

# ‘Each time I’m reminded of it, I feel as though I need therapy’: Australian Football, Tragedies and the Question of Catharsis<sup>1</sup>

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*Australian Football League fans often narrate particularly distressing finals losses in tragic terms. Drawing from the field of tragedy studies, this paper examines the way such losses are experienced and told, and the suffering and possible pleasures these accounts reveal. How, I ask, do these losses engender so much pain? And why do fans continually return to their memories of these defeats, when each return re-awakens the grief? These questions lead me to consider the relationship of tragedy to trauma, and the contentious nature and meaning of catharsis, a term common to the analysis of both tragedy and sport.*

We wouldn't think anything of tragedy if we did not have a deeply ingrained sense of order already there to be affronted. Tragedy in life, as art... exposes by violation our mostly unconscious assumptions about how the world should be; and how often we take it for granted that it is as it should be (a world, say, without our death already in it).

Adam Phillips<sup>2</sup>

'Ask any Western Bulldogs supporter at random the worst moment of their footy life and the answer will almost certainly be: The Loss. Western Bulldogs vs Adelaide [Crows], Preliminary Final, September 20, 1997... The losing spin of the roulette wheel on which Bulldogs people had invested everything.'<sup>3</sup> So began Marty Gleeson in late 2007 for a piece titled 'Ten years of torment: 1997... from drought-breaker to heart-breaker' for the summer edition of *Inside Football*.

A magazine providing in-depth coverage of the Australian Football League (AFL)—the sport of Australian football's elite professional competition—this off-season edition of *Inside Football* was principally concerned with the coming 2008 AFL season.<sup>4</sup> Amid all the profiles and predictions, Gleeson's lament stood out like a beacon, placing the feelings of fans front and centre, when every other article focused on football clubs and their players.<sup>5</sup> A Western Bulldogs supporter himself, Gleeson recounted 'The Loss' in all its dreadful detail. There was the great optimism that preceded the match, followed by his joyous sense that the game was as good as won when the Bulldogs went to the half-time break with a 31 point lead. Then came the third quarter when the Bulldogs reinforced Gleeson's confidence, holding off the threatening Crows. But what should have been a triumphant final quarter brought instead a rising concern as the 'Dogs failed to seal the game, missing chance after chance. And then suddenly Adelaide made their move, storming into contention. After the Bulldogs failed to take another two opportunities, one either side of Adelaide taking the lead, the game was over. The Bulldogs had somehow lost. 'Ten years later' and Gleeson wondered 'if it was even real':

The pre-game hope and premiership dreaming seem like pure fantasy now, The Loss just brutal reality asserting itself.

The Loss was more than losing a mere football match: it was like a death to deal with, however inadequately.

Say '1997' and Bulldog people know exactly what you mean. We carry it with us.

Ten years later we are still theorising on its turning points and wishing it had turned out another way.

How is it that the outcome of a football game—a bunch of boofheads kicking around a pigskin', as one of the fans I interviewed put it—could generate such a response?<sup>6</sup> How, in other words, could a football club's loss be so awful, so heart-breaking, that 'it was like a death to deal with'? While such questions echo through the writings of sports fans, they have been largely foreign to the discipline of sports studies.<sup>7</sup> For like *Inside Football*, and the sports media more generally, scholars of sports have tended to focus on the deeds of sporting clubs and players, rather than on those sports fans who avidly follow their fortunes.<sup>8</sup> In the last few years, however, several scholars have begun to explore the rich emotions experienced by Australian football fans. Joy Damousi and John Cash have started analysing the nostalgic, melancholic inner lives of Australian football supporters, tracing the way football facilitates a means of culturally working through the vicissitudes of familial (and other close) relationship.<sup>9</sup> Melissa Walsh has embarked on a study of the way fans sustain hope in the face of defeat.<sup>10</sup> And June Senyard has also turned her attention to football followers, mining their affective memories of suburban football grounds, and exploring the emotional nature of Melbourne's early football spectators.<sup>11</sup>

My paper adds to this emerging literature by creating space for exchanges between the study of sports and theatre. Australian football has often been spoken of as a form of theatre, but rarely has this metaphor been analysed in any detail. The major exception is the theatre historian Peter Fitzpatrick, who compared the way both theatre and football create a sense of drama that is then resolved (though often incompletely).<sup>12</sup> 'Tragedy', Fitzpatrick notes, has an 'immediate application to the understanding of football as theatre', and he writes of grand final defeats which brought 'that exquisitely painful sense of loss and resignation' that marks 'the full tragic experience'.<sup>13</sup> Fitzpatrick, however, is concerned with the drama of football as a whole,

and since ‘you can’t scale the heights of tragedy week in week out’, he turns to the Theatre of the Absurd and other connections between footy and the theatrical stage.<sup>14</sup>

In this paper I want to build on Fitzpatrick’s work by focusing on the connections between tragic theatre and awful football final defeats. For one of the striking aspects of Marty Gleeson’s account of ‘The Loss’ is the way he deploys the classical tropes of tragedy. There is the hubris of presumed victory, critical errors that dramatically reverse good fortune, a pitiable conclusion and, at the end of it all, an unsettling realisation of what has come to pass.<sup>15</sup> And Gleeson is not alone in narrating an especially painful finals defeat in tragic terms. Many other Bulldog fans provide very similar accounts of the 1997 preliminary finals loss. Moreover, fans of most other AFL teams tell their own stories of finals woe, of horrible defeats that seem somehow tragic in nature. For example, Collingwood is renowned, among other things, for its tragic string of grand final defeats in 1977, 1979, 1980 and 1981; Geelong for its grand final losses in 1989, 1992, 1994 and 1995; while Essendon followers still speak in bitter terms of the preliminary final loss to Carlton in 1999. But not all significant finals defeats are told in this way. For most of the Collingwood fans I interviewed, the thrashing at the hands of Brisbane in the 2003 grand final was deemed much worse than the narrow loss they had also suffered to Brisbane in the previous year’s grand final. For many Bulldog fans, however, it was the close loss in 1997 that seemed tragic, with the 1998 preliminary final thrashing at the hands of Adelaide somehow not quite so disturbing. What, then, leads football fans to recount only some finals losses in tragic terms?

