

Redemption and Revolution

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by Walter Stein

Raymond Williams strives to unite fidelity to tragic realities with an absolute secular revolutionary faith. On the social plane this leads him, as we have seen,¹ to a highly problematic, indefinitely recessive, conception of 'total redemption' – and to attendant moral risks. And, so long as 'so absolute a conception'² of some actual social future is envisaged, it is proper to ask how much is included in this conceptual absoluteness. There is a story about a conference of French writers, soon after the last war, in which a Marxist, discussing the mastery of human suffering under socialism, was asked what he thought of the problem of, for instance, a child run over in a traffic accident. His reply was that, in a truly socialist society, there would be no traffic accidents. It is not necessary to approach these problems with a similar ingenuousness in order to recognize the pertinence of such simple questions. Social injustices aside – and can we really envisage an era when *all* injustice and alienation will belong to the past? – accidents will never be wholly avoidable (at any rate, there will always be floods and earthquakes). It surely cannot be mere pedantry, or paralysis, that continues to find such problems to the point.

There would of course be no such problem if the theoretic future were not called upon to redress past and present actualities so absolutely. But in that case the whole imaginative universe of the 'total redemption of humanity' by revolution – and the whole moral calculus going with it – would wither away. Nor is this 'total redemption' limited to social relations and the externals of man's control of his destiny. The hope extends essentially to the whole of men's lives – and deaths. Death – as Jan Kott notes, a propos of *King Lear*, quoting Ionesco's *Tueur sans Gages* – is the ultimate alienation: 'We shall all die, this is the only serious alienation'.³ Raymond Williams, however, insists not only that, in principle, human life can wholly surpass 'the mask of Fate', but that even the ultimate givenness of death is wholly redeemable: in our own pulses.

It is here that Williams' tendency, which we have examined at some length, to elude traditional tragic bearings whilst continuing to

¹*Humanism and Tragic Redemption*. NEW BLACKFRIARS, February 1967.

²*Cf. art. cit.* p. 238.

³Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (London 1964), p. 123.

lay claim to traditional tragic resonances, and his tendency to identify 'everyday tragedies' in modern experience more and more totally with remediable social disorders, impinge most critically upon the evidences of literary tragedy. Indeed, there is a decisive gap between some of Williams' own insights into the relevant modern literature and his concern to peel away 'the mask of Fate' from every kind of human waste to reveal an underlying remediable disorder.

Many of his most central literary analyses thus converge towards a demonstration of the condition of post-liberal 'stalemate', emerging out of the liberal 'deadlock':

In a deadlock, there is still effort and struggle, but no possibility of winning: the wrestler with life dies as he gives his last strength. In a stalemate, there is no possibility of movement or even the effort of movement; every willed action is self-cancelling. A different structure of feeling is then initiated: . . . the victim turning on himself. (142)

This conception is brilliantly applied to Chekhov and Pirandello, Eliot and even Camus; and much else in modern writing is illuminated by it. The resulting critical enrichment and sharpening of our general modern picture still need, however, to be related to Williams' controlling idea of *totally particular* historical disorders and – so also – the prospect of a *total* historical redemption. But at this most critical point of contact between revolutionary aspirations and tragic phenomena, *Modern Tragedy* slides decisively into overstatement.

Thus it is not only society's 'incorporation of all its people, *as whole human beings*' (76 – original italics) that the long revolution is to achieve, but liberation – or at least potential liberation – from every type of alleged 'absolute or transcendent' evil (59), personal as well as social. Williams is much less explicit about the personal implications of this vision than about its social ends, and this makes it very difficult to grasp the full, concrete meaning of 'the total redemption of humanity' in Williams' borrowing. But, though he hardly specifies the horizons, or depth, or manner of personal redemption to be envisaged, there is a pervasive, resolute rejection of evil 'as inescapable and irreparable' (59) – of tragedy as, in any sense 'inherent' (106) in the human condition as such. The intensity with which any such 'absolute' tragic notions are rejected fuses with the insistence that tragedy and 'everyday tragedies' must be seen as related, and that the tragic is not merely something that happens (something we merely take in, like spectators) but something that makes demands on us: demands to redeem. The impulse is deeply humane – bordering on an essentially religious humaneness – but, in this form, embodies serious confusions.

