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THE MORTAL CONDITION: A DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

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THE MORTAL CONDITION: A DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

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PREFACE

The following study is an attempt at a definition of Tragedy. It is primarily a theoretical work, concerned with the enunciation and clarification of the theory rather than with a critical application of that theory. However, some partially critical application and testing of the definition seemed useful and desirable; thus the nature of Chapters III, IV, and V. But here again, the basic interest is theoretical: an elaboration and clarification of the definition.

No attempt has been made, therefore, to examine "critically" a large body of "Tragedies." Such an attempt would have destroyed the unity of the work while at the same time drawing attention away from the central concern. I have, instead, thought it expedient and reasonable to exemplify my definition of Tragedy by using it as a means of understanding three very different but unquestionably distinctive kinds of "Tragedies": incontestably great Tragedies, what I have called theodicies, and the uniquely neo-classical heroic tragedy. Thus the investigation of each of these plays is intended to be exemplary of the definition, not a critical study of the individual play. Obviously much more can and must be said about the plays as literary works, as

dramas, as indices to the thought and expression of their time. I have sought, merely, to draw attention to their existence as Tragedy, and to restrict myself to that labor only.

Nor is this study in any sense historical. I have arranged the examination of individual works according to age only because it seemed natural and convenient to do so. And I have elected to treat the Greek, the Renaissance, and the neo-classic drama not so much because of the ages as because of their obvious importance in studies of the drama. Chapter V deserves, in this respect, particular comment. It is, of course, largely historical, but this has seemed to me unavoidable. My examination of neo-classic tragedy, like that of the theodicies, seemed a necessary addition to a clarification of what I conceive to be the peculiarly "tragic" features of Tragedy. Thus the interest here is in it as type. But in order to characterize the type and thus to point to the particular limitations it has as Tragedy (and thereby further to define Tragedy), I thought it necessary to construct a basically historical characterization.

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THE MORTAL CONDITION: A DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM OF TRAGEDY

We look before and after, Shelley says, and pine for what is not. And within this statement we can see the reasons why man finds Evil in the world, as well as, ultimately, one of the primary bases of Tragedy. For although man lives (and dies) in time, and cannot but know himself caught in its forward march, yet he lives a life of the spirit that transcends time, that is beyond time. He does look (agonizingly) before and after--to contemplate the inevitability of his own death, to reflect on past suffering, to discover within his own person, endlessly torn between the rival claims of finitude and infinity, the Mortal Condition. Perhaps he pines for what is not: certainly he repines against what is. He ponders the evidence that there is unmerited suffering in the world, that no principle of Justice manifests itself in the pattern of mortality. So with a profound sense of sorrow but also of mystery, he writes the story of Job. But Justice, he thinks, must be, for he feels the injustice of the lot of man, which can only be

judged against the existent principle of Justice, without which both the concept injustice and man's life are meaningless. But since the order of Justice is not perceived by man, it must be of and with God, who is of necessity just: "For," as Richmond Hathorn says, "if God be not just, where is justice to be found, whereby we may even justify our disapproval of its absence?"¹ He then writes a theodicy. Or he may, in his contemplation of the Mortal Condition, recognizing the limit of his vision and the need for hope, but feeling the sorrow and the mystery, celebrate the spirit of man in this situation. And he writes Tragedy.

But what is this Tragedy? What is the nature of this work man produces? What its essence? For at least 2,300 years western man has diligently and exhaustively sought answers to these questions; almost none have suggested that they are meaningless. The very persistence with which we ask these questions, then, establishes clearly that the existence of something we call Tragedy is a fact which we can all recognize, even if we cannot always define or explain it. The questions show that those productions of the human spirit which we call Tragedy share all some common quality--a quality that has been defined in terms of everything from dramatic structure to "world view."

But if most men agree that something called Tragedy

¹Richmond Y. Hathorn, Tragedy, Myth, and Mystery (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 55.

exists and that they can recognize it when it is shown in literature, why, one asks, has it been so impossible to agree on a definition or description of its primary nature?