My exploration of this question draws on in-depth interviews with twenty footy followers and the writings of and about fans in books, periodicals and the Internet.<sup>16</sup> I also draw on studies of tragedy to help understand what happens for footy fans when their team’s season ends with an *especially* distressing finals defeat. It may be argued that the term tragedy has become hackneyed due to overuse (by sports journalists among others). Yet my interest here lies not in fans’ characterisation of losses as ‘tragic’, but in their excessive responses to particular losses, and in the way the narratives of these losses come to deploy the tropes of tragedy. And it is worth remembering that tragic theatre seeks to generate an excessive response, to unsettle audience members even though they are generally forewarned of the subject

matter and often already know the story which is to be played out.<sup>17</sup> This points, however, to an important distinction between tragic drama and football. Uncertainty is structured into football, the result of matches *must* be unknown, whereas those attending a play generally know if the play is supposed to have a tragic ending.<sup>18</sup> These endings, though, can still surprise and shock, as shown by Samuel Johnson’s famous angst at Cordelia’s death.<sup>19</sup> But Johnson chose to support a version of *King Lear* with a happy ending, an option not available to Marty Gleeson or other Western Bulldogs followers.<sup>20</sup>

My concern in this paper is not whether certain finals losses can be ‘truly’ equated with tragic theatre, but with why they are told as tragedies. What experiences and passions, in other words, lead football fans to narrate losses in these particular terms? I turn, therefore, to the field of tragedy studies, not for a formula of tragedy but for entry points into the passions of fans. Or, to be more specific, into the difficult mysteries of suffering and pleasure. For at least since Aristotle presented his thoughts on poetry, the suffering enacted in tragic drama has been analysed as much for the pleasure this supposedly brings audiences as for the pity and fear that Aristotle believed was the source of this pleasure.<sup>21</sup> And, almost invariably, part of this conversation has been the question of whatever it is that Aristotle meant when he deployed the term ‘catharsis’.

## SUFFERING, PLEASURE AND CATHARSIS

There must be something special about the specific pleasures we take in the representation of tragic events, and that specialness must have something to do with the pity and terror they are calculated to evoke.

Francis Sparshott<sup>22</sup>

Aristotle refers to catharsis but once in what remain of his writings on tragedy, when he notes that tragedy arouses ‘pity and fear’ in order to accomplish ‘the catharsis of these passions’.<sup>23</sup> But what does it mean to accomplish the catharsis of pity and fear? This tantalising question has reverberated through subsequent commentaries on tragedy, with probably more written about the possible meanings of catharsis than on any other aspect of tragedy.<sup>24</sup> Did Aristotle envisage catharsis

as a pleasurable homeopathic-like purging of the pity and fear that pollute the mind, as Jacob Bernays suggested, or the purification of the tragic act, as Gerald Else argued?<sup>25</sup> Or is catharsis best read as the pleasure of clarification, be that satisfaction of a cerebral nature, as Leon Golden believed, or the ‘getting clear through pity and fear’, as Martha Nussbaum put it?<sup>26</sup> Might catharsis be instead simply the safe stimulation and enjoyable release of emotions, as Jonathan Lear contends, or did Aristotle have in mind an educative function as well, as Richard Janko maintains?<sup>27</sup>

Tempting as it is to try to provide the definitive answer as to what Aristotle meant by catharsis, I am inclined to agree with Andrew Ford that such an endeavour is fanciful.<sup>28</sup> There is still space, however, for critique. And what is notable in the possibilities I’ve just canvassed is that they fail to adequately engage with the unsettling, disturbing aspects of tragedy—with tragedy’s excess. People who’ve just viewed Shakespeare’s *King Lear* do not tend to report a pleasurable purging, release or purification of their feelings, nor cerebral pleasures or an enjoyable clarification achieved through pity and fear. Instead they write of shock, silence, tension and a search for meaning.<sup>29</sup> “How can these things be?” is the question that urges itself on us,’ writes Clifford Leech of the ‘tragic effect’ of another seventeenth century play, Pedro Calderon’s *The Mayo of Zalamea*.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the fault here lies in part with Aristotle and changing understandings of tragedy, but it remains a weakness of tragedy studies that neither the various takes on catharsis or other approaches give us a sense of why people wilfully attend what Cynthia Marshall terms ‘emotionally devastating’ tragedies.<sup>31</sup>

Maybe the experiences of Aussie-rules football fans can shed some further light on the suffering and possible pleasures that the notion of catharsis points to, even if we can never really know what Aristotle meant by it. For the notion of catharsis has regularly been invoked to explain the intriguing passions of sports fans, though rarely with any great rigour. The American psychoanalyst Abraham Brill was one of the first to make what became a common argument about the catharsis which spectator sports enabled. ‘Sports’, Brill wrote in 1929, provide ‘a great and necessary catharsis, indispensable to civilized man—a salutary purgation of the combative instincts which, if dammed up within him, would break out in disastrous ways.’<sup>32</sup> But while Brill celebrated the supposed purgation of ‘impulses which too much dammed up would lead to private broils and public disorders’,

Marxists criticised the way that spectator sports acted as ‘capitalists’ safety-valve’, purging the working-class aggression that ‘should be directed against the ruling class’.<sup>33</sup>

Many sports sociologists and psychologists read these popular theories of catharsis as suggesting that those who viewed contact sports would be drained of aggression and hostility.<sup>34</sup> However, empirical studies found that people expressed greater hostility after attending aggressive sporting contests.<sup>35</sup> Although the links were never properly worked through, these studies actually offer some support to an alternative notion of catharsis developed by Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning. Bringing together Elias’ theory of ‘the civilising process’ with Aristotle’s thoughts on tragedy and music, they argue that spectator sports function to excite intense emotions in a world where they are increasingly repressed.<sup>36</sup> In essence, sports like soccer arouse passions that are normally repressed such as ‘fear and compassion, or jealousy and hatred’. The expression of these manufactured emotions is cathartic because they are experienced ‘in a manner which is not *seriously* perturbing and dangerous as is often the case in real life... They lose their sting.’<sup>37</sup> Elias and Dunning propose that ‘optimum enjoyment’ requires a prolonged battle, with first one team scoring, then the other.<sup>38</sup> The supporters of the team that suddenly scores the decisive goal would then experience, they suggest, ‘the happiness of triumph and jubilation’ of ‘a great game’.<sup>39</sup> But the distress of the losing team’s supporters is not discussed. And the distress expressed by Gleeson over the Western Bulldogs’ 1997 preliminary final defeat indicates such losses might be seriously perturbing, somehow more ‘like a death’ than the loss of ‘a mere football match’.<sup>40</sup> Elias and Dunning’s notion of catharsis also fails, therefore, to engage with what is disturbing; in this case with losses that can be read as tragic. Is there any pleasure and catharsis available in such losses? This is the underlying question of my paper.

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

When my son Zac and I settled in front of the television, we felt a confidence borne from a decisive run of recent victories by a team confident of their destiny.

Steve Strevens<sup>41</sup>

Nadia couldn't concentrate on the day before the 2003 grand final.<sup>42</sup> Her team Collingwood was playing Brisbane on the last Saturday of September for the second year running. But while the Magpies had been great underdogs in 2002, this year they were clear favourites. Like most Collingwood fans, Nadia had the strong 'sense that this was our year'. Unable to work on her chemistry thesis, Nadia decided to do something very 'unusual' for her—to go shopping for clothes. Everywhere she went Nadia encountered this 'huge expectation that Collingwood was going to win'. Already she had seen that this expectation had 'led to all sorts of very very strange and uncharacteristic behaviour on the part of many people'. Nadia herself had done 'some very strange things like making a recording of the Collingwood theme song for an Essendon supporting friend in Bangkok'. Shopping for some 'smart black and white livery' to watch the game in, Nadia found herself having these 'Collingwood conversations with shop-keepers of the sort that my father would have'. She was engaging 'in that way that I never thought was my style' as if she was 'sort of taken by the spirit'.

