

THE TRAGIC THEODICY

BOTH to the poets who have created high tragedy and to the critics of all eras who have thought deeply about it, its proper matter has always been that involved in some aspect or other of the Problem of Evil. In the theorists this is clear, from Aristotle down through what faint consideration tragedy was given in the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance in all lands, through the Reformation in some, through Cartesianism and Rousseauism wherever they penetrated, through English and American thought, to the twentieth century. Among the writers of tragedy the same unanimity has prevailed, from Aeschylus to Eugene O'Neill, from *The Suppliants* to *Days Without End*. All have recognized that to be human means to yearn for happiness; and implicitly at least that tragedy is the quest of poetic insight, *in so far as insight may be gained*, into the riddle of high interference with human happiness.

In any consideration of the Problem of Evil, and therefore in tragedy, there is involved a theodicy: an attempt to penetrate the ways of God with unhappy mankind; a poetic exploration of human disappointment overhung by an Omnipotence that yet must be friendly; a wistfulness to reconcile in mortal vision, if it be possible, distant Divine Goodness and its permission or direction of instant human mishap; an intense effort of poetry to fuse these two factors together into one heightened picture of satisfying colour, light and shade, proportion and perspective. There is no question here of a clear-cut solution of the riddle—if that were possible tragedy would be shorn of most of its fascination and beauty; its only use would be its brief, poetic refreshment of a known answer that conceivably might need occasional rehearsal by short human memory, clouded ever anew by the turmoil of sublunary things. Intellectually, tragedy at its best does for man regarding the Problem of Evil what philosophy does for him regarding, for example, the Trinity: shows him the non-repugnance to reason of a mystery that it cannot explain. Emotionally, it is evident,

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the effect in each case is quite different, owing to the intimate human poignancy of the materials of tragedy's mystery, as well as to the poetry of their exploration. The tragic process has not been described better than in Professor Macneile Dixon's fine saying: "The spirit of inquiry meets the spirit of poetry and tragedy is born."

As an immediate corollary of what I have said, it follows that for true tragedy the elements of the Problem of Evil must be truly conceived; and that the satisfactions of tragedy are valid only in so far as the poet's concept of these elements is true. Departure from truth, false or incomplete assumptions regarding the constituents of the riddle, are the enemy of high tragedy. If one of these factors is falsely presented, then the experience of both the poet and the spectator is false; if the problem as put is artificial, fashioned however sincerely by the poet, then the experience of his tragedy is artificial; if truth is presented incompletely, then the tragic experience is incomplete, something has been withheld from the spectator, he has been arrested this side the ultimate reaches of tragedy. And in that measure—and more—the art of the tragedy is false art. The tragic theodicy must be discriminating indeed.

In our universe, the desires and needs of individuals meet repeatedly with contradiction, the aggregate of which makes up what we call, in general, evil. For man it involves the endless tale of human suffering; whence, looking to his own well-being, for him evil is that which ought not to be. Strictly, evil is defined as the privation or the absence of some good which belongs properly to the nature of the creature. The mind of man is puzzled by two kinds chiefly. They are *physical* evil—the sum of all that brings hurt to man in nature or in natural society, by harming his body or by frustrating either his natural desires or his proper activity and development: in a word, *pain* of body or soul or of both; and *moral* evil—the disorder involved in the departure of human free will from the moral law, together with the acts that result from such disordered will: in a word, *wrongdoing*. Essentially negative both, these two kinds of evil are positive in their disturbing, discordant

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effect in the harmony of things. In both, thinking man sees with bewilderment nature—rational and non-rational—at war with, thwarting herself, and sees himself shorn of felicity. Regarding what evil is, thinkers of all ages have been in substantial agreement. The Problem is not here. Regarding why evil is, they have parted company sharply; this has been indeed the "*punctum pruriens* of metaphysics." And imbedded in its heart has ever been the knotty problem of human conduct.

This double aspect of the Problem of Evil (why unhappiness should exist, and how man should act to be happy) the poets of successive ages have woven into the fabric of tragedy. Not always, however, with the same effect: for the puzzle of high interference with human well-being has, to the peoples of different ages, and to different peoples of the same age, presented itself in varying fashion. The variation has been due, not to an internal evolution in the problem itself, but to an evolution, by addition or subtraction, of human knowledge of the problem's elements. The clouds that since the beginning have on all sides dimmed its features for observing man have risen and settled again, thinned on this side to thicken on that, begun here to scatter only to gather there once more, without ever wholly yielding their secret. But the tragic poets have never been abandoned, nor need they ever, as long as men and poets endure, abandon their high quest.