One of the first answers to the question is a statement of the obvious: that the meanings of words and concepts change; and the equally obvious, that unless one is aware (as he often is not) that the meaning he is giving to a term is not the same as that given by another, then serious confusions and distortions can ensue. Do we mean, in short, the same by Tragedy as Aristotle does by Tragedia?¹ Are we trying to define and identify the same thing? I suggest we are not, that we are, in fact, dealing with a more limited (more closely defined) concept and feature of human experience than Aristotle. I suggest further that whatever may have been the influences of Aristotle's theory on subsequent critics and philosophers, whatever the influence on writers of Tragedy, whatever the confusions and misunderstandings

¹In all of the following discussion of Aristotle's Poetics, I am less concerned with discovering Aristotle's meaning than I am with clarifying the problem of trying to define Tragedy by means of the standard uses of Aristotle. It seems to me that the Poetics is often so employed as to stand in the way of a clear understanding of the nature of Tragedy. It is true, of course, that Aristotle's remarks in the Poetics grew out of and should be viewed in relation to an entire philosophic system. However, it is equally true that none of the larger scope of that system is ordinarily employed by critics when they bring Aristotle to their aid in an attempt to define Tragedy. And certainly if these concerns (what I here call the "heart" of Tragedy) are behind Aristotle's reflections on Tragedy, they are not at the center of his formal remarks on it, so that students of Aristotle might be forgiven for thinking that these concerns are not central to his definition.

that have followed from his remarks, or whatever Aristotle did in fact mean by *Tragedia*, still we today share, largely, a concept of Tragedy that embraces the Greek as well as more "modern" drama and that we should above all attempt to find out what it is that this concept does embrace. It is of little importance that we cannot always say what it encompasses. What is important is that we do know generally what it does not encompass, and clearly that a positive content exists. We know that there is something that literature can express about the life of man as he sees it that is not dependent on historical theory or the conscious world view of a particular period. And we know, finally, that this something, called Tragedy by us, emerges at different times and with varying degrees of realization of the idea Tragedy, and that as the individual expressions approach nearer to the idea Tragedy we judge them to be among the very noblest of man's creations.

We generally think of the form of Tragedy as dramatic, even though we find in other literary forms many elements of what we think of as tragic. And even though Professor Henry A. Myers makes a good case for Moby Dick as Tragedy, he is careful to point out that Melville's book is essentially dramatic in structure and effect.¹ In other words, students of Tragedy seem to be agreed that a necessary

¹Tragedy: A View of Life (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956).

feature of Tragedy is the dramatic involvement of character or characters and the dramatic revelation of the meaning of their predicament. Thus it has seemed logical to many to attempt to find within the form itself the essence of Tragedy: within the characterization, the construction and manipulation of scene, the language or speeches, the use of verse or non-verse, and the even more mechanical and superficial features of dramaturgy. Indeed Aristotle devoted a considerable portion of his study of drama in the Poetics to these matters. Moreover, some very rewarding recent studies have been made from this approach, but they seem to tell us something about the nature of great dramatic art and little about Tragedy itself. Often these investigations help us to see the shortcomings of individual poets or even to understand more clearly the critical assumptions and pronouncements that underlay the artistic aberrations of talented poets, but once again they take us no nearer to the heart of Tragedy. We must, then, in our search for the meaning of Tragedy, leave aside this fascinating, and valuable, area of inquiry, which has been often and illuminatingly treated. We must, I believe, in order not to be led down wandering paths and byways, assume at first a great artistic sensibility and competence for the poet and concentrate on what is revealed through them.

But to think of Tragedy without thinking of Aristotle and the familiar, if puzzling, terms pity and fear,

hamartia, and catharsis is impossible. One needs, therefore, to examine Aristotle's theory in order to see what help it affords and where it leads one away from the central inquiry.

"Aristotle's [theory] . . . ," says Gerald Else in his recent study of the Poetics, "is divorced from metaphysics and grounded in psychology--a new psychology. It starts from the premise, not that tragedy must adumbrate the metaphysical truth about human affairs, but that the best tragedy must arouse pity and fear in the highest possible degree."¹ The end, the function, of Tragedy, according to Aristotle, is to have a psychological effect on the audience, to cause them to experience pity and fear intensely. But even though we may well agree that true (or the best) Tragedy does in fact cause us to experience either one or both these emotions, to assume at the outset that to raise these emotions is the end of Tragedy before we have found what Tragedy is seems at best premature.