Later Nadia termed this 'presumptuous joy', and the out of character actions it occasioned 'hubris'. Strange though she found it, such rash certainty is not unique. Gleeson tells us that 'we [Bulldogs fans] did not consider the possibility' of loss.<sup>43</sup> Charlotte, a Geelong fan, experienced a similar certainty before the 1995 grand final.<sup>44</sup> She spent the next twelve seasons after that devastating loss forswearing any faith or hope in the Cats. Yet in a manner that Charlotte described as 'really bizarre', she and those she knew suddenly became convinced that Geelong would win their 2007 preliminary final clash with Collingwood, despite having spent much of the year 'waiting for the bubble to burst'.<sup>45</sup> Glory, or a chance at glory, was on its way, or so these footy followers believed.

But if uncertainty is a hallmark of Australian football matches, what led fans like these to the curious belief that victory for their club was guaranteed? It seems as if some kind of faith is at work; faith in a promised time when the beloved club will win the much coveted premiership.<sup>46</sup> When the signs of football—a reading of form and the portents of the season—pointed to a glorious victory, the promised triumph was presumed before the game had even begun. Nadia, Gleeson and Charlotte all traced their overconfidence back to particular events which suggested this was to be 'THE YEAR', as Brian Matthews referred to it in his autobiography.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, on

occasions when the signs were less clear, or pointed to defeat, these fans expressed hope but no conviction.<sup>48</sup>

The signs of impending victory can be found during games, as well as before. In the 1997 preliminary final it was the commanding display of the Bulldogs that convinced many fans that they were going to win. A barracker with the assumed Internet name (what we might call 'Nom de web') of 'Pembleton', explained that:

i had about 60 minutes where i believed we were going to the grand final. It wasn't a matter of 'isn't it great to be close to a grand final?', rather it was 'OMFG [Oh My Fucking God], we're finally going to a grand final'. For 60 minutes or so that day i experienced what it feels like to KNOW your team is going to a grand final, and i loved it.<sup>49</sup>

Pembleton's post provides another example of mistaken belief, of the way that positive signs seemed to be read by these footy followers as a guarantee that the object of desire—a grand final or premiership—was at hand. Evidence that victory *should* occur became seen as evidence that victory *would* occur.<sup>50</sup> Hence the triumphant joy.

But confidence at a game, and an intense one at that, is different from the exuberance possible before the match. While I'm yet to speak to or read of a Bulldogs fan who did not, at some stage in the game, expect to win, few were ready to publicly celebrate. Those who did celebrate were quickly quelled by others who feared hubris. 'I blame my brother' for the defeat wrote 'always right' in August 2006.<sup>51</sup> 'In 1997 towards the end of the third quarter we kicked a goal and he stood up and yelled... "We're going to a Grand Final!!!" He was immediately besieged by a number of Bulldogs supporters who knew what a dangerous comment that was.' It was 'Too late' concluded 'always right' 'and the rest is history.'

What was 'too late', however, was the concern with hubris. For the Bulldog fans, like Nadia in 2003, already believed that they were going to win. And although this belief brought considerable pleasure, it also set the scene for the horror that followed; for a loss that was somehow completely unexpected. A combination of faith and signs that the faith would be realised had established the conditions for a defeat that would later be read as tragic. It was an intoxicating mix, enough to lead the normally cautious Nadia into uncharacteristically

presumptive celebrations. Even Charlotte, who sought to stamp out her faith, came in spite of herself to a belief in late 2007 that courted bitter disappointment once again.<sup>52</sup> It is to such bitter disappointment that I now turn.

## TRAUMA

I was still depressed when we landed back home in Sydney a couple of days later. The feeling of loss was akin to that of when love goes wrong. Something had died. A dream had ended.

Clinton Walker<sup>53</sup>

The psychologist Carol Gilligan has argued that the classic Greek tragedies are better understood as tales of trauma.<sup>54</sup> While I find her take on both tragedy and trauma highly problematic—she hopes to escape both—the accounts that football followers give of the aftermath of tragic finals losses are emblematic of trauma.<sup>55</sup> ‘It was devastating, people were completely stunned,’ said Dave of the 1997 preliminary final:

I’ve never seen so many people so drained. I was shell-shocked. A mate of mine said he was never going to go to a game again, he was that distraught... It looked to be inconceivable after three-quarter time that we would lose—and inconceivable after the first fifteen minutes of the last quarter.<sup>56</sup>

Devastation was allied with disbelief. There was something awful about the loss that seemed impossible to understand. And in this Dave was not alone. ‘Walking home that night was the weirdest feeling,’ explained Tony.<sup>57</sup> ‘Everyone had their tri-coloured flags out of their houses saying “Go Bulldogs” and it was just breaking dusk. My wife at the time said to me, “do you know what this feels like? Like one of those German existentialist films of the 30s, you knew something had gone on but your brain deliberately didn’t want to compute it.”’

For many Bulldog followers, what had happened couldn’t be put into words. Their shock and bewilderment were expressed instead by silence, tears and other physical manifestations of considerable unease. ‘When the siren went i just sat there in shock,’ recalled ‘DOG

GOD’, ‘and i remember not speaking until my brother came home from work, and we didnt speak about it all night.’<sup>58</sup> ‘Chicago’ ‘was on the top deck of the Northern stand and cried for ten minutes after the match.’<sup>59</sup> Tony felt ‘sick in the guts, just sick in the guts’ after the game. ‘Leon’ also felt ill, writing later that this ‘game is the only time I have left a match feeling physically sick due to the result. I have left games we have lost feeling disappointed, heartbroken, angry etc... but this day went way, way beyond that. There’s no other way to describe it—I just felt sick.’<sup>60</sup>

Others expressed the unspeakable in violent acts of revenge against those who seemed to have stolen their enjoyment.<sup>61</sup> The normally empathetic Walter ‘saw a couple of cars with windows smashed in as I was leaving’ but was too numb and tortured to care.<sup>62</sup> Daniel’s father, a normally ‘mild-mannered public servant’ who never expressed anger, tried ‘to get out and kill’ a celebrating Crows supporter who was yelling and banging on his car.<sup>63</sup> Daniel himself felt ‘shattered’, but he pissed himself laughing when a Bulldogs follower ‘smacked’ a Crows fan and yelled out ‘yeah Bulldogs’ after the Crows fan had screamed ‘yeah Crows’ in his face.<sup>64</sup> This was the only moment of wit in the immediate aftermath of the loss that I’ve come across. The defeat was literally no laughing matter. Whereas the often dark humour of fans seems somehow to generally limit physical fights, in a curious reversal the single moment of comedy came out of violence.<sup>65</sup>

For Clifford Leech, tragedy is ultimately about a confrontation with death, our death whose shocking reality we can never truly envisage or live ‘through in advance’.<sup>66</sup> This is what ‘tragedy is truly about: the realization of the unthinkable’.<sup>67</sup> When Western Bulldogs fans were able to try and express the unthinkable in words, death was the metaphor they often turned to. Marty Gleeson, as we’ve already heard, felt that ‘The Loss was more than losing a mere football match: it was like a death to deal with, however inadequately.’ The preliminary final loss ‘was like dying to most of us supporters’, stated ‘Chicago’.<sup>68</sup> ‘Sporty Spice’ agreed, noting ‘I’ve always said 97 felt like someone had died and took me eons to get over.’<sup>69</sup> Nadia, too, experienced the Magpies’ 2003 grand final defeat as like a death.<sup>70</sup> That night Nadia couldn’t sleep. It seemed bitterly cold, though she wasn’t sure how much of that was due to the actual temperature and how much to ‘my psychological state’. She got up and made a hot water bottle

'which should be unnecessary on the last Saturday in September', and read *Kill for Collingwood*, the history of the club which her father had delivered in the morning with her grand final ticket inside it. Later she would see this 'huddling in bed, clinging to the hot water bottle' as 'like a kind of physical manifestation of trying to hold onto something that is sort of escaping... trying to cling to something that seemed to be gone.'

