

TRAGEDY

I remember when I was a youth and excitable, I went to a performance of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. The question may be asked, excitable in which direction. Certainly it was not the one Ibsen intended. The truth is, I had absorbed (second or third hand) *The Decline of the West*, and was all for the spiritual expression of the early cultural ages and the sweep and energy of the first secular expansion (the Renaissance), but I would have run blocks to avoid the romantic and nineteenth century, or any of the products of the conscious and disillusioned selfhood. Under these circumstances it was manifestly absurd to go to *Ghosts* anyway. I came away with no very amiable remembrance. Such a play I refused to call tragedy, the name was too noble. I coined another word, 'pathody', the story of pathetic suffering, and dubbed it so.

This may have been unfair to *Ghosts*, I shall return to that as I find occasion; but it is in curious agreement with some speculations of our time about tragedy. There has been a general feeling that the limits of tragedy should be narrowed, that tragedy means 'great tragedy', tragedy in the grand manner, and that everything which does not end nobly with

physical destruction and implicit spiritual triumph is somehow unworthy of that designation. Some writers have pushed all other drama over into comedy (*Comédie Humaine*), extending the term 'bitter comedy' to cover a host of disillusion, from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* to Ibsen's *Wild Duck*, Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*, and the most serious modern plays.

Strangely enough, it turns out in the end that though the narrowing down of tragedy may have seemed a qualitative one (ruling out plays, that is, which do not fulfil certain structural and emotional requirements) the result proves *historical*: we come out with plays belonging only to specific periods and to no other. Thus Farnham in *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*: 'to our European perception, only two peoples have also purged human suffering by the creation of tragedy in the grand style. These two are, of course, the Greek and the Christian European.' And it is clear, in Farnham as elsewhere, that great tragedy is limited not only to these two peoples, but to the two ages they chiefly formed, Periclean Athens and Renaissance and seventeenth-century Europe.

In saying this we have moved into a mode of thought characteristic of the modern mind, that of organic history, of the evolution of ideas. This presupposes a dialectic of history, a pattern of cyclical recurrence within the larger growth or change. Thus the aesthetic investigation becomes also a historical investigation, and the question, what are the qualities of this thing we have been calling 'great tragedy', merges with another question, what are the spiritual qualities of those rare ages from which it springs. The answer cannot be a simple generalisation as of black and white. A work of art, like the age which gives it birth, is a fabric of crossing and contradictory threads, or better, like Aristotle's virtues, it inheres in the tension of opposite elements, either of which if too exclusively predominant may destroy it. As we define axes in the study of a curve, so here we may define ideal poles for that tension in the flow of which tragedy is formed.

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*The lif of this world
Ys reuled with wynd,
Weping, derknesse,
And steriinge;¹
With wind we blomen,
With wind we lassun;*

¹Steriinge = suffering

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*With weopinge we comen,
With weopinge we passun.
With steriinge we begynnen,
With steriinge we enden;
With drede we dwellen,
With drede we wenden.*

This is an English poem of the fifteenth century, of the late Middle Ages. It defines the pole of contempt for the world; we may call it earthly pessimism, for pessimism can be of various kinds. Is that the tragic attitude? Certainly it recurs again and again in Greek and Elizabethan tragedy. It might almost be called the ground or sub-stratum of tragedy. So Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon*:

*Alas! the fates of men: their brightest bloom
A shadow blights; and, in their evil day,
An oozy sponge blots out their fleeting prints
And they are seen no more. From bad to worse
Our changes run, and with the worst we end.*

(II. 1327–30)

Or Sophocles in the *Oedipus Colonos*:

*. . . To the Gods alone
Comes never Age nor Death. All else i' the world
Time, the all-subduer, merges in oblivion.
Earth and men's bodies weaken, fail and perish;
Faith withers, breach of faith springs up and grows;
And neither men nor cities that are friends
Breathe the same spirit with continuing breath.*

(II. 609–14)

Or Shakespeare, more terribly, in *Macbeth*:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

(V. v. 24–28)

But great tragedies do not merely express such earthly pessimism. The same Sophocles who wrote in *Oedipus the King*:

O generations of men, how I
Count you as equal with those who live
Not at all!
What man, what man on earth wins more
Of happiness than a seeming
And after a turning away?

(II. 1187–92)

wrote also of the wonder of man (*Antigone*, II. 332–38):

Many of wonder lives and moves, but the wonder of all is man,
That courseth over the grey ocean, carried of Southern gale . . .
And Earth, supreme of mighty Gods, eldest, imperishable,
Eternal, he with patient furrows wears and wears away, . . .
Subduing her unwearied strength with children of the steed.

The same Shakespeare who wrote in *King Lear*:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,
They kill us for their sport,

(IV. i. 38–39)

brought that play to some kind of spiritual triumph, and closed his career with the confident humanism of *The Tempest* and Miranda's admiring cry:

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in it!