Aristotle's concept of catharsis is a more difficult problem. If it means what it has long been thought to mean, that Tragedy effects a cleansing, so to speak, of the soul of the spectator by causing a discharge of an excess of the emotions of pity and fear, or, alternately, that it purifies the emotions themselves in the spectator by ordering and limiting them--then we could say that this judgment too is

¹Gerald F. Else, Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 389.

premature; because this again is a statement of the end of Tragedy, made before the thing itself has been defined. Moreover, commentators on Aristotle have found it increasingly difficult to find such a seemingly crude notion of the function of Tragedy congenial. And it remains, according to these views of its meaning, an hypothesis on the psychological effects of Tragedy on the individual, even if that individual be defined as the ideal, rather than real, spectator.

However, Else has brought forward quite another view of the import of catharsis in Aristotle's theory. Aristotle is not speaking, Else declares, of an end result of Tragedy, but of "a process . . . and a process operated by the poet through his 'structure of events.'"¹ Catharsis is not a final purging of the emotions of the audience, but rather a purging, by the poet, of guilt from the tragic figure within the play. Thus construction and movement of the plot are such that the poet can cause the dramatic figure to emerge as, though perhaps guilty of some crime, at least free from the blood curse that should attach to the crime. This view, then, would remove catharsis as a statement of the end result of Tragedy, for as Else says, "if catharsis depends on the constructive activity of the poet, it ceases to be a standard result automatically attained by any play called

¹Ibid., p. 230.

'tragedy.'"¹

But Else goes on to say that even if catharsis is not the telos of Tragedy it is an element necessary to the raising of pity and fear, and thereby tragic pleasure, in the audience. For catharsis is finally, according to Else, an activity of the spectator, an activity brought about by the "process" of the poet in constructing the play; that is, the reader judges the actions of the tragic man and sees him as free from the pollution that the act would bring ordinarily: "the purification of the pathos, that is, the exculpation of the hero's motive from polluted intent, is precedent to our feeling pity for him."² Clearly, then, even if we accept Else's explication of the term catharsis, we are brought back to a discussion not only of the telos of Tragedy, but of the telos as a producing of a psychological effect on the audience. But this is still premature.

The doctrine of hamartia in Aristotle's theory of Tragedy has a venerable and important history in both the study and production of tragic drama. In this doctrine, students of Tragedy (critics, philosophers, and poets alike) have seemed to find the central characteristic that distinguishes the truly tragic figure from the one who is simply a victim of misfortune. The notion of hamartia is usually

¹Ibid., p. 231.

²Ibid., p. 447.

seen as closely bound up with that of the "good man" as tragic figure, who, Aristotle says, is the only suitable person, since the fall of a bad man cannot awake that sympathy (pity) for unmerited suffering that is necessary to the proper response to Tragedy. But since, further, the fall of a blameless good man brings only moral revulsion, his goodness must be tempered with some fault. Here, according to the more or less standard view, is the function of hamartia. Hamartia is that failing (either of judgment or of character) that renders the "good man," the suitable tragic figure, imperfect enough for his fall to bring with it pity instead of revulsion. This is the view that gave rise to the doctrine of the "tragic flaw," which has held sway off and on since the Renaissance.

But many objections to Aristotle have risen on this point, in recent years especially. D. D. Raphael, for instance, has charged Aristotle with a contradiction, maintaining that he cannot have it both ways. Either pity or hamartia, he demands, not both: "if hamartia is responsible, there cannot be pity, and if pity is appropriate, hamartia cannot take the blame."¹ What Raphael argues is that if pity is appropriate only when suffering is unmerited, then one is contradicting himself when he says that hamartia makes the sufferer partially responsible for his misfortune (if

¹The Paradox of Tragedy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 22-23.

not, indeed, guilty of a crime) and therefore more worthy of pity. Yet this objection would appear to be based on disagreement with the assumption that the sufferings of the simply good man bring moral outrage rather than pity, a disagreement that is an example of another kind of objection that can be made to Aristotle. Surely the belief that underlies Raphael's logic is that one can in fact pity the simply good man. And this is a very persuasive belief.