I have referred to Professor Dixon of Glasgow, whose *Tragedy*, first published nearly ten years ago and often in my hands from that day to this, I consider the most acute, in many ways, and in some the most *essential* criticism of tragedy that has appeared in print these many years. So much of what he says is well said that it seems ungrateful to differ from him; I do so here in a minor point. Somewhere he calls the drama of Greece the earliest observatory that opened to human gaze the moral and religious problem of tragedy. Though elsewhere conscious of the legacy of Israel to tragic drama, he seems here to overlook that earlier observatory, the Book of Job. After an epic age richer than the Greek with the riches of the Pentateuch—Creation, the

Fall that *first brought death into the world, and all our woe*, the Deluge and Babel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Egypt, Pharaoh and Moses, the Red Sea, the desert and Sinai, and the Ark of the Covenant; an age rich with the epic wealth of the conquest of the Promised Land, the wars, the recurrent apostasies and their punishments, popular repentances and deliverances through Judges and Kings—Saul, David, Solomon—the rise and fall of the temple, the years in Babylon and their end, the rebuilding of Jerusalem; an age further enriched by idylls like those of Ruth and Tobias, and episodes like those of Judith and Esther—after such an epic age comes to the Hebrews the formal “emergence of mind” (as Professor Dixon describes Greek tragedy) in the theodicy of Job. Here is a poetic-dramatic observatory earlier than the Greek, one that penetrates more deeply and truly than the Greek into the unfathomable firmament of the Problem of Evil. Job first, and in dramatic spirit, scans the heavens from a world of men thwarted of happiness, with Divinity brooding dove-like on the vast scene made somehow strangely pregnant with woe. Here human disappointment, especially that of the upright, is brought into the light of the Providence of God, is found to be not invariably the punishment of sin, often indeed a test of virtue, a proof of God’s love. But great mystery remains: “Behold, God is high in his strength, and none is like him among the law-givers. Who can search out his ways?” (xxxvi, 23-24).

Unaware of this earlier exploration, the Greeks had it all to do independently and under the handicap of the Homeric pantheon. The mother of a people who were slow to scrutinize the gleaming, all-too-human gods she gave them, Greece mothered also an aristocracy of mind before which that pantheon eventually crumbled, either to death in scientific materialism, or to new though still groping life in the notion of a monotheistic Supreme Being not wholly divested of the humanity that had clothed its predecessors—a Zeus to whom the man who rose above his fellows was an object of envious attention or of just retribution. Such, in contrast, to the gods of Homer, was the divinity of Greek tragedy as

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it emerged from that aristocracy of mind become vocal in the throats of the tragic poets of Greece. A divinity supreme, yet not quite so, perhaps; since behind it lurked uncertainly the shadow of a great Necessity to which even godhead seemed subject. Beneath this firmament man moved freely but precariously, for the Attic heaven was jealous of human prosperity and righteously on guard armed with the great rule of moderation in all things, a rule that was to the Greeks at once the hedge of divinity and the formula of human felicity. Their tragic poets were acutely aware of the human yearning for happiness, and of its too frequent, unexplained frustration beneath the canopy of overhanging, overseeing divinity. Their poems embody their theodicy.

It was hampered by certain limits: by the Greek confusion of ethics with aesthetics in the quest of happiness; by their preoccupation with this-worldly happiness to the neglect of any deep concern for that of the next world, an incomplete apprehension of human destiny; by error and defect in their concepts of divinity, humanity, and the relations between the two. But these tragic writers wrote sincerely and with fine artistry—they were poets; so that even with limitations their achievement was magnificent, their poetic penetration of the everlasting puzzle a creation of arresting beauty. This was a result made possible by their “profound sense of God and their vivid sense of man,” and the consequent theodicy of their tragic plot. For from these elements is high tragedy distilled, as Aristotle, looking on their work, clearly saw, interpreting that vision in his well-known judgment: “We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of tragedy is the plot.” Perhaps the greatest single disservice done to high tragedy since his day has been the gradual desertion, by critics and playwrights, of this pronouncement. Certainly Shakespeare, upon whose work chiefly the critics have founded their rejection of the ancient view, would have suffered their heresy without sharing it. Greater than the Greeks as creator of character, he was not for that their inferior in awareness of the supremacy of plot. It is the world’s misfortune (and Shakespeare’s) that criticism, capti-

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vated by the first perfection, has overlooked or denied the second, abetted in its partial view by the poet's gentle accommodation of his clear sense of high tragedy to the secular temper of a secular age, an accommodation achieved by not obtruding on his stage a supernatural theodicy. To suppose its complete absence from his thought is to dishonour the intelligence of the poet he was.

For between the Greeks and Shakespeare a great thing had intervened: the sublime marriage, in the thirteenth century, of the Hebrew-Christian tradition of divinity and humanity to Greek truth, in the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas. In the Scholastic theodicy the mystery of the Problem of Evil persists, some of its Greek mists dispelled, but not all. The mystery is rarefied and intensified; the materials of tragedy are still there, and better than before, because now they are true. And just as the tragedy of the Greeks is unintelligible without an intimate knowledge of their view of religion, so modern tragedy after the *Summa's* diffusion through the Christian world cannot be understood except in the light of Scholasticism, refracted though that light has been in the successive lenses of the pagan Renaissance, the Reformation, the philosophies of Descartes and Rousseau and Kant. Especially is Shakespeare incomprehensible save in that light, since in England its earliest refraction came so shortly before his day that about his young head the white luminosity of the *Summa* yet lingered. This is no naïve assertion that Shakespeare was a Catholic, or that he actually felt a Dantesque vocation to make poetry out of Scholasticism; but it does mean that the critic who knows little of, and attends less to, Scholasticism's Christian interpretation of the universe will miss something important in Shakespearean tragedy. Recall Tolstoy's great obfuscation in the hands of just such critics.