(V. i. 181–84)

And this was not only Miranda, it is the voice of Bacon in *The New Atlantis*, it is the surge and discovery of the Renaissance, as it was in an earlier time of Periclean Athens. Great tragedy may spring from a ground of earthly pessimism, but it rises in the conviction of human worth and the divine splendour of things. If contempt for the world is one pole of the tragic tension, humanistic hope is another, and it is in the flux of these that an age of great tragedy moves. The conditions for such a blend are as precise and rare as for a great age of physical science or any other distinctive cultural phenomenon. What are these conditions and how do they arise?

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Consider the case of Greece. Imagination must feel its way into the history of that time. First is the old mature civilisation of the Aegean, of

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Crete and Mycenae, contemporary with Late Kingdom Egypt, an age of imperial refinements, like the late Greek and Roman on a smaller scale—vessels over the Mediterranean bearing wine and oil and spices for a luxurious and decaying people. Then a time of troubles. The beginning of barbaric invasions. The Egyptian scribes recording: ‘The islands of the sea are restless.’ The Trojan wars, the weakening and collapse of the old cultures, and always tribes of blond barbarians from the North, the Dorians, Ionians, Aeolians. So we come to the Greek Dark Age, a primitive span between the Mycenaean civilisation and the Hellenic.

What characterises a primitive way of life? A cult and faith, a tribal belief and worship. But also a bare hard existence and sombre sense of its cruelty. Earthly pessimism, and belief in the gods. This sets up a paradox. For the gods rule life, and their rule is cruel, yet they must be worshipped as the gods. They act in jealousy and spite; they destroy men and towns. *The Iliad* has been called ‘The Poem of Force’; it relates the impartial destruction that is the rule of life:

*We to whom Zeus
Has assigned suffering, from youth to old age,
Suffering in grievous wars, till we perish to the last man . . .
Nothing there is more wretched anywhere than man
Of all that breathes and creeps upon this earth . . .*

All the terrible stories of the later tragedies arise in this time: of Oedipus hounded by the fates, Orestes commanded by the gods to kill his mother, and then tormented for the act, Prometheus punished for good will to men. And yet the gods of these myths are not to be questioned, but admired, revered. It is apparent that a probing, rational age could never sustain this problem. It must be an age of inherited dogma, taboos, fear. Fear and faith merge in acceptance, in resignation.

Such an age produces many expressions of earthly pessimism: here is Hesiod of the eighth century B.C.:

*Condemn'd to sorrows and to toil we live,
Rest to our labours death alone can give;*

Of Mimnermus in the seventh, after a catalogue of afflictions:

*There is no man in the world to whom Zeus does
not give manifold woe.*

It produces also testaments to the primitive faith. So Theognis, who had summed up the tragic ground in a passage echoed in the *Oedipus Colonos*:

'Best of all things upon earth is it not to be born nor to behold the splendours of the sun; next best to traverse as soon as possible the gates of Hades', stresses the ritualistic answer:

Pray to the Gods, with the Gods is power.

But such an age cannot produce great tragedy. Tragedy must combine also the humanistic pole; it must grow from the spiritual question and daring of a Promethean people, from the attempt to make the old faith and its legends conform to enlightened reason, to humanise and moralise the gods. This is the spirit in which Greece rising from its 'Dark Age' and defeating the Persians built the glory of Periclean Athens, the art, drama, philosophy, the democratic life, which by their very energy were to undermine themselves.

Socrates does not speak of the seventh-century God of Semonides: 'Thundering Zeus . . . doeth . . . what he will'; but rather: 'no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods.' It was in this spirit and at the same time that the ninety-year-old Sophocles took up the Oedipus story again, that cruel primitive tale of the direful gods, and transformed it in his *Oedipus Colonus* to a drama of redemption, the spiritual rise through suffering, the vision and deification of 'a man more sinned against than sinning'. Those happen to be the words of Lear, but with the parallel insight that unites great tragedy, Sophocles also has Oedipus say: 'My life hath more of wrong endured than of wrong done.' As in the case of the execution of Socrates, suffering becomes here the means to a greater kingdom of spirit, and it is with perfect right that the chorus rounds out the close: 'Come, I lament no more. His destiny has found a perfect end.'

Yet, even here we must observe how perilously great tragedy is poised. This spiritual victory, which in its tension with the primitive world of waste had in effect formed tragedy, is already too rationalised, too dominant. Pity and terror are eased in Socratic peace. This is perhaps a philosophic gain, but already it is a dramatic loss. Moreover, another difficulty arises. The duality of the primitive time was faith and pessimism. Faith now has submitted to reason, and the very probing mind which with Sophocles justified the way of god to man, with other keen observers cuts through justification to a new pessimistic doubt. But not to primitive pessimism. That was linked with faith and led to resignation. Now the primitive paradox is broken apart, and opposing the new humanised faith (which may betray hope, as it does not always seem an accurate description of the phenomenal world) arises the new sceptical pessimism, which

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doubts, questions, resents, and complains. Tragedy now becomes more 'tragic' in the popular sense, that is, it hurts more, but less tragic in the great sense. This is the Euripides of *The Medea*, building a purposeless agony, or of the *Trojan Women* where the Fall of Troy becomes a thing of human sentiment and disillusion.