Again, however, Else has offered a different view of Aristotle's meaning. According to Aristotle, he says, poetry is portraying not merely "'men in action,' but also 'men of action.'"¹ Thus the "good man" is the "man of action," not one who is blameless. He is of that class of men who strive for virtue, who spend (and perhaps lose) their lives in striving for it. The dichotomy between good and bad is absolute: either one does or does not strive for virtue. If one does, he is a good man; if one does not, he is not a good man. The former is serious and can be taken seriously; the latter is not and can not.

And hamartia Else takes to be not an essential part of the tragic figure's character, but one of three essential elements in the best tragic incident. It works reciprocally with "recognition" and "reversal" to produce the incident best suited to achieve the tragic effect. Thus hamartia is

¹Op. cit., p. 73.

not a tragic flaw or the establishing of guilt or responsibility in the tragic figure, but merely an ignorance of events or persons that must precede recognition and thereby reversal.¹

Yet while one is trying to decide whether to accept Else's judgment that hamartia is not a crucial element in the character of the tragic figure, and whether Aristotle's dictum does in fact give an insight into an essential feature of Tragedy, he must pause to remember that "Tragedia" does not in itself connote 'tragic,' but 'serious drama'" in Aristotle.² Therefore some of what seem contradictions or irrelevancies to us may well proceed from the fact that at one time Aristotle is speaking of what we think of as Tragedy and at another of serious, but not tragic, drama. But if Aristotle is not at all times speaking of Tragedy, then one must clarify for oneself what Tragedy is before he can determine what of Aristotle is germane and helpful.

Moreover, "there is in fact not a word in the Poetics about the ultimate 'secrets of life,' about why mankind should suffer or be happy, about Fate or man's relation to God, or any such metaphysical matters."³ As Richard Sewall says, of the Greek "account of all the forces, within and without, that make for man's destruction, all that afflicts,

¹Ibid., especially pp. 378 ff. and pp. 412-421.

²Ibid., p. 330, n. 101.

³Ibid., p. 306.

mystifies, and bears him down, all that he knows as Evil"--of all this "Aristotle is singularly silent . . . but it is the essence and core of tragedy."¹ Here is a serious and central objection to Aristotle, for he is indeed strangely silent about the very springs of Tragedy. And though much of the Poetics may be found to harmonize with the results of an investigation of these springs, still the investigation is not Aristotle's and must go beyond him.

Thus we must leave Aristotle, at least for a time. In a search for the meaning and nature of Tragedy, we are not concerned to understand what the Greeks conceived Tragedy to be in theory--or the English, or the French. We are concerned to discover what that is which, when discovered or achieved in any period by any people, and whatever their understanding of its nature, we can and do label Tragedy. And we may well find that "tragedy in its greatest days comported things that were not dreamt of in Aristotle's philosophy."²

¹The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 47.

²Else, op. cit., p. 446.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF TRAGEDY

One of the distinguishing features of comedy is that it is funny, as Dennis acutely observed.¹ And a memory of this fact helps to prevent us from overloading terms that distinguish types of dramatic literature until they no longer serve to distinguish. Clearly one cannot call everything that is not tragic "comic" and still hope that the designation will cast any appreciable light on the work so classified. And although the traditional classification of Shakespeare's plays into comedies, tragedies, and histories indicates well enough, perhaps, a general awareness of this critical maxim, at the same time, the continuing attempt to break down Shakespeare's "comedies" into "dark" and "light," "problem" (or tragi-comic) and simple indicates perhaps equally well that the awareness is not always heeded.

Thus it will perhaps not be superfluous to observe that just as comedy is funny, Tragedy, as George Steiner says, ends badly.² Tragedy is not simply non-comic drama.

¹John Dennis, The Critical Works of John Dennis, ed. Edward Niles Hooker (2 vols.; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), II, 160.

²The Death of Tragedy (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 8.

Neither is it all drama that treats the problems of man with great seriousness. Tragedy presents man suffering. Indeed, at the heart of Tragedy are the death and destruction of man. Tragedy rises up out of the defeat and death that punctuate with inexorable regularity and finality the life of mortal man.