Nadia and the Bulldogs fans had experienced the joys of anticipation, the delights of believing that the wondrous pleasure they had long yearned for was about to be theirs. But instead of realising their dreams they ended up receiving something completely unexpected. Their glorious fantasies of victory were ruptured by something they couldn't understand. In Lacanian terms, it is as if they encountered that bit of reality that is unbearable, the *Real* which has our death in it, whose presence resists complete symbolisation and brings trauma.<sup>71</sup> Their expressions of shock, bewilderment, silence, tears, physical pain and violence read like descriptions of the excessive suffering Jacques Lacan termed *jouissance*: an intense experience of something which is too much, something intolerable and redolent of death.<sup>72</sup>

The end of the game, then, brought no happy purgation, no satisfying enlightenment, no draining of hostility. The loss was seriously perturbing, the bitter emotions of defeat had a danger in them and they still stung. There was no experience, in other words, of catharsis as defined by scholars of tragedy and sports. But perhaps it is too early for an analysis of catharsis. For what we have here are moments of expectation and then a dramatic reversal of fortune. The ingredients for tragedy, but not yet the telling of tragic tales. The question is, why do such experiences of trauma come to be told in tragic terms? I address this question by looking at the way fans live with this trauma.

## TRAGIC NARRATIVES

IT HURTS, it really hurts. Any team, but Carlton. Years of therapy to erase the '99 prelim nightmare. But now it is back to the couch again!

Alex Shabs<sup>73</sup>

Traumatic finals losses exercise a terrible fascination for football followers. They often want, in the months and years that follow, to annihilate the memory of the hideous defeat, but many seem unable to stop speaking about it. On the Internet discussion forums it sometimes seems not a week will go by without a Bulldogs fan bringing up the 1997 preliminary final loss. Discussions of the Adelaide Crows, of former Dogs players like Mark West, Todd Curley and Rohan Smith, of the former coach Terry Wallace, of the so-called losing culture of the Bulldogs, of close losses, and of the continued wait for a premier-ship victory, are all wont to diverge into a conversation about that fateful defeat. On most occasions there are complaints that the topic has been brought back up. 'Stop \*\*\*\*ing Talking About It! 😞', wrote 'Leon' in October 2005 after 'bulldogrob' created 'Only for the Brave', a thread notifying people that Fox Footy were replaying the game.<sup>74</sup> When the *Herald Sun* journalist Mark Stevens wrote about the match in August 2007, 'AngeloPetraglia' asked 'Why do we have to re-live all those memories again?':

Sat down for some breakfast and a coffee yesterday morning looking forward to a good day and nearly choked on my corn flakes!

Yes. I nearly started crying... again. Ahhhhhh the pain. How, how, how, how, how, how did we ever lose that game?<sup>75</sup>

Such acts of protest, however, keep the discussion going. And those who complain generally go on to detail their memories of the loss, with 'AngeloPetraglia' writing, for example, of the great silence on the train home, broken only by his brother's anti-Todd Curly rants.

The complaint is that recalling the loss seems to bring back the awful suffering. 'Feel sick', wrote Batman after reading the Stevens article.<sup>76</sup> 'I read that, and all a sudden that bottle of scotch on my desk is looking good,' reported 'SonOfScray'. 'I remember that day like it was yesterday and it still hurts, even reading the article stirred up some emotions.'<sup>77</sup> 'Each time I'm reminded of it, I feel as though I need therapy' stated 'The Coon Dog' after 'Pembleton' started a thread on the ten year anniversary of the loss.<sup>78</sup> 'Hello all', wrote 'Jean Claude Vas Deferens' to the people reading a June 2007 thread on Terry Wallace that had turned into another discussion of the 1997 preliminary final:

just wanted to let you know that I've been outside all afternoon hitting myself in the head with a hammer. The reason, of course, is because it feels so good when you stop. The pain kind of... just goes away. I wish I could say the same thing for that Preliminary Final. 😊<sup>79</sup>

The considerable humour in these comments serves to emphasise the suffering entailed in remembering the loss.<sup>80</sup> But why is there this compulsion to return to this pain, a return that acts as something of a repetition? Freud, wrestling with the question of why people seemed to compulsively repeat moments of trauma, suggested that each repetition attempts to quiet the trauma and in so doing end the cycle of repetitions.<sup>81</sup> Each repetition is a failed attempt to heal the trauma. The repeated attempts to understand what happened—to understand both why the Bulldogs lost and why it was such a shattering event—certainly suggest that fans are continually trying, and continually failing, to completely grasp and thus quiet this trauma.

But unlike victims of actual shell-shock, the Bulldogs footy fans do not repeat the actual event of the loss. They do not wake up in a cold sweat after nightmares that re-enacted the traumatic events.<sup>82</sup> Instead their return is more like that of Freud's grandson who expressed the pain of his mother's absence through a repetitive word-game.<sup>83</sup> For the fans' continuing return comes via words; through the attempt to tell what at the time was untellable. The move is from what happened to a story of what happened.

Kathleen Sands argues that such a transformation of 'the modality of repetition from... event to narration' characterises successful tragedies.<sup>84</sup> The tragic narratives 'mark off trauma', delimiting these black holes so that meaning might orbit around them.<sup>85</sup> Yet Sands' conception of tragedy seems too stable. The continual return to these narratives suggests that something continues to escape, or perhaps to break through. Leech puts it better, I think, when he notes that 'any successful tragedy makes us feel simultaneously that we have done with the situation and that we are still desperately concerned with it.'<sup>86</sup>

But if the measure of success is the resolution of trauma, these tragic narratives fail. The words that come to stand in for the loss can never fully capture it. The pain remains strong, as we have seen. What, then, does telling these events in tragic terms provide? According to

Sands, 'Tragedies record the fundamental contradiction between reality and ideality: life is not as it should be.'<sup>87</sup> Marty Gleeson's tragic tale of the 1997 preliminary final attests to a horrible wrongness. The game had not ended as it should have. It is a point made over and over again—sometimes with humour, often with pity—in the never-ending discussions by Bulldog fans of the game.