In this last play we are closer than anywhere else in the classical world to the post-romantic exploitation of pain. Thus Andromache, in saying farewell to her child, broods over his coming death:

*How shall it be? One horrible spring . . . deep, deep,
Down. And thy neck. . . Ah God, so cometh sleep!
Put up thine arms and climb
About my neck; now, kiss me, lips to lips . . .*

And Hecuba, when she brings in the broken body, plays on the afflicting details:

*Poor little child!
Was it our ancient wall, the circuit piled
By loving Gods, so savagely hath rent
Thy curls, these little flowers innocent
That were thy mother's garden, where she laid
Her kisses; here, just where the bone-edge frayed
Grins white above—Ah heaven, I will not see!*

This is the new horror, and it is indissolubly tied to the new enlightenment, the realised sense that life should be rich and full. Thus Hecuba goes on:

*. . . hadst thou known
Strong youth and love and all the majesty
Of godlike kings, then had we spoken of thee
As of one blessed . . . But now thine eyes
Have seen, thy lips have tasted, but thy soul
No knowledge had nor usage of the whole
Rich life that lapped thee round . . .*

And even the nominal return, at the end of the speech, to the primitive ground, assumes the fever of revolt, in which the old resignation and dignity is gone:

*O vain is man,
Who glorieth in his joy and hath no fears;
While to and fro the chances of the years
Dance like an idiot in the wind!*

Both late Sophocles and Euripides, then, come at the close of tragedy, since the rationalised faith cuts off the roots of suffering, while the new disillusion cuts off the roots of purpose. But the greatest tragedy, the Orestes trilogy of Aeschylus, hangs at the critical moment, on the rim; at the moment before the formulation into rational faith or rational question; when both these exist implicitly in the structure, and heighten it in the tension of suffering and triumph, waste and reward; while ostensibly and nominally the whole is still held together by the primitive bridge of energy and resignation. It is at this point that the mystery of tragedy most mirrors the mystery of life, of the universe itself.

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So much for the Greeks. Look now at our own culture, the Christian, European, Western, whatever one intends to call it. The picture is far more complicated, but the evolution of tragedy is strangely parallel. As with the Greeks there was the fall of an old civilisation, the descent of barbarians, a time of troubles and a primitive age. And again there is the paradox of the cruel blind world and of faith in God. Here is a typical passage from a poem by Fredugis of the court of Charlemagne (translated by Helen Waddell):

*So passes all the beauty of the earth . . .
O flying world! that we sick-hearted, love thee!
Still thou escapest, here, there, everywhere,
Slipping down from us. Fly then if thou wilt.
Our hearts are set in the strong love of God.*

Here is another from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Christ* of the late eighth century (translated by Professor Spaeth):

*Tis a dreary waste
Of ceaseless surges we sail across
In this wavering world, o'er wind-swept tracts
Of open sea. Anxious the struggle,
Ere we bring our barks to land,
O'er the rough sea-ridges. Our rescue is near;
The Son of God doth safely guide us.*

The Christian poles are analogous to the Greek, but richer and more magical; they are spiritualised: the brittle vanity of earth and the divine mystical hope. Yet just as with the Greeks the paradox is there. Material things are given over to Fortune, a goddess as capricious and cruel as any pagan fate. How can we sustain the rift between a Christian loving God and this tormenting power? Faith supersedes reason; the question must not

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be asked. Dante puts it clearly enough: '*State contenti umana gente, al quia*', —content yourselves, mortals, with the how (the effect, that is; for, it is implied, you cannot know the why, the cause).

The whole age from Charlemagne to the Renaissance is dominated by this surrender and by the sombre world-view it involves: 'The life of this world is ruled with wind, weeping, darkness and suffering.' As with the early Greeks that is a tragic view, and yet no great tragedy came from those centuries. If the world is a blind waste, and life after death the only good, if the individual, without question, must surrender to this belief, how can there be tragedy? Great tragedy arises from some sort of conflict between the titanic individual, the individual believing in earthly life and its validity, and this resigned grey ground of primitive wisdom. In the Middle Ages the pain which would otherwise build tragedy breaks into resignation and faith, it becomes in a spiritual sense trivial. Chaucer has a long poem on Troilus and Cresseide, showing the beauty of their love and the poignance of its ruin. At the close Troilus rises far above the earth and sees its littleness. The closing counsel is for penitence:

*O yonge fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with your age,
Repeyreth hoom from worldly vanitee,
And of your herte up-casteth the visage
To thilke god that after his image
Yow made, and thinketh al is but a fayre
This world, that passeth some as floures fayre.*

Like the tragic personalities of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the whole poem melts back into the medieval frame. Its very poignance is inconsequential: This is the world; what more can you expect; cast up your eyes to God.