In one sense, Tragedy is a mirror of life. It focuses attention on the unhappy (and inevitable) features of the mortal condition: that the body is liable to sickness, disease, decay, death; that the will is infirm; that man suffers self-division over baser inclinations and moral (or spiritual) "oughts." Fulke Greville attempts to describe this mortal condition in Mustapha:

Oh, wearisome Condition of Humanity!
Borne under one Law, to another bound:
Vainely begot, and yet forbidden vanity,
Created sicke, commanded to be sound:
What meaneth Nature by these diuerse Lawes?
Passion and Reason, self-diuisiion cause.
Is it the marke, or Maiesty of Power
To make offences that it may forgiue?
Nature herself doth her owne selfe defloure,
To hate those errors she her self doth giue.¹

In other words, Tragedy focuses on the existence of Evil in the world. "All Tragedy," D. D. Raphael says, "deals with the presentation of evil" ² "The first business of the tragic dramatist," he says further, "is to express the

¹Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (2 vols.; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, n.d.), II, 136.

²Op. cit., p. 25.

disturbing character of the existence of evil" ¹ But whether or not the first business of the tragic dramatist is to express this disturbing character, certainly an awareness of it is a prerequisite to his writing Tragedy. He must be aware that by nature man is subject to pain, misery, want, frustration, and defeat. Before he produces Tragedy he must feel the full measure of man's mortality and the natural sense of outrage or injustice that is consequent to his capacity so to reflect on his condition.

But of course a recognition of the existence of Evil does not always produce Tragedy, or even the "tragic view." It may produce attempts to "account" for Evil, to justify God's ways to man: anything from Job to Paradise Lost. Or it may produce a conviction that in a world in which Evil exists there can be no Justice or a God of Justice. Moreover, much of lyric poetry seems to proceed from this same recognition of the existence of Evil. And yet these productions are not Tragedies. Often they are very serious, sometimes profoundly moving and intellectually satisfying; but we do not call them tragic in the same sense as Antigone. We must, therefore, refer to something more (though not other) than a recognition of the existence of Evil when we speak of Tragedy.

This "something more" is often identified as the

¹Ibid.

nobility of the tragic figure, what Raphael calls his grandeur d'âme.¹ We admire the tragic hero, so the argument goes, not simply because he is noble in his fall, but because he is spiritually triumphant even though physically defeated. Thus his fall is spiritually elevating.

The hero is a man like us, showing human weaknesses from which the devices of art free us for the nonce; but though an object of our sympathy, he seems sublime, for he outstrips us, and the superior powers whom he opposes, in greatness of spirit. And our sympathy for him as a fellow human being gives his sublimity a stronger appeal than that exerted by the sublimity of the alien power with which he contends. By such devices Tragedy exalts man in our eyes.²

This is a good point. Surely it isolates one of the central effects of Tragedy; but what it most reveals is another assumption about the nature of Tragedy, an assumption that is not so acceptable. It pictures man in a struggle against external, alien powers, just as Steiner does when he speaks of the "forces"³ that defeat man. This kind of assumption has led to the attempts at identification of the particular "force" that is operative in each individual Tragedy, such as Fate, Fortune, the Gods, Nature, or a Manichaeian power of Evil.

But the central feature of Tragedy is that the tragic figure is not defeated by some alien force. The presentation

¹Ibid., pp. 26 ff.

²Ibid., p. 31.

³Op. cit., p. 8.

of the mortal condition is such as to make the Mortal Condition itself the antagonist. Tragic man is not defeated by some wholly external force (nor by a wholly internal one), but by the Mortal Condition, in which he finds himself and which subsists in him: it is neither external nor internal, but both.

Tragedy does deal with the presentation of Evil; but more specifically it deals with man's (the tragic hero's) confrontation with it. In Tragedy man runs head-on into Evil, and he must struggle with it as he attempts to live. And he of course externalizes Evil. He views it as an existent force outside himself and with which he must contend. Moreover, since Evil threatens his life as rational-spiritual-physical being, he feels that he must combat it. But Tragedy discovers in his struggles with Evil that (whatever of its features the particular tragic figure contends with) it is not simply external. It discovers that to act is to become a part of that against which one acts. It reveals, in short, that Evil is an essential part of the Mortal Condition, and therefore ineradicable. As we see in Hamlet, men become "a little soiled i' the working."¹