These confusions are partly factual, partly logical, and involve some corresponding semantic shifts. On the factual plane, there is an overstatement of the distinguishing tendencies of 'modern tragedy' – to the point of attributing to the drama of liberal 'deadlock' and

'stalemate' a historical singularity not borne out by the evidences of tragic literature as a whole. It is true that modern writing has tended to fashion these patterns into an orthodoxy, but they have not sprung, fully armed, from the head of the modern liberal predicament. The 'wrestler with life' who – like Brand – 'dies as he gives his last strength', with 'no possibility of winning', after all has an ancestry reaching back as far as Antigone, and which includes not only Cordelia and – very differently – Dr Faustus, but perhaps also Tristan and Phèdre (and certainly includes every historical martyrdom in the face of unequal historical odds). Similarly, the condition of 'stalemate' – 'the victim turning on himself' – cannot be simply equated with 'the final crisis of individualism, beyond the heroic deadlock of liberal tragedy' (151), but has its classical prototype in Hamlet – followed by the 'comic' sentimental education of *Le Misanthrope*, Swiftian self-laceration, and so to Werther, the *Ode to a Nightingale* and the encroaching waste land. It would seem, then, that Raymond Williams' conclusion 'that what is now offered as a total meaning of tragedy is in fact a particular meaning, to be understood and valued historically' (61) only holds if the terms 'particular' and 'historically' are stretched to allow for essential structural analogies comprehending not merely the 'deadlocks' and 'stalemates' peculiar to our age but their deep historical roots in tragic tradition.

Once the sense of tragedy as 'inherent' and 'inescapable' in human existence has been diagnosed as, substantially, a peculiarity of our time, the ground is prepared for concluding that 'tragic necessity' is a merely relative phenomenon – which may, thus, be totally surmounted in the future. One more step, however, is needed for such a conclusion: a showing that the notion of tragedy as 'a total condition' (179) is not only relative in the sense of attaching peculiarly to the age of liberal deadlock and stalemate (and I have suggested that it is in fact a deeply traditional notion) but is, indeed, an intrinsic falsification or false perspective. Williams offers to show this in the context of his critique of Camus, whom he charges with a 'refusal of history' – or, as Sartre has put it, 'a bitter wisdom which seeks to deny time':

Camus seems, again and again, to take an historical action, and to draw much of his feeling from it, only to put it, in the end, outside history. (184)

Thus, in *Cross Purpose* (*Le Malentendu*):

The voice speaks of pity and kindness, but the action speaks of fate, an indifferent, arbitrary and tragic fate. And we have to ask (Camus would have insisted on asking) what are the sources of this perceived condition, especially when it is asserted as common. There is an ambiguity, an honest ambiguity, at the centre of Camus' work, for he recognises the sources of this condition in particular circumstances, and yet also asserts that it is absolute. (179)

This 'ambiguity' – asserting the absoluteness of particular circumstances, identifying particular historical conditions with 'fate' – is the locus of radical ultimate evasions – of a 'false consciousness'. For thus the demands for historical revolution are smothered, and displaced by 'a metaphysical revolt against an eternal injustice' – which can far too easily warrant a sort of resigned complicity with concrete historical evils. And so the 'mask of Fate' is both factually and morally falsifying.

As a critique of absurdist politics this surely drives home – though Camus' insistent concern with the morality of means remains correspondingly relevant to the politics of revolution. But metaphysically, despite its initial plausibility, the critique ultimately backfires. For where, at the level of tragic metaphysics, does evasion finally lie: in the acknowledgement of 'permanent contradictions' (175) in man's condition, or in an assertion of their total historical solubility?

'The ambiguity' that sees particular tragic circumstances as, at the same time, rooted in an 'absolute' condition certainly is no evidence in itself of a sleight of vision. Obviously, any human experience at all, within history, is – whatever ultimate meanings it may have, or not have – 'particular' and 'historical'. Williams repeatedly seems to imply (in his treatment of Strindberg, Pirandello, and Eliot, as well as Camus) that to show that a writer's tragic vision relates to concrete particulars of time and place is, *ipso facto*, to show that any sense of 'permanent' or 'absolute' meanings inherent in these must be illusory or evasive. Only a positivist empiricism (such as was buried by Wittgenstein) could, with consistency, deploy such a logic; it is especially disconcerting to come upon traces of it in the hands of so Hegelian a writer as Raymond Williams.

Everything depends upon the actual content – the phenomenological structure – of the particulars at issue. And Camus, like Strindberg or Pirandello, is after all at pains to analyse these structures of consciousness – and their sources in human facts – and they all advance positive grounds for their various tragic assertions of 'permanent contradictions' in human existence. These assertions, and the grounds advanced on their behalf, are unequal in force: some are unsubstantiated or clearly unsound, some dubious – and some surely irresistible, once they have been allowed to penetrate us. To distinguish, with careful particularity, between such resonances is one of the main tasks of tragic criticism – and an essential critical basis of tragic theory.