But suffering can never become wholly trivial in a human sense, however much we assert the vanity of earth and hope of heaven. It is on a relative scale, and can only partake in part of resignation. Already in a primitive age, with the root of speculative philosophy and science, the root of tragedy begins to form. Then with the unfolding of the new culture comes a new freedom, both to dare and to suffer, and the daring and suffering alike assume titanic validity. In the dangerous adventure of this time, a new humanity is born, bold and individual, sensing its power, in the words of an Elizabethan: 'free, stout, haulte, prodigall of life and blood', coursing over the world, remaking the solar system and universe, creating science, re-examining dogma in the light of confident reason.

As with the Greeks, the final result of this process was the rationalisation and humanisation of the primitive paradox. God was no longer left outside the universe, nor the sphere of matter given over to blind fortune, but reason took the concept of a benign creator and worked it through all things. That is just what Milton attempted in *Paradise Lost*, justifying the ways of God to men, and the hoped-for Commonwealth had been a political adventure of the same kind. This movement had actually two peaks, the cosmic rational optimism which Voltaire parodied in *Candide*: 'All things are for the best in this best of all possible worlds', and the transcendental romantic faith which inebriated the Germans, Emerson, and Thoreau: 'There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.' In short, the humanistic and benignly positive faith of the aged Sophocles, of Socrates (and even, more in the transcendental sense, of Plato) was born again, but in a far more radical way, and superimposed on a new liberated personality. For the West has done everything more wildly and radically than any other civilisation, as one might guess from Gothic, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Beethoven, our wars and atomic science.

And again, as with the Greeks, the mind, having rationalised faith, could proceed to undermine it. Rationalised faith is always a splendid liability. And it is natural that, having pushed the humanistic hope farther than any other people, we should also be more racked by the new sceptic doubt which succeeded it. The history of tragedy in the West is intimately tied up with this sequence: from the Medieval pessimism of earth and divine faith, through the humanistic faith and its disillusion, back to the affirmation of waste, but the new fevered waste of the romantic and frustrated heart.

Cultures cannot be laid side by side as you would two yardsticks. What happened spiritually in Greece during the hundred years from early Aeschylus to late Euripides, seems to have spread itself in Europe over three centuries from the Renaissance to modern, and was greatly complicated by the blending of Christian and Classical, the cultural rise of successive nations, the French, Italian, Spanish, English, German. Still, the time from Milton to Goethe could be called our Age of Confidence. The resemblance between the *Samson Agonistes* of Milton and Sophocles' *Oedipus Colonos* is obvious and intentional. Samson also in suffering and blindness achieves his spiritual destiny:

*Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.*

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And the chorus dismisses us 'calm of mind all passion spent'. As in Sophocles we feel that the delicate tension in which the greatest tragedy is formed has somehow been passed. Rationalisation absorbs pathos.

Yet it is a rationalisation always more required as the human emotion and protest deepen with the temporal faith. Racine has been compared with Euripides—a largely fortuitous parallel—yet already here (under the patterned histrionics of a baroque classicism) the pre-romantic heart is formed, intensifying the pathos until it would tear the structure but for the heroic heightening and massive control of the rationalised form. This shell has only to break for the sentiment and grief to pour out like blood from a wound.

But still this increasing burden of personality and pain is borne along on a tide of confidence, which shifts now from its rational to its intuitive and post-Rousseauian ground. Thus Goethe, where the tragedy when admitted leans inevitably to the unbearable dwelling on the heart's waste—the humanised pitiableness of Gretchen in prison—more radically than Milton in *Samson Agonistes*, puts affliction aside, or rapturously soars over it, in a perilously Western and transcendental way.

In contrast to the resigned earthly pessimism of the Middle Ages, here we have a glowing belief in the brave new world. Let Traherne speak, a seventeenth-century contemporary of Milton, who long before Goethe or Wordsworth or Thoreau were born, expressed many articles of their ideal faith, the faith on which democracy and especially America were predicated. In a poem called 'Ease', he wrote:

*That all the Earth is one continued globe,
And that all men therein are living treasures,
That fields and meadows are a glorious robe
Adorning it with smooth and heavenly pleasures.*

*That all we see is ours, and every one
Possessor of the whole; that every man
Is like a God Incarnate on the Throne,
Even like the first for whom the world began; . . .*

*That all may happy be, each one most blest,
Both in himself and others; all most high,
While all by each, and each by all possess
Are intermutual joys beneath the sky.*

We cannot read the authors from the Italian humanists and Platonists down

to the age of Revolution, or look at the art, without feeling, recurrently, this battle cry of the new life; and the advance lies on two fronts, toward the new universe of law and beauty, and the new man of innate power and good.