While these discussions evoke the pain of the loss, they also address this wrongness. Those seen to be at fault—particular Bulldogs players, the coach, the whole team, umpires, the Adelaide Crows and its players—are the subject of hostility and derision. There are the pleasures here of scapegoating and of the birth of hatred. In a typical example, Dave has 'always despised Adelaide, and in particular Kane Johnson and Darren Jarman' since the 1997 loss; 'the whole team I just hate.'<sup>88</sup> The ongoing nature of this hatred reveals the way a seemingly wrong loss can foster rivalry and a wish for revenge.

Such wishes were on display alongside painful recollections after a come-from-behind victory against Adelaide in 2006 that put the Bulldogs into the finals for the first time since 2000. 'snag's started an Internet discussion thread on the pleasures of retribution, with the comment that it was 'impossible to watch us play Adelaide at the "G" without getting horrible flashbacks of 97, similar to Vietnam veterans to low flying choppers.'<sup>89</sup> Interspersed among the re-iterations that followed of the 1997 loss were expressions of delight at the crucial win over Adelaide. But 'Yankee Hotel Foxtrot' articulated the thoughts of many in noting that though 'yesterday was a wonderful victory... it does nothing to erase the pain of 97.'<sup>90</sup>

Instead, there is a sense among Bulldog fans that only a premiership victory can properly redress the tragic preliminary final loss to Adelaide. 'Until a GF [Grand Final] win, it will never heal,' is how 'bulldogtragic' put it when responding to 'Yankee Hotel Foxtrot's post.'<sup>91</sup> This desire for redemption is arguably the most telling effect of a tragic reading of the 1997 trauma. Each return to the horribly wrong loss, and the great suffering this occasioned, fosters a demand for reparation. The need to remedy the devastating loss that should never have happened thus becomes one more reason to crave the delivery of another Western Bulldogs premiership flag.<sup>92</sup>

Charlotte provided a different kind of tragic narrative when recounting Geelong's 1995 grand final defeat. Looking back the loss seemed inevitable, her certain belief a terrible mistake.<sup>93</sup> Her tale

acted as a protection against further trauma, as a warning of the futility of trusting that glory would someday come.<sup>94</sup> Yet Charlotte's regular return to this warning, and associated protestations of disbelief and mistrust, suggests she was wrestling at some level with a hope against hope for the promised glory that would counter the 1995 defeat. And in late 2007, when the signs indicated victory should be at hand, she came again, despite herself, to certain belief.<sup>95</sup>

Nadia also came to understand the shocking, unexpected grand final defeat of 2003 as somehow inevitable. When she got up the morning after the Magpies' 2003 defeat, Nadia felt a sense of betrayal to see the sun up shining brightly on a glorious morning, that life was continuing on as normal.<sup>96</sup> After crying for a long time she rode to her father's house, and together they drove out to the green hills of Eltham. They were acting out a different kind of return, re-enacting a ritual of childhood, counting magpies, their club's 'totemic bird'. The 'ritual of the drive and the counting of the birds' was another way of recovering desire after a traumatic encounter. For she and her father were coming together to 'let go of the season that had been and start looking forward to the next one'. Nadia had 'everything invested in that game, well maybe not everything, but an awful lot, really a huge amount'. Until the drive she felt like something had died, 'the season and all that had transpired throughout it seemed to be ebbing away and leaving a sort of nothingness.' However, the return with her father to magpie counting—to something that was a word-game among other things—enabled her to realise that she 'still loved' the Magpies, and 'that there would be a future'. Though she still describes the loss as tragic, Nadia finds it 'hard to imagine' the game as having 'any other ending'; it even 'seems somehow rather fitting that that's how it ended'. Less angst lingered with her than it did with Charlotte and does with the Western Bulldogs followers. Perhaps this was because she had found another, deeper way of returning to her love and faith in Collingwood, with the ongoing quest for the premiership that this entails.<sup>97</sup>

## CATHARSIS?

Tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery.  
AC Bradley<sup>98</sup>

This paper has explored something of the pleasure and suffering bound up in particularly distressing final losses that many footy fans come to read as tragic. Signs that a grand final appearance or premiership is likely are presumptively taken as guaranteeing that the promised time of ultimate victory and reward is at hand. This belief that victory is certain leads to considerable joy but also establishes the conditions for tragedy; for a loss that is somehow completely unexpected. These losses are experienced as traumatic. They are shocking in a manner that cannot be articulated, and lead to substantial suffering likened to that occasioned by a death. The barrackers I studied repeatedly returned despite themselves to these losses. But they brought with them the words which had been largely absent in the initial face of this loss. And these words framed the loss in tragic terms. The various tales of wrongness, inevitable failure, and of inevitable redemption, all renewed a longing for the premiership.

One question to be addressed is: what are the consequences of getting what is desired? To put it in footballing terms, what happens when the beloved club does actually win the premiership? But I want to end where I began, with the difficult mysteries of the pleasure and catharsis in tragic suffering. Clearly, the fans who were the subject of this paper did not experience a pleasurable catharsis as it has been defined. Neither, however, do those people who attend performances of tragedies like *King Lear*, though they do not appear to suffer as extremely as the footy fans I've chronicled. Yet the Bulldogs fans who continually return to speak of the tragedy of 1997 did evince some elements of pleasure. They wrote of the pain of returning to the loss with wit, relished a hatred of Adelaide, nurtured a desire for revenge, and yearned even more for the premiership that would reward their faith and redeem their suffering.

These pleasures arise from a desire to right the tragic wrong that occurred in the 1997 preliminary final. Kathleen Sands writes that to 'uncover tragedy is... to reignite the desire for lives and selves that are better.'<sup>99</sup> Perhaps this is where the catharsis associated with tragedy might lie: in the telling of tragic narratives which frame trauma somewhat in language. Although the trauma is never fully purged or released, enough sense is made of it to foster the wish for another world.<sup>100</sup> There is something of a clarification, in other words, that leads to the pleasures of desire.<sup>101</sup>

But the pleasure here is an awful one, that of starting afresh after a devastating loss. And the desire for a better, promised world has a danger to it, for it can occasion the presumptive certain belief that sets the conditions once again for another shocking loss. ❖

