakes, yes. But for personal gain, never. You did what you believed in. Sometimes right, sometimes wrong. [Because there is] in Government service something that is far more important than money." Here at the height of Nixon's eloquent charge to serve the public honestly there is his own hamartia. Hamlet directs the way to it. The King presses the prince to say where he has hidden Polonius's body. The prince replies that Polonius is at supper. Claudius wants to know where. Hamlet replies, "Not where he eats but where he is eaten." The crime that Nixon denies is taking bribes. The first article of impeachment nails him for giving them.

Nixon ends his extemporaneous talk that Friday morning, as you will remember, with an eloquent injunction to his audience to aim high: Teddy Roosevelt, he reminds them, served his country always in the arena, tempestuous, strong, sometimes wrong, sometimes right, but he was a man. As we know from blogs at the time, he moved his audience never to give up: "It is only a beginning always. The young must know it; the old must know it. It must always sustain us because the greatness comes not when things go always good for you, but the greatness comes when you are really tested, when you take some knocks, some disappointments, when sadness comes, because only if you have been in the deepest valley can you ever know how magnificent it is to be at the highest mountain. Always give your best, never get discouraged, never be petty; always remember others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and

then you destroy yourself." Where did this come from? It can be said of Nixon in office as Malcolm famously said of the first thane of Cawdor, "nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it" (1.4.7-8). Where in Lear did Edmund's revelation come from: "Some good I mean to do in despite of mine own nature." Since Aquinas, Christians have a name for this: prevenient grace. Christian tragedy is a contradiction in terms. But there it is.

This paper is in memory of Tom Idinopulos.

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¹ See Gerald L. Wilson, "A Strategy of Explanation: Richard M. Nixon's August 8, 1974, Resignation Address," Communication Quarterly 24.3 (Summer 1976): 14-20.

² I cite Shakespeare's plays from the New Arden, third edition.