But the greatest age of tragedy, as with the Greeks, came on the rise to rational formulation, when all this confidence was held paradoxically in the primitive frame of life, a place of temporal and earthly waste, of which King Lear preaches: 'We came crying hither; thou knows't the first time that we smell the air, we wawl and cry.' And it is just by a contrast between the new universe and humanist man and the old vanity and fallen Adam that Shakespeare expressed the melancholy of Hamlet:

. . . this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory;
this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging
firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears
no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.
What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in
faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how
like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world!
the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of
dust? Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your
smiling you seem to say so.

The faith of Traherne and the humanists, though it forms here one pole of the tragic tension, is implicit only, and builds with the old, but paganly transformed, pessimism, the titanic struggle of tragedy.

To Shakespeare and his age, therefore, it is no surprise when the brave new world crumbles, the giants and demi-gods fall, like Prometheus and Icarus and Phaethon, their old prototypes, when the earth returns to its native ruin. And the writers of great tragedy could stand it; they could stand anything. For when humanistic belief is shattered, they can still fall back to the old ground of acceptance, the timeless out of time. Goethe, as he implied to Eckermann, could not let Faust be damned; it would have undermined the creative world he believed in, that he had to believe in. But Marlowe, though a kind of Renaissance Faustian himself, could let Faustus be damned, and do it with as much energy as if the damnation were some strange triumph:

*O it strikes, it strikes: now body turn to ayre,
Or Lucifer wil beare thee quicke to hel: (Thunder and Lightning)
O soule, be changed into little water drops,
And fal into the Ocean, nere be found:*

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My God, my God, looke not so fierce on me: (Enter diuels)
Adders and Serpents, let me breathe a while:
Ugly hell gape not, come not Lucifer,
Ile burne my bookes, ah Mephastophilis. (Exeunt with him)

And then the chorus enters and Marlowe is able to return to a medieval resignation:

Cut is the branch that might haue growne ful straight,
And burned is Apolloes Laurel bough,
That sometime grew within this learned man:
Faustus is gone, regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise,
Onely to wonder at vnlawful things,
Whose deepnesse doth intise such forward wits,
To practise more than heauenly power permits.

It is not in the plot of a play or the outline so much as in the whole feeling that it must be judged. No one can miss here a sense of dignity and reserve; the turmoil of human revolt and destruction occurs in a frame of balance and value and repose. The tragedy is sharp but it does not sob or wail, it does not tear life to shreds; in short, it is not neurotic, it is not maudlin.

Such was tragedy on the rise to the rational formulation. Return now to Ibsen, and contrast with Marlowe a passage from *Ghosts*. This is from the nineteenth century, after a formulated faith has moved into the temporal realm and has then broken to disillusion and bitterness, opposing the earthly hope with a new spiritual pessimism, in the words of Arnold, without 'certitude or peace or help for pain'. The play involves the case history of a promising young artist cursed with hereditary syphilis:

OSWALD: What I am suffering from is hereditary; it (*touches his forehead and speaks very quietly*)—it lies here.

MRS. ALVING (*almost speechless*): Oswald! No—no!

OSWALD: Don't scream; I can't stand it. Yes, I tell you, it lies here, waiting. And any time, any moment, it may break out.

MRS. ALVING: How horrible—!

OSWALD: Do keep quiet. That is the state I am in—

MRS. ALVING (*springing up*): It isn't true, Oswald! It is impossible! It can't be that!

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OSWALD: . . . To become like a helpless child again. He called it a kind of softening of the brain—or something of that sort. (*Smiles mournfully*) I think that expression sounds so nice. It always makes me think of cherry-coloured velvet curtains—something that is soft to stroke.

No one can deny that this is tragic in the popular sense, that is, it hurts, but not in the sense we have been using ‘great tragedy’. With Marlowe as touchstone, it is easy to feel the exploitation of neurotic pain. What one may not observe is that this fevered agony and resentment springs just from the sense that life *should* be beautiful and good, from the kind of optimism about man that appeared in Traherne in the seventeenth century and spread over the world with Rousseau and the Revolution and the Romantic belief in the human heart. The contrast of the old view of life and the new is explicitly made by Oswald:

Well, all I mean is that here people are brought up to believe that work is a curse and punishment for sin and that life is a state of wretchedness and that the sooner we can get out of it the better. . . . But the people over there [*i.e., in Paris*] will have none of that. There is no one there who really believes doctrines of that kind any longer. Over there the mere fact of being alive is thought to be a matter for exultant happiness. Mother, have you noticed that everything I have painted has turned upon the joy of life?—always upon the joy of life, unflinchingly. There is light there, and sunshine, and a holiday feeling—and people’s faces beaming with happiness.