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Fiona Kerr, Joy Damousi, Esther Faye, Zoë Loh, Cecily Hunter, Julie Robarts, Louis Magee, Warwick Anderson, Melissa Walsh, June Senyard and Alex McDermott for their valuable feedback, conversation, assistance and support. I am also grateful for the feedback I received when presenting earlier versions of this paper to the Australian Historical Association, the Australian Society for Sports History, the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne, and the School of Human Movement, Recreation and Performance at Victoria University. I would also like to thank Michelle Smith for her support and encouragement, as well as the referees for their comments.
- 2 Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery*, London, Faber and Faber, 1998, 95.
- 3 This quote, and the following quotes and details are from Marty Gleeson, 'Ten years of torment: 1997... from drought-breaker to heart-breaker', *Inside Football*, vol. 37, no. 35, Dec. 2007–Feb. 2008, 26–27. Gleeson's emphasis.
- 4 There is considerable debate over the naming of the football code that developed in Melbourne in the late 1850s. In this paper I refer to it formally as Australian football in preference to Australian Rules Football which has not been used in the titles of the game's governing bodies. At times I also use the popular terms for football from the Victorian vernacular, namely: football, footy, and Aussie-rules.
- 5 I generally use the term 'fan' in this paper to denote football supporters, despite the fact that many supporters refer to themselves as *barrackers* as well as fans. The term barracker as applied to sports followers is local rather than international and is likely to cause confusion for some readers. Although the term fan was probably developed in the United States of America to refer to baseball followers in the 1880s, it has been regularly applied to Aussie-rules devotees since at least the 1920s and seems to be overtaking barracker in general Australian conversation.
- 6 Interview with Pete.
- 7 Notable examples of fans writings on Australian football include John Harms, *Loose Men Everywhere*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2002; Angela Pippas, *The Goddess Advantage: One Year in the Life of a Football Worshipper*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2006; Matthew Price, *Way to Go: Sadness, Euphoria and the Fremantle Dockers*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, WA, 2003; and Matthew Hardy, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: A Footy Fan's Memoir of Life on the Outer Looking In*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 1999. For a detailed bibliography of writings on Australian football fans see Tim Hogan, 'Football and fans: An annotated bibliography', in Matthew Nicholson (ed.), *Fanfare: Spectator Culture and Australian Rules*

*Football*. ASSH Studies No. 15, Australian Society for Sports History, Melbourne, 2005, 125–40.

- 8 A mid-1990s' review found that studies of fans accounted for only four percent of the papers in sports sociology and sports psychology journals, while sports were also rarely the focus of sports histories. See D Wann and M Hamlet, 'Author and subject gender in sports research', *The International Journal of Sport Psychology*, vol. 26, 1995, 225–32. Those studies of sport which have examined fans have tended to focus on the issue of fan violence. For an overview see Matthew Klugman, 'Emotional devotees: Approaching the inner world of Australian Rules Football fans', in Matthew Nicholson, Bob Stewart and Rob Hess (eds), *Football Fever: Moving the Goalposts*, Maribyrnong Press, Hawthorn, Vic., 2006, 207–22.
- 9 John Cash and Joy Damousi, 'Inside footy mania: The psychological underpinnings of football supporters' passionate attachments to their teams', *Meanjin*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2004, 218–226; and 'Fathers and daughters at play', in Nicholson, Stewart and Hess (eds), 223–232.
- 10 Melissa Walsh, 'What if? Australian Rules Football and the uchronic imagination Collingwood, grand finals and memory', in Nicholson, Stewart and Hess (eds), 233–242.
- 11 See June Senyard, 'Mining the barracker archive', in Bob Stewart, Rob Hess and Matthew Nicholson (eds), *Football Fever: Grassroots*, Maribyrnong Press, Hawthorn, Vic., 19–30; 'The barracker and the spectator: Constructing class and gender identities through the football crowd at the turn of the century. (Australian rules football)', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 62, 1999, 46–55; and 'Marvellous Melbourne, consumerism and the rise of sports spectating', in Nicholson (ed.), 25–40. Important recent studies of the passions of English soccer fans include Garry Robson, '*No One Likes Us, We Don't Care: The Myth and Reality of Millwall Fandom*', Berg, Oxford, 2000; and Chris Stone, 'The role of football in everyday life', *Soccer & Society*, vol. 8, no. 2/3, 2007, 169–184.
- 12 Peter Fitzpatrick, 'Football and theatre', in Stephen Alomes and Bob Stewart (eds), '*High Mark* Australian Football and Australian Culture: Contemporary Studies of the Great Australian Game', Maribyrnong Press, Hawthorn, Vic., 1998, 29–37. The playwright Oriel Gray also wrote of the connections between theatre and football and the legends they created in 'Loss of a homespun legend', in Ross Fitzgerald and Ken Spillman (eds), *The Greatest Game*, William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1988, 153–61. More recently Stephen Alomes made the persuasive argument that Australian football should be considered an art form in its own right in 'The lie of the ground: Aesthetics and Australian Football', *Double Dialogues*, vol. 8, Summer 2007/8 [http://www.doubledialogues.com/archive/issue\_eight/alomes.html, accessed March 21, 2008].
- 13 Fitzpatrick, 32.
- 14 Fitzpatrick, 33.
- 15 Aristotle developed this account of tragedy in his Poetics. My citations of this text rely on Richard Janko's translation. See Aristotle, *Poetics I With The Tractatus Coislinianus. A Hypothetical Reconstruction of Poetics II. The Fragments of the On Poets*, Richard Janko (trans. and notes), Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 1987.
- 16 The research for this project (including the in-depth interviews and weekly readings of the Western Bulldogs supporters page of the BigFooty.