Tragic man emerges as both doer and sufferer. The Mortal Condition is more than he is: it surrounds him and engulfs him--and it defeats him. But it does also subsist

¹The Cambridge Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, ed. John Dover Wilson, The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1936), II.i.40.

in him, and only in him. He resists or attacks that part of the Mortal Condition which he has identified as Evil, and through the Mortal Condition he is defeated and defeats himself. Tragedy focuses on this feature of mortality with such force and clarity as to force us to recognize its existence. We are not allowed to remain with a simplified (if pleasant) view. The tragic involvement of man in Evil is isolated and revealed. Tragic man takes sides in the battle against Evil but finds himself in the impossible position of functioning as both opponent and ally. This was sometime a paradox, as Hamlet says, but Tragedy gives it proof.¹

Thus we can see the inevitability of the hero's defeat. He may attempt to solve Evil (as a problem) or to eradicate it (as a disease), but he will always be defeated in the attempt, for he cannot change what is a part of the given--the Mortal Condition. Because of the paradoxical Mortal Condition, even when he is standing against necessity he is more firmly establishing that necessity; while seeking Justice (or attacking Evil) he is becoming involved in both Evil and injustice. He tackles Evil as a problem; but Tragedy shows that, as Richmond Hathorn says, Evil is a mystery which can never be "solved" like a problem or a

¹It is essential to see that, when we speak of the tragic figure's paradoxical situation, the one thing we are not describing is a psychological conflict of passion and reason, as in a kind of psychomachy. To view man's problem in these terms is to miss Tragedy, as is the other and opposing extreme view--that man is crushed by a force without.

riddle.¹ It can only be identified, confronted, and experienced--and perhaps partially understood. The tragic figure must and will be crushed. As George Steiner puts it, "The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This . . . is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama but not tragedy."² Or as he has finely said later on, "In tragedy, the twist of the net which brings down the hero may be an accident or hazard of circumstance, but the mesh is woven into the heart of life."³

The tragic hero must, of course, be self-conscious and self-willed, and therefore feel responsible for his actions. And when he faces the "problem" of Evil, he must have confidence in his ability to solve it. But in Tragedy the Mortal Condition is shown to be such that he can never achieve either this objectivity or this surety. He must choose and act; he will err and fall.

These matters all belong to the finite. But even while he must confront Evil as irreducible and ineluctable, the tragic figure must at the same time affirm Justice and

¹Op. cit., pp. 16 ff.

²Op. cit., p. 8.

³Ibid., p. 128.

Good in the same terms. He is, therefore, brought face to face with the mingling of the finite and the infinite.¹

Tragedy emphasizes that because of the Mortal Condition man cannot escape these antinomies. He cannot separate the apparent human meaning of his plight and actions from the possible divine one. Nor can he deny either. He cannot, in short, effect a complete separation of himself and the world. Tragedy presents an uneasy balance of the self-conscious and the participating mind, one which is of necessity uncertain of its judgments, convictions, values, but equally certain that it must affirm them.

Thus Tragedy lets us, the mortal viewers, see that man is involved in his world, in its Evil, and that he is, therefore, incapable of viewing the world simply objectively, of standing above it or apart from it. It shows that, as a concomitant of this existential involvement, the issues can never, for the individual, be clear-cut--Good or Evil, truth or falsity, just or unjust; that the individual must always be to some extent uncertain of the import of his actions and even of his motives; that yet he must act and feel himself responsible for his actions, even when he finds it

¹On this point compare Clifford Leech: "Now it is of course true that the tragic writer is concerned with the here and now, that any ideas he may have about the continuance of human life, in another mode, after death, are, for the purposes of tragic writing, irrelevant. Nevertheless, he sees his characters against a background of cosmic forces, unknowable but inviting speculation, unseen yet ever active" (The John Fletcher Plays [London: Chatto and Windus, 1962], p. 111).

impossible to draw sharp distinctions between what he freely chooses and what he could not but choose, between what is simply human and what divine, between what he can fully understand and what he can see but dimly. This is the unhappy and disturbing feature of the Mortal Condition which the tragic writer perceives (or presents) and which the tragic figure must confront.