And it is just this beaming happiness, life, liberty and the pursuit of joy, the presumptive human good that is denied when at the close, as the mother, pulling the curtains on the sunrise, comforts her son, ‘Look, Oswald, what a lovely day we are going to have’, the attack falls:

OSWALD (*who has been sitting motionless in the armchair, with his back to the scene outside, suddenly says*): Mother, give me the sun.

MRS. ALVING (*standing at the table, and looking at him in amazement*): What do you say?

OSWALD (*repeats in a dull, toneless voice*): The sun—the sun.

MRS. ALVING (*going up to him*): Oswald, what is the matter with you? (*Oswald seems to shrink up in the chair; all his muscles relax; his face loses its expression, and his eyes stare stupidly. Mrs. Alving is trembling with terror.*) What is it? (*Screams*) Oswald! What is the matter with you?

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(*Throws herself on her knees beside him and shakes him*) Oswald!
Oswald! Look at me! Don't you know me?

OSWALD (*in an expressionless voice, as before*): The sun—the sun.

The real value of this play is no doubt its treatment of the social and intellectual problem. If we wish to commend it, we must try to take it as a drama of ideas. But it employs the methods of tragedy and as such opens itself for comparison with great tragedy, a comparison in which it can only lose favour. For pain here is nervously overwrought and without catharsis. Hysteria raises a wail which obscures the intellectual communication on which the play depends. It is as if suffering in this post-romantic time had moved into a new realm. It arrogates to mean more where it deserves to mean less. What is this beside the loss and tragedy of *Lear*? The death of Cordelia, who is certainly worth a thousand Oswalds, the suffering of Lear and Gloucester, which would make Mrs. Alving look like a squashed bug. But Shakespeare brings it off with dignity, with a mighty rounding out and resigned reconciliation which leaves sombre peace: 'The oldest hath borne most; we that are young, shall never see so much, nor live so long.' Considering only the tragic destruction of *Ghosts*, what do we have? One young man paralysed by syphilis. It is not sheer callousness to say that the hospitals are full of them, and that we kill off thousands more painfully in every war. We are now preparing to destroy the world or a considerable portion of it, and have we nerves and tears to waste on these Oswalds?

The truth is, modern life has changed the significance of personal suffering, of the whole personal existence. The individual tragedy, the heart of Renaissance faith and meaning, has, to put it bluntly, become a laughter at the gods. Whether we like it or not, that is what it is. There is only one real tragedy left, and that is the historical tragedy of man, just as there is only one actual hope left, the organic hope of man. Everything reflects this, must return to this. Our wars, state, life, education, dreams and fears all dwarf the personal, drown the personal in the symbol of some emergent supra-human whole. This cannot be presented in the old frame of human will and fixed value out of which grew the individual laughter and the individual pain. Painting, music, all arts, have moved into the self-conflicting relative of an intellectual form, transcending heroic or romantic personality in the critical nuance of the modern abstract. This is already apparent in the progression from Ibsen's *Ghosts* to his *Wild Duck*, a better work for the very reason that it moves from obvious tragedy toward the subtle suspension of ideas; and with Chekov this is made the entire design. There are many roads and many

byways, from the cult of Expressionism and the poetic drama of Eliot, to the sophisticated precision of Giraudoux or significant eccentricity of Shaw, but all lead in one direction, to the intellectual transcendence, the sole victory our world-tragedy affords. These may be the best plays of our time, but they are not tragedy, and that is the subject here.

If we look for tragedy of a more traditional sort, we must descend to lesser authors or to poorer plays. Such continue to wring the romantic heart. There was considerable excuse for this sort of thing in the early nineteenth century, when romantic sensitivity and disillusion had opened fresh worlds of suffering, while the individual life had still some appearance of validity. Schopenhauer even defined this as the legitimate end of tragedy ('On Some Forms of Literature'): 'We are brought face to face with great suffering and the storm and stress of existence; and the outcome of it is to show the vanity of all human effort . . . we are . . . prompted to disengage our will from the struggle of life.' And that might not seem an unfair description of the *Maria Magdalena* of Schopenhauer's contemporary, Hebbel.

Even today the average man feels that it is enough if tragedy makes a consistent use of pathetic and harrowing details. But the later nineteenth-century change in critical theory is reflected in Arnold, for whom suffering which does not reach resolution is 'painful, not tragic', and the better moderns have either gone the way of the modern transcendence, or have made a conscious and forlorn effort to inform post-romantic tragedy with the spiritual triumph of an earlier time.