- com internet football discussion site <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?f=20>), was conducted between 2004 and 2008. In this paper I refer to interview participants by the first name of the pseudonym they chose. I refer to Internet posters by their online name in single quotation marks. And I refer to everyone else by their full name in the first instance, and then by their surname. All emphases in quotes are from the sources themselves unless otherwise noted.
- 17 Aristotle would probably not have put it in terms like these, though he argues that tragic plots should make those who hear of them 'shudder' as well as 'feel pity', which suggests the audience should be both moved and unsettled by the tragic tale. Aristotle, 53b1.
  - 18 It is this factor which Keenan underplays too much, undermining his otherwise intriguing exploration of sporting contests as a 'tragic' art-form. Francis W Keenan, 'The athletic contest as a "tragic" form of art', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 10, 1975, 39–54.
  - 19 Samuel Johnson made this comment in the 'Preface to Shakespeare's plays' that he wrote in his annotated edition of Shakespeare's plays, published in 1765. This preface can now be read in Graham Parker, *Johnson's Shakespeare*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1991.
  - 20 Johnson was one of the many to support Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear*, James Black (ed.), E Arnold, London, 1976 [1681], an adaptation of Shakespeare's which ends with Lear returned to the throne and Cordelia married and about to be made Queen. This version of *Lear* was preferred to Shakespeare's original play for around 150 years.
  - 21 It is not clear whether the fragments that remain of Aristotle's work on *Poetics* were actually written by Aristotle or by a student attending his classes. Most commentators assume the former, but Leech is of the latter view. See Clifford Leech, *Tragedy*, Methuen, London, 1969, 14.
  - 22 Francis Sparshott, 'The riddle of *Katharsis*', in Eleanor Cook, Chaviva Hošek, Jay Macpherson, Patricia Parker and Julian Patrick (eds), *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, University of Toronto, Toronto, 14–37.
  - 23 Aristotle, 49b27.
  - 24 This claim is made by Leech, 47; and by Martha C Nussbaum, 'Aristotle', in T James Luce (ed.), *Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome*, Scribner's, New York, 1982, 405.
  - 25 Jacob Bernays, 'Aristotle on the effect of tragedy', trans. Jonathan Barnes and Jennifer Barnes, in Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield and Richard Sorabji (eds), *Articles on Aristotle*, Duckworth, London, 1979 [1857] vol. 4, 154–65; Gerald F Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1957.
  - 26 Leon Golden, 'Catharsis', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 93, 1962, 51–60; Martha C Nussbaum, 'Tragedy and self-sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on fear and pity', in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, 261–90, 281. See also Martha C Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.
  - 27 Jonathan Lear, 'Katharsis', in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, 315–40; Richard Janko, 'Introduction' in Aristotle.
  - 28 Andrew Ford, 'Katharsis the ancient problem', in Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (eds), *Performativity and Performance*, Routledge, New York, 1995, 109–32, 109.
  - 29 See, for example, Leech, 50; and Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979.
  - 30 Leech, 19–20.
  - 31 Cynthia, Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity and Early Modern Texts*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002, 1. Marshall provides her own very unorthodox take on catharsis via a creative but flawed take on Lacan (her key distinction, for example, between the ego and the body is incongruous with her attempts at a Lacanian analysis).
  - 32 Abraham Brill, 'The why of the fan', *North American Review*, vol. 228, no. 4, 1929, 429–34, 432.
  - 33 Allen Guttman, 'On the alleged dehumanization of the sports spectator', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. xiv, no. 2, 1980, 275–82, 76. This quote from Guttman is an example of the way Frederick Turner's quite distinct theory of frontier America acting as a safety-valve was taken up in relation to sports and melded in with the notion of catharsis. For a discussion of the history of the safety-valve theory see Douglas F Fidler, George Coroneos and Michael Tamburro, 'Frederick Jackson Turner, the revisionists, and sport historiography', *Journal of Sports History*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1975, 41–50.
  - 34 For an overview see D Wann, *Sports Psychology*, Upper Saddle River, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1997, 353–57.
  - 35 Wann.
  - 36 Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, 'The quest for excitement in leisure', in Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (eds), *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, 63–90; Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Edmund Jephcott (trans.), Urizen Books, New York, 1978. See also Eric Dunning and Chris Rojek (eds), *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process: Critique and Counter-Critique*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1992; and Eric Dunning, 'On problems of the emotions in sport and leisure: Critical and counter-critical comments on the conventional and figurational sociologies of sport and leisure', *Leisure Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1996, 185–207.
  - 37 Elias and Dunning, 80, my emphasis.
  - 38 Elias and Dunning, 86.
  - 39 Elias and Dunning, 86.
  - 40 Gleeson, 26.
  - 41 Steve Strevens, *Keeping the Faith: Collingwood... the Pleasure, the Pain, the Whole Damned Thing*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2005, 2.
  - 42 The following description and quotes are drawn from my interview with Nadia.
  - 43 Gleeson, 26.
  - 44 Interview with Charlotte. Another Geelong barracker, Richard Marles, also speaks of becoming certain the Cats would win the 1995 grand final. Marle's story was recounted by Chris Johnson in 'Heartbreak or Cat heaven?', *The Age*, 28 September 2007.
  - 45 Interview with Charlotte. Although Geelong went on to win their 2007 preliminary final against Collingwood, my interest here lies in Charlotte's 'bizarre' certainty before the game, a certainty that she found eerily similar

- to that she had before Geelong's defeat in the 1995 grand final.
- 46 It is little wonder that the most common metaphor used to describe Australian football and its fans is that of religion, though there are important differences between footy and organised religion. For a review, see Klugman, 'Emotional devotees'.
- 47 Brian Matthews, *A Fine and Private Place*, Pan McMillan, Sydney, 2000.
- 48 Nadia had little confidence Collingwood would defeat Brisbane in the 2002 grand final, neither did Charlotte when Geelong played Brisbane in a 2004 preliminary final, and Gleeson gives no sense that he approached the Bulldogs 1998 preliminary final versus Adelaide with anything more than hope.
- 49 'Pembleton', 'Re: Only for the brave', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=205291&page=2>, 18 October 2005 [accessed that day].
- 50 Matthew Hardy, a St Kilda barracker, details something of this process in his description of the lead up to the 1997 grand final. Despite never previously attending a game where he 'presumed St Kilda would win', he 'now felt we should win', and only 'wondered what it might feel like to lose' just before the game began. Matthew Hardy, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: A Footy Fan's Memoir of Life on the Outer Looking In*, Random House Australia, Sydney, 1999, 246–7.
- 51 'always right', 'Re: passion v expectation', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=263130>, 20 August 2006, [accessed that day].
- 52 Belief seems allied to fantasy here, for as Jacqueline Rose notes, 'fantasy's supreme characteristic is that of running ahead of itself. There is something coerced and coercive, but also wild and unpredictable about it.' See Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 15. But fantasy does not alone explain the move to such a certain belief, for at other times fans like Nadia and Charlotte are able to contain their fantasies of a premiership win and regularly resist the urge to presume that a glorious victory is on hand. Indeed, it is the surprise of Nadia and Charlotte at their own 'bizarre' certainty that points to something strange, maybe even uncanny, occurring here. Such certainty deserves further study.
- 53 Clinton Walker, *A Football Life*, Pan, Sydney, 1998, 434.
- 54 Carol Gilligan, *The Birth of Pleasure*, AA Knopf, New York, 2002. See also Carol Gilligan, 'Knowing and not knowing: Reflections on manhood', *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2004, 99–114.
- 55 The descriptions that follow fit both the standard understanding of trauma as a 'deeply distressing experience' that leads to 'emotional shock' (as the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* puts it), and Sigmund Freud's earlier more technical use of the term as a particularly intense experience which cannot be adequately understood and has long-lasting effects on an individual's psyche. For an overview of Freud's development of the term see Jean Laplanche and J-B Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans.), W W Norton, New York, 1973, 465–9.
- 56 Interview with Dave.
- 57 Interview with Tony.
- 58 'DOG GOD', 'Re: Dogs loss like horror movie', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=360182&page=2>, 18 August 2007 [accessed 20 August 2007].
- 59 'Chicago', 'Re: Dogs loss like horror movie', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=360182&page=3>, 18 August 2007 [accessed 20 August 2007].
- 60 'Leon', 'Re: Dogs loss like horror movie' <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=360182&page=4>, 19 August 2007 [accessed 20 August 2007].
- 61 For an examination of this theme in relation to nationalism see Slavoj Žižek, 'Enjoy your nation as yourself!', in Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, 200–37.
- 62 Interview with Walter.
- 63 Interview with Daniel.
- 64 Interview with Daniel.
- 65 For more on violence and Australian football see Ian Warren, *Football, Crowds and Cultures: Comparing English and Australian Law Enforcement Trends*, Australian Society for Sports History, Maroochydore, 2003. Tragedy and comedy often come very close to each other, as Jacques Lacan and René Girard have noted. See for example, Alenka Zupančič, 'Ethics and tragedy in Lacan', in Jean Michel Rabaté (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 173–90; and René Girard, 'Perilous balance: A comic hypothesis', in the collection of Girard's essays, *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978, 121–35.
- 66 Leech, 65.
- 67 Leech, 65.
- 68 'Chicago', 'Re: Ch.9 - Wallace: "This is my worst loss in footy."', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=231583>, 31 March 2006 [accessed that day].
- 69 'Sporty Spice', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=231583>, 1 April 2006 [accessed 3 April, 2006. 'Sporty Spice' has since changed his username so a different name now appears alongside this post].
- 70 The following details are from my interviews with Nadia.
- 71 For an explication of the Real see Jacques Lacan, *Seminar 11: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, in Jacques-Alain Miler (ed.), Alan Sheridan (trans.), W W Norton, New York, 1981.
- 72 Lacan develops the notion of *jouissance* as excessive suffering in *Seminar 7: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, J A Miller (ed.), Dennis Porter (trans.), W W Norton, New York, 1992. For a good introduction to the term see Carmela Levy-Stokes, 'Jouissance', in Huguette Glowinski, Zita M Marks and Sara Murphy (eds), *A Compendium of Lacanian Terms*, Free Association Books, London, 2001, 101–9. Chris Oakley explores how soccer can lead to particular experiences of *jouissance* in his engaging book, *Football Delirium*, Karnac, London, 2007.
- 73 Alex Shabs, 'Letter to the editor', *The Age*, 17 April 2007.
- 74 'Leon', 'Re: Only for the brave', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=205291&page=2>, 16 October 15, 2005 [accessed that day].
- 75 'AngeloPetraglia', 'Re: Dogs loss like horror movie', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=360182&page=3>, 19 August 2007 [accessed 20 August 2007]. For the article see Mark Stevens, 'Dogs loss like a horror movie', *The Herald Sun*, 18 August 2007.
- 76 'Batman', 'Re: Dogs loss like horror movie', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=360182>, 18 August 2007 [accessed 20 August 2007].

- 77 'SonOfScray', 'Re: Dogs loss like horror movie', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=360182&page=2>, 18 August 2007 [accessed 20 August 2007].
- 78 'The Coon Dog', 'Re: 10 Years Ago Today', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=374647>, 20 September 20, 2007 [accessed that day].
- 79 'Jean Claude Vas Deferens', 'Re: I am no troll just wanting to understand a few things.', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=338474&page=2>, 15 June 2007 [accessed that day].
- 80 The use of humour here points again to the connections between comedy and tragedy. A deeper analysis of this humour (and indeed that of footy fans more generally) is warranted, but is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 81 Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the pleasure principle', in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVIII, Hogarth Press, London, 1959, 3–64. See also Sarah Jones, 'Repetition and binding: Freud's project and the death drive', *Analysis*, vol. 9, 2000, 104–23.
- 82 Thus despite their metaphors of death and occasional comparisons to the suffering of war victims, the trauma experienced by these footy fans is qualitatively different and notably less extreme than that suffered by victims of shell-shock and others whose dreams repeat the unbearably intense trauma they experienced.
- 83 Freud, 'Beyond the pleasure principle', 14–16. For Lacan's take on this see his piece on 'The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis', Alan Sheridan (trans.), *Écrits: A Selection*, WW Norton, New York, 1977, 30–113, 103.
- 84 Kathleen Sands, 'Tragedy, theology, and feminism in the time after time', *New Literary History*, vol. 34, 2004, 41–61, 42.
- 85 Sands, 42–3.
- 86 Leech, 55.
- 87 Sands, 43. This definition, as Sands notes, goes against the popular definition of tragedy as a fatalistic worldview, most notably put forward by George Steiner in his work on *The Death of Tragedy*, Faber and Faber, London, 1961. Instead Sands argues that tragedies are better understood as 'shattering worldviews', because they 'tell of worlds and times that are broken such that no coherent view of them can be had', 43. I discuss this question further in note 86.
- 88 Interview with Dave.
- 89 'snags', 'passion v expectation', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=263130>, 20 August 2006, [accessed that day].
- 90 'Yankee Hotel Foxtrot', 'Re: passion v expectation', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=263130>, 20 August 2006, [accessed that day].
- 91 'bulldogtragic', 'Re: passion v expectation', <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=263130>, 20 August 2006, [accessed that day].
- 92 The telling and re-telling of the seemingly tragic preliminary final loss also enables the pleasures of identification and bonding with other Western Bulldogs followers, as an Internet post by the barracker 'WW Biscuit' attests: 'We ARE almost a secret and mythical cult, built upon a timeless resilience and indefatigable optimism. Doggy supporters don't even need words—just a simple exchange of nods is telling enough to say

- "Brother, I know what you've been through!". 'WW Biscuit', 'Footscray FC: What does it Mean to You?'. <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/showthread.php?t=123813>, 27 July 2004 [accessed 20 December 2004]. Note here, though, how again suffering is intertwined with 'indefatigable optimism'. Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (Indigo, London, 1992) also reveals some of the pleasures to be found in forming an identity around supporting a losing team. Anecdotal accounts of Boston Red Sox fans suggest that the loss of this identity—after the longed for triumph finally occurs—can cause considerable angst. Again this is an area ripe for further study.
- 93 The inevitability of tragedy is another one of the traditional tropes of the genre.
- 94 Charlotte's tale therefore supports Freud's thesis that people return to moments of trauma in order to try to ensure they are never so shocked by an unexpected event like that again. See Sigmund Freud, 'Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety', in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XX, Hogarth Press, London, 1959, 77–178.
- 95 As soon as the 2007 preliminary final began Charlotte realised Geelong might actually lose, and quickly came to regret her belief. However, after enduring the most agonising match of her life (an experience which itself bordered on the traumatic), the Cats scraped to a narrow victory, and won the Premiership convincingly the next week. Interview with Charlotte.
- 96 This and the following details and quotes are from my interviews with Nadia, October 2005 and May 2008.
- 97 For more on the love Australian football fans have for their clubs, and the pursuit of the premiership that this love sets in place, see Matthew Klugman, 'Loves, suffering and identification: The passions of Australian Football League fans', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, forthcoming, 2009.
- 98 AC Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, Macmillan, London, 1905, 38.
- 99 Sands, 58. Terry Eagleton makes a similar point, arguing that tragic drama and literature are useful in as much as they point to situations of injustice that need to be redressed. See Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002.
- 100 It can be argued that the continuing (re-ignited even) belief in a promised world (salvation), invalidates any claim these experiences have to be tragic, as Steiner continues to do (see for example, George Steiner, "'Tragedy,' Reconsidered', *New Literary History*, vol. 35, 2004, 1–15). However, possibly futile leaps of faith may themselves be considered tragic, and hopes for a better world have been a long-standing problem, as the Ancient Greek myth of Pandora's Box illustrates. Nevertheless, my aim in this paper has not been to ascertain whether these particularly distressing football losses are truly tragic in nature, but rather to explore why they are recounted in tragic terms.
- 101 And catharsis can be understood as clarification, as Nussbaum and Golden persuasively argue. They do not, however, understand this clarification as tied to an encounter that is somehow traumatic in nature; a trauma which leads to excessive suffering, at least for footy fans. See Nussbaum, 'Tragedy and self-sufficiency'; and Golden.