There is very little attempt in *Modern Tragedy* to go into such distinctions. A case is established against O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, of 'a false particularity' – that is, of imposing from the outside 'the characteristic metaphysics of the isolate' (118–119). And one must agree that 'it is as easy to relate' the 'social world of temporary relationships, transience and bright emptiness' of Eliot's

Cocktail Party 'to the particular place and the people as to a common human condition' (164). But the great tragic constants of human blindness or perception, failure to meet or falls from communication, need of what cannot be or loss of the utterly needed – already endemic in Sophocles and Shakespeare – cannot be generalized away into mere particularities of situation or history.

Williams' argument hardly comes to grips with such tragic universals, as such, and their bearings upon the concept of the 'total redemption of humanity'. For the most part, the argument merely relies upon a strong general emphasis on the 'particular circumstances' of tragedy, together with a similar general stress upon history as a transformer of circumstances. So, in the concluding essay – on Brecht:

We have to see not only that suffering is avoidable, but that it is not avoided. And not only that suffering breaks us, but that it need not break us. Brecht's own words are the precise expression of this new sense of tragedy:

The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary.

This feeling extends into a general position: the new tragic consciousness of all those who, appalled by the present, are *for this reason* firmly committed to a different future: to the struggle against suffering learned in suffering: a total exposure which is also a total involvement. (202–3)

Yes – indeed. Yes, yes; *but* . . .

But not every particular suffering is avoidable. The appalling struggle against suffering learned in suffering, though always redemptive, cannot always be effectively practical:

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes;

I know thee well enough, thy name is Gloucester:

It may well be a struggle against necessary suffering.

Raymond Williams seems to conclude that tragic suffering is avoidable altogether, though, appallingly, it is not avoided – and not avoidable this side of revolution. And indeed, some such vision seems implicit in the concept of 'the total redemption of humanity' by revolution. There are, however, some places where Williams himself approaches a very different recognition; and it is striking that these relate to D. H. Lawrence on the one hand and Camus himself on the other. Comparing Lawrence's *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* with *Anna Karenina*, Williams accuses Lawrence precisely of 'dodging' the ultimate challenge of the tragic:

Lawrence misses the decisive question: how can it be that real, potent life is necessarily destroyed by the 'morality . . . of life itself'? The point will be very important at a later stage of our argument. Meanwhile we can notice the prepared escape route [*Lady Chatterley's Lover*], in which the full claims of individual life are asserted, without the necessity of tragedy.

An escape route, of course, from the logic of his own position; not necessarily an escape route from life itself. (124)

And to Lawrence's charge against Tolstoy, of 'wetting on the flame' by allowing Anna Karenina's life to be sacrificed to 'the social code', to 'the mere judgment of man' – rather than to flow with 'the vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself', the 'greater, uncomprehended morality, or fate' – Williams decisively replies:

The child of the body is there, in any society. Frustration and hatred are there, under any laws, if the relationships are wrong. The tragedy of Anna is exacerbated by her society, but the roots of the tragedy lie much deeper, in a specific relationship (just as, contemporary societies in which the old sexual laws and conventions have been practically abandoned, men and women still kill themselves in despair of love). (129)

These facts of life are decisive not only for what is at issue between Lawrence and Tolstoy, but for every kind of total commitment – including Raymond Williams' own – to a 'new sense of tragedy' totally defined by the feeling:

The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary.

Some sufferings appal us because they are necessary; because we perceive that, in any society, in however revolutionized a future, such sufferings will persist; because we sense, within them, or beyond them, an uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality – or *anti*-morality – or fate; because we glimpse that, since the roots of such sufferings lie much deeper than any social injustice, only on St. Neverneverday or at the Last Judgment – will a poetic justice reign; because 'the total redemption of humanity' seems both necessary and impossible – fatefully usurped by specific tragic necessities.

It is surely remarkable that Raymond Williams – the theorist of total redemption by revolution – should recognize, in the mirror of Lawrence – the poet of total self-fulfilment – those limits to human self-redemption which *both* these forms of heroic aspiration are totally committed to surpassing. (Samuel Beckett's insistences lie in wait for them both.) Frustration and hatred are there, under any laws, if the relationships are wrong – and there will always be specifically wrong relationships. For the most part, Raymond Williams' critical and theoretical judgments bypass, or emphatically deny, this recognition. Thus, to question, as he does, 'the fact of evil as inescapable and irreparable' (59); to say 'we cannot . . . say that tragedy is the recognition of transcendent evil' (60); and to assert – *without qualification* – 'that man is not "naturally" anything: that we both create and transcend our limits, and that we are good or evil in particular ways and in particular situations, defined by the pressures we at once receive and can alter and can create again' (60) – seems to prepare an escape route not merely from particular situations and limits but

an escape route from life itself. Tolstoy and Lawrence between them serve warning against this route. But it is only in the (penultimate) chapter on Camus that *'the permanent contradictions of life'* (180) are at last explicitly acknowledged; only to give way once more, in conclusion, to the 'new sense of tragedy' for which 'suffering is avoidable' – 'the new tragic consciousness of all those who, appalled by the present, are *for this reason* firmly committed to a different future'.