* * *

A child goes into the street and is struck by an automobile. Men speak of the terrible tragedy. But no literary critic would call it that, even if it were dramatised in the most pathetic way. Suffering is not necessarily tragic at all in the literary sense. The Middle Ages, before the individual formulation, often treats suffering in the most inconsequential way. Chaucer has made jokes on broken marriages that would have torn a romantic age to shreds. And the modern transcendence also has made a weird and comic mockery of pain. There is the last act of Shaw's *Heart-break House*, where Boss Mangan snivels off to the gravel pit, and the bombs fall in the adventurous diversion of suicide: 'it's splendid: it's like an orchestra: it's like Beethoven . . . I hope they'll come again tomorrow night . . . Oh, I hope so.' Flaubert, in the mid-nineteenth century, wrote of Bovary's bungling surgery, by which the clubfoot lost his leg, with a burning indignation, a sense of outrage against the implicit worth of man:

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'Hippolyte looked at him with eyes full of terror, sobbing: "When shall I get well? O save me! How unfortunate I am! How unfortunate I am!"' But a similar scene in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* assumes inhuman laughter. They have poured cement on Cash's broken leg, aiming 'to ease hit some'; we see the whole thing through a boy's eyes:

'Your foot looks like a nigger's foot, Cash', I said.

'I reckon we'll have to bust it off', pa said . . .

They got the flatiron and the hammer. Dewey Dell held the lamp.

They had to hit it hard. And then Cash went to sleep.

'He's asleep now', I said. 'It can't hurt him while he's asleep.'

But the grotesque pain of 'laughter out of dead bellies' is no further from great tragedy (is even mingled with it in *Hamlet* and *Lear*) than the abuse of gloom and tormenting details. There was an early torture where the wall of the belly was opened and the intestine caught on a stick. Then it was slowly unrolled inch by inch and yard by yard. There is a kind of romantic music which attempts just that. I used to have friends who were fond of such music, so I told them of the torture, and afterwards I had only to look at them in a concert and make a little gesture as if I were playing it out, for them to go all to pieces. It is quite surprising how many people think that all tragedy has to do is to roll your gut out on a spool. They go to *Gone with the Wind* and suffer incredibly for hours, come out as if they'd been through a wringer, with every ounce of purpose and vigour squeezed dry, and say, it was a moving performance. I suppose arsenic would move them about as well.

And yet it is difficult, apart from the intuition and sense of a play, to say how great tragedy is different from this, to define the creative form of its triumph. Suppose we say it embodies redemption. This immediately suggests something of a moral kind. But we will not find it so. Goethe's *Faust* is redeemed, not the *Faustus* of Marlowe. It is not programmatic redemption that is involved, not Salvation Army blessing, but the kind of instated tacit redemption that burns a godhead through the close of *Othello* and *Lear*. It is not that Shakespeare says life is meaningful and good and that Ibsen or a modern says it is a morbid waste. It may seem the opposite. Shakespeare may go out of his way to tell you life is a walking shadow, and Ibsen may stress that it is or should be the heart's desire. It is simply that Shakespeare can put his characters through violence and wasteful death and bring them out living souls, and that Ibsen crushes life out of his in a universe which has no value apart from that romantic span they have been denied.

It is this implicit victory which an age of great tragedy, balanced between the primitive and humanistic faith, is able to bestow. Apparently it has little to do with conscious intention. Many modern authors feel the obligation to write 'great tragedy' (the author of *Death of a Salesman*, for example); they write an introductory essay about the nobility of man; but of course they end up with waste and depression, for that is the nature of the merely individual tragedy in our age. They are like those preachers who have read Spengler and say we must create a new religion to avoid destruction. As if it were in our power, or demanding it were more than a sign of the void: 'Between the motion and the act falls the shadow.' Also O'Neill. Of *Mourning Becomes Electra* he tells us: 'My chief aim was to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble and debased life.' Either the play or the movie can prove this is far from what we find. What emerges is waste, the drained surrender of the last bloodless wail: 'gloating over the years of self-torture . . . throw out all the flowers . . . staring into the sunlight with frozen eyes.'

O'Neill may have intended triumph, but the time he wrote in was not a time of triumph (beyond that of the intellectual abstract); it was a time of Spengler and 'The Hollow Men' and the lost generation, the romantic disillusion succeeding the romantic faith, and it is not surprising if that was just the greatness he achieved.

What of Shakespeare? Did he write with a programme of spiritual rise, or was it the unconscious blessing of his age? He never told us, and that in itself is significant; but the view of his predecessors was that of medieval waste and earthly pessimism. Tragedy was the fall of the great from fortune to misery at the whim of the stars, the blind turning of Fortune's wheel. And in early Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, the pair of 'star-cross's lovers' afford good illustration of this sort of thing. If we consider the bare plot, nothing could seem more expressive of the waste of life. Beauty, youth, love:

*O! she doth teach the torches to burn bright . . .
Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear
That tips with silver all these fruit tree tops . . .
This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet . . .*

And then this bud, by the merest whim, is nipped and destroyed. Could there be any more purposeless futility? And Shakespeare makes no explicit attempt at 'transfiguring nobility', no programme of immortality or justice.