But while it preserves the compelling and disturbing nature of man's mortal experience, with all its pathos, suffering, and mystery, true Tragedy is also spiritually ennobling and pleasing. We are made glad, even in the face of the oppressive features of the Mortal Condition revealed to us, that we are, like the defeated hero, man. There is an ennobling appeal in the hero's struggle against the invincible power of his own condition. Indeed, his greatness is inseparably tied to his defeat. He is great because he rises above his mortal condition, even though such a triumph can only result in his destruction. Here is the crucial paradox of Tragedy, and it is Tragedy's very life. In the profoundest sense the hero is both vanquisher and vanquished. Thus we admire him. We discover in him, perhaps, the grandeur d'âme of which Raphael speaks. And we can agree with Raphael that his fall is elevating for us, that spiritually he is triumphant although physically vanquished. In his destruction we recognize the inseparability of his tragedy and his triumph, and we are at once grieved and made proud

in our humanity.

The paradox of his tragedy is more real, however, than Raphael sees. We are only partially correct when we say that he is spiritually greater than the adversary which defeats him. In a sense, to be sure, he is. He does become greater than he is. But this is the central point: he becomes greater than he is, not greater than God, or Nature, or Fate, or some such external force. The force is at once external and internal, personal and impersonal, human and divine.

This distinction is very helpful when we come to consider a question that has troubled most students of Tragedy: can Tragedy be Christian? Most recent critics have answered no.¹ Since all Tragedy, most of them have said, depends on wasted goodness, it cannot be Christian, for Christianity does not allow that goodness can be wasted--not in the ultimate meaning of the world, which is known only to God. Moreover, they claim, the exaltation of man to a sublimity surpassing that of his adversary, which, for the Christian, must finally be identified with God, is impious and blasphemous, and in no way amenable to Christian doctrine.² Thus it has often been supposed that Tragedy must be essentially Manichaeian or at best agnostic, that it

¹For instance A. C. Bradley, I. A. Richards, Una Ellis-Fermor, Karl Jaspers, D. D. Raphael, R. B. Sewall.

²Cf. Raphael, op. cit., pp. 40 ff.

is firmly grounded in a serious question whether there be a just order in the universe which impinges on the life of man, and that the answer of the writer of Tragedy is most often no. These arguments are serious and often persuasive, though, I am convinced, wrong. And they need to be examined closely not only because they are sometimes made the basis for unfruitful theories about the kind of age in which Tragedy can be written, but also because they distort what a Tragedy actually does.

There are two principal objections to these arguments. First, they assume that the "questioning" which follows the recognition of Evil in the world is the poet's, not the tragic figure's; the question "What meaneth Nature by these diuerse Lawes?" is then the poet's as he functions as philosopher. And since the agreement is that purest Tragedy presents man being crushed, then the poet must believe either in a Manichaeian struggle between Good and Evil, or in a criminal God. But though the poet has no doubt questioned as man, as poet he is not himself asking the question but presenting tragic man asking. He is not, in this sense, functioning as philosopher. He is, rather, discovering to man the essence of what it means, to experiencing man, to be mortal. He shows to man the nature of the Mortal Condition that he is in as he discovers and confronts Evil. He reveals the Mortal Condition from the point of view, not of the truly omniscient observer, but of man involved in his

world, in its Evil, of man who looks before and after, who is both spiritual and physical. Tragedy does not assert that, because man cannot discern a conservation of goodness in the world, it is not there. It is not a product of black pessimism, because in itself it does not confuse the human and immortal views of the order of the universe.

Tragedy reveals the meaning of mortality. It does not stop short with the single-voiced "lament or melancholy lyric,"¹ but attempts to demonstrate the fullness of the mystery of Evil in the world. Through the confrontation with the Mortal Condition the tragic figure learns more of what it means to be mortal. We, of course, learn even more accurately what it means, because for a time we are freed, through the power of art, from the mortal limitations and see the play whole (including the elevating spirit of the tragic figure), whereas he, being a part of it, can never grasp it entire.

But the writer of Tragedy functions, not as the answerer, but as the identifier and poser of questions.² He reveals the meaning of the Mortal Condition, not the meaning of life. He does not avoid or underplay the suffering and misery of man's life, but he does show that man can be noble and exalting in this condition. He says that life can be

¹Richard Sewall, op. cit., p. 6.

²Raphael makes a similar point.

Tragedy to the unflinching human view, not that this is The Meaning of Life.

Clearly, if God were to write the play, there would be no Tragedy. But this is not the play of which God is the author. This is a play written from the point of view of man, perhaps even a Christian man. Theodicies are written from the point of view of God,¹ and even should one accept their theological argument without question, when he turns to look at the life of man as man, subject to the Mortal Condition, then he finds it liable to Tragedy. It is unlikely that any but the most extraordinary minds, those capable of crying out with joy as they are put to the stake, can sustain the immortal point of view. Perhaps the poet is capable of it for the duration of a composition (it is possible that tragi-comedies are written from approximations of this point

¹I choose the term theodicy here because, since in its strictest sense the term refers to a justification of the existence of Evil in the world, particularly a world created by God, this keeps the attention on the fundamental intention of the work in question: to see the true meaning and purpose of the world. Obviously such an attempt must presume to see the world from a vantage other than that employed by man. In the celebrated Theodicy of Leibniz, for instance, the primary thesis is that what man experiences as evil must not be elevated to the plane of final being, because to do so is to confute the infinite with the finite. Man's judgment is always limited by inherent ignorance: it does not penetrate to teleology. The purpose and meaning of the world are known only to God. In a sense, of course, this is a human solution, but only in a limited sense. Ultimately it argues that there is no human solution. Thus the point of view of God is postulated, even if it is postulated negatively; that is, by the necessity for that point of view through a recognition of the inadequacy of the human point of view to solve the problem, or answer the question.

of view). But man is mortal, and for the vast majority of men there will exist an inevitable tension between religious hope-religious experience, and mortal experience. Indeed, this too is a part of the Mortal Condition which tragic man faces. The writer of Tragedy preserves this tension as well as the ambiguity and renders it in his drama. He refuses to oversimplify by choosing, just as man is unable to choose in his ordinary experience of the world.

Abstractions about the incompatibility of this view and optimistic religion simply fail to see that these are inseparable rival claims on man's mortality. This confusion is similar to that of Theodore Spencer in Death and Elizabethan Tragedy when he finds the popularity of the memento mori of the middle ages to be an indication that death was the looked-for end to life, that it was desired and the after-life devoutly wished for.¹ But surely the reason why the memento mori was effective as a means to turning man's thoughts away from worldly lust is that it dwells on the ever-present fear of death in man, the mortal, fleshly horror of it.² It too, then, reveals the paradox, the mystery of the Mortal Condition.

¹Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936.

²Herbert J. Muller makes the same point: "Their [Medieval men's] lust for life led to a horror of death unparalleled in all history The horror was due in part to the fear of hell, but mostly it seemed due to the thought of mortality, the melting of this not too solid flesh" (The Spirit of Tragedy [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956], p. 139).

The second objection to the arguments about the incompatibility of Christianity and Tragedy is partially consequent on the first. Since in Tragedy the poet is not attempting to give a statement of the ultimate meaning of the world or man's experience in it, since he is writing neither theodicy nor manifesto of pessimism, we cannot conclude that he is impiously exalting man over God. Moreover, as has been pointed out, man becomes greater than himself, not greater than God. The greatness he achieves, his nobility, is essentially inseparable from his mortality, his not being greater than God. Thus without going into the question "how pessimistic is Christianity?" (an answer to which might tend to resolve the problem in another way) we can conclude that Tragedy is not in itself anti-Christian.

We do not mean by Tragedy, then, all serious drama. We mean a literary creation that takes its root in catastrophe, in human defeat and suffering; and which, by focusing on and revealing the Mortal Condition, causes us to experience the paradoxical union of opposites in man, as he confronts Evil in the world. And it is a piece of literature that raises equally paradoxical emotions in us--sympathy (or pity) and spiritual elevation: a joyful sorrow. But the joy does not come with victory, or with the aversion of catastrophe. On the contrary, it comes with defeat (from which rises a "tragic" victory) and from catastrophe itself. Thus we do not speak of Tragedies with "happy endings," for

this is to deny Tragedy.

It