The momentary acknowledgment of 'the permanent contradictions of life' is so crucial to the whole concept of 'the total redemption of humanity' in history that we have to give full weight to the context in which it occurs, and to Williams' immediate inferences from it. It is evidently arrived at with great reluctance, and accorded very little stress. Indeed, as we saw, Williams' purpose is precisely to reject the conception of tragedy as 'inherent' – as 'absolute or transcendent', as 'a total condition' or unavoidable fate. And his reference to 'the permanent contradictions of life' occurs in the very course of his objections to the 'ambiguity . . . at the centre of Camus' work' which recognizes the sources of tragedy 'in particular circumstances, and yet also asserts that it is absolute':

It is not an evasion of the permanent contradictions of life to recognise and name a more particular and temporary contradiction. Rather, the naming of the latter as Fate is itself evasion. (180) Is this not an implicit, backhanded endorsement of precisely those tragic 'names' the passage seems to disqualify? It may (or may not) be 'evasion' to 'name a more particular and temporary contradiction' as 'Fate'; but then, how does this bear upon *'the permanent contradictions of life'* – which, after all, are the heart of the problem? May *'the permanent contradictions of life'* be named, without evasion, as 'Fate'; or might it even seem evasive to name these 'permanent contradictions of life' *permanent contradictions (irreducible to 'more particular and temporary contradictions')*?

The radical elusiveness of the passage derives most immediately from its equivocal compression. On the face of it, its two sentences seem stably, symmetrically balanced – the former precluding, the latter affirming, a locus of evasive 'naming'. Actually, however, their relation is unstably oblique, so that no consistent statement concerning 'permanent contradictions' on the one hand, and 'particular and temporary' contradictions on the other, emerges, but an amalgam in which 'the permanent contradictions of life' (which in retrospect are equated – or *are* they? – with 'Fate') seem alternately endorsed and disowned as a properly 'nameable' source of tragedy in its own right. This is not, however, merely a matter of local loose language. The whole tendency of the argument is to shift us away from any sense of evil as 'absolute or transcendent', 'inescapable and irreparable' (59), from suffering as 'inevitable' (77), tragedy as 'inherent' (106) – away, that is, from any sense of 'permanent contradictions' (175) – towards a 'general position' that sees suffering as

'avoidable' and 'unnecessary'. So that, when it comes, the apparent acknowledgement of 'the permanent contradictions of life' surely demands a maximum of alertness and careful explication of relationship to the over-all argument. Looseness and ambiguity at this point cannot help seeming evasive – precisely in attributing evasion through ambiguity to others – the more so since very little further attention is given to the matter. Is *all* human evil and suffering 'avoidable' or not? Does 'the *total* redemption of humanity' have to reckon with '*permanent* contradictions' in life or not? Is the 'different future', to which 'the new tragic consciousness' commits us, to resolve only 'particular circumstances' that appal us or also 'the permanent contradictions of life'?

Camus (it is a tribute to both Camus and Raymond Williams) evidently confronts Raymond Williams with the ineluctable force of 'the permanent contradictions of life'. And Williams confronts these permanent contradictions with an ineluctable necessity to contradict them. For Camus – with Beckett – represents the ultimate logic of human limits; and Williams (like Lawrence) the logic of absolute temporal aspirations. The necessary tension between these positions (since each of them embodies essential human truths) at once prescribes and precludes the total redemption of men by men; for

This is the monstrosity in love, lady, that the will is infinite,
and the execution confined; that the desire is boundless, and the
act a slave to limit.

But this same tension—the crucial tension of tragic experience—can also point beyond itself, towards significances that can comprehend both:

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes;
I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester:
Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:
Thou know'st the first time we smell the air
We waul and cry.

Thou hast one daughter
Who redeems nature from the general curse
Which twain have brought her to.

Music, awake her: strike! (*Music*)
'Tis time: descend: be stone no more; approach;
Strike all that look upon with marvel. Come;
I'll fill your grave up: stir; nay, come away;
Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him
Dear life redeems you.

O Wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in't.

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(Next month, the concluding article: *Redemption and Tragic Transcendence*)