Clear in the theology of ancient Israel, in that of St. Thomas equally clear and elaborately refined in detail, is the unhesitating idea of an almighty and good God, held unwaveringly good in spite of the riddle of human suffering, which he could prevent. For Job and for St. Thomas man's will is physically free. For both, the notion of human

happiness exceeds, without deserting, the bounds of this world to embrace endless beatitude in the next. For both, so bright is man's promise of felicity, so eager his will for its attainment, that his whole life on earth is characterized by its seeking. For both, the problem of man's pain includes the fact of the Fall and its penal effects on man's body and soul, with results exhibited in the long epic of mankind's spiritual and material woes. The certainty of Revelation, supported by that of Reason, is for both Hebrew and Christian the source of this concept of man's affair with God in its large lines and in its detail. Much that is Greek it rejects; some it retains; in its Thomistic expression, the concept refines exceedingly. But there the Problem of Evil remains, and becomes by refinement intellectually more acute, emotionally more poignant than ever before. This is tragedy's debt to St. Thomas.

The existence of this rich legacy has escaped the view of many students of tragedy or has met with their casual, uncomprehending dismissal. When the critic is agnostic this carelessness is intelligible, since to him the *Summa*, whose content he grasps only slightly and whose tragic significance he grasps in no way at all, is a sealed chapter in a closed book of history that will never be reopened. But there are writers living daily in the light of the *Summa* who have gone too long to school under short-sighted critics of the sort described. These too quickly relinquish their treasure, precious even in such a field as that of tragedy. No one who knows his St. Thomas should make the mistake of thinking that tragedy depends on agnosticism, that tragedy goes out the window when Christian philosophy and theology come in the door. To their treatises on the Problem of Evil even the greatest scholastic theologians append the colophon: *O altitudo!* There is too much simplicity in the facile supposition that Catholic theology abolishes the problem utterly, that it clears up all details of the relations between Almighty Providence and man's use or misuse of free will in his quest of happiness. For instant proof of the opposite, recall the white heat of the Bañez-Molina controversy on Grace in the late sixteenth century, a high refine-

ment of speculation on the Problem of Evil, the inherent supernatural interest of which must not obscure the perseverance of the riddle for Catholics on a this-worldly, natural plane as well. Readers of Newman will recall his eloquent account of the latter in the fifth chapter of his *Apologia*, to which the doubting may turn.

What the *Summa* means to tragedy may be summed up briefly as follows: it provides the true Divinity of tragedy, towards which Greek drama was straining, and which the secular English drama gradually eliminated with incalculable loss; it enlarges the scope of the tragic vision, adding to time eternity; it equips tragedy with a true and final theodicy including the mystery round which tragic poetry revolves.

I may add the conclusion that this theodicy is our only hope for high tragedy's future. As long as art bears on her shoulders untruth or half-truth, she will bend to earth under its weight; released, as in the theodicy of the *Summa* by truth, tragedy may rise stately and straight and sublime to her full height—which is above that of her ancient days in Greece or her more recent days in Shakespeare. And if proof is required of her present need of release, one has but to examine her modern history. The last glimmerings of the *Summa's* light on the Elizabethan stage have faded long ago. Heaven has long since closed again over tragedy, and is forgotten; so roofed over, tragedy has sickened and died. Contemporary attempts at serious drama are closely bounded by the confines of this sublunary world; so true is this and so definitely accepted by playwrights themselves, that they have forgotten the word *tragedy*. A play so styled would be a novelty to-day, its quaint label held faintly pretentious. Tragedy is no longer written.

Not a delicate adjustment of agnosticism and faith, not merely the New Humanism—only the full and perfect faith and the complete humanism, natural and supernatural, of Scholasticism will restore to tragedy the life-giving theodicy bequeathed to her in the thirteenth century, but never fully claimed. "We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of tragedy is the plot." This

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theodicy is that plot.

And what of the obvious and, at first glance, numbing objection, that the poets are not of my mind, that they have done very well with other theodicies than that of St. Thomas? I have already disclosed that I revere the Greeks and Shakespeare, *on this side idolatry*, as much as any; I cannot, however, submit with those who say that nothing higher in tragedy can be achieved. For, entirely apart from religious controversy and speaking solely from a literary point of view, I regard the *pagan* Renaissance (not the Christian) as the Great Assault, and the Reformation as the Great Betrayal of the plans of a Providence that had meant to favour English literature far above all others, by producing the genius of Shakespeare, the supreme poet, to weave the Thomist theodicy into supreme tragedy in our language. Far-seeing Providence for our glory denied genius to the poets of other tongues, who had the theodicy; it was short-sighted man who denied the full beauty of that theodicy to our poet.

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