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Nevertheless, this is the way that Romeo dies:

*Thou art not conquer'd: beauty's ensign yet
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
And death's pale flag is not advanced there.*

. . . Shall I believe

*That unsubstantial death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
For fear of that I still will stay with thee,
And never from this palace of dim night
Depart again: here, here will I remain
With worms that are thy chambermaids; O! here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh . . .*

So an age of Renaissance life can transmute the most futile death to its own substance. Of course, this victory may seem partly a matter of language. In a modern play it would be hard to make a character soar off in this way as he poisoned himself. It is not probable, either in action or speech. In *Juno and the Paycock* by the modern Irish O'Casey, Johnny is led out to die, saying: 'What do you want with me . . . you wouldn't shoot an owl comrade.' That is more probably the way a man would die, but it doesn't make great tragedy. The devaluation of language is only one phase of the devaluation of life. At a time when most people think drama should be a record of what might have been said on the street day-before-yesterday, it is hard to realise what an advantage the Greeks and Elizabethans derived from working in an age when vision automatically surpassed probability, when a plot could be a plot rather than a likelihood, and a speech could be a great poem without violating symbolic truth.

That death of Johnny in *Juno and the Paycock* is not at all untypical of modern death on or off the stage. Even our living actors today are taught to die in evasion. They are stretched out with digitalis and oxygen, drugged each night for their slumbers, while the doctor cheers them on: 'Looking better, old fellow; be out of here soon.' In a few days he is out of here indeed, but in a subtler sense than was intended. Beside this death of hollowness, how does Othello die? Again, as in *Romeo*, one must notice that there is no explicit victory, neither in action nor words, no reconciliation, salvation, triumphant spirit or other such superimposition. A man, through misunderstanding and lies, kills the woman he loves and

who loves him. He discovers the waste of his act and in shame and despair takes his own life. It seems Shakespeare could hit on nothing but plots of futility. Yet this is the way Othello dies:

. . . *I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice; then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this;
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus. (Stabs himself)*

Unconquerable spirit does not have to say it is unconquerable, it breathes invincibility. But the way it does so can no more be formulated than the ultimate world-view of Shakespeare's plays, the ultimate drift of life itself. It is a property of infinite transcendence. Where the typical post-romantic tragedy involves emotional and spiritual defeat on to which may be forced a kind of explicit and programmatic victory, this of the Elizabethans consumes explicit and programmatic defeat in some flame of tacit and spiritual victory, of which no satisfactory account can be made. Naturally there are means to this end, some of which may be analysed. There are all the attributes of early tragedy: the great man, the inherited moral plot, the poetic soliloquy, the traditional improbables, fluidity of space, time, causality, everything which characterises the symbolic stage. And of course there is Shakespeare himself, the accident (if one likes to suspend problems by that word) of Olympian birth.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the plays of Shakespeare are not merely the product of the age, or that if they are, the age is also the product of these elements it produces. But just because of this organic interplay, this perpetual shuttling from part to whole and from whole back to the part, all the elements of Renaissance theatre, including the author himself,

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become (not in their uniformity but in their paradox) one with the awakening spirit of the time; everything fuses in the living act which flowers in *Lear*. Shakespeare is Shakespeare only by virtue of becoming the blossom which the whole plant of Europe at that moment was pushing up from its synergy of cells. Every element, in fact, grows a mirror of the whole. It is for that reason we have approached the problem from above, from the history of ideas. And we may close with one particular which typically embodies and summarises it all—the stage:

Great tragedy requires not only a certain type of spirit, but a national theatre, a living tradition of the stage. It cannot be merely a court stage or an intellectual stage, but a popular stage, springing from the people. Yet it cannot pander to the people in just the way our popular movies do. It must hold the highest standards, wrestle with the greatest problems, yet still grip and amuse. Roots in life and head above the clouds. It must bridge, that is, the enormous gulf between Oedipus and the satyrs, between Lear and the grossest clown. It is more than coincidence that such a stage has existed twice in history, in the two ages we have considered, the ages wedding faith and question and all the irreconcilables of an expanding life.

And that stage, the stage of Shakespeare, is a symbol of everything else we have expressed: even the name seems significant, 'The Globe'. It is placed in a slum with bear rings and whore houses, but is frequented by all walks of men. As the Renaissance grew from the Middle Ages, this stage has grown from that of the old morality plays. It is not a representational window into a specific time and place, but a universal expanse of bare board jutting into the crowded pit. It is the middle earth, hung between a medieval heaven and a sulphurous hell. At any moment the traps can open and ghosts and witches rise in smoke from below, or the pulleys creak and spiritual visitants descend. Thus it lies between ultimate values, but the energy which breaks there swallows those values, distorts and dissolves them, as forms are dissolved in El Greco: 'None does offend, none, I say, none; I'll able 'em.' This is the irreducible storm that sweeps the symbolic stage—all human folly and hope and desire, cruelty and love, their waste and fall, triumph and regeneration, and sombre acceptance in the frame of the old wisdom and faith:

. . . *Men must endure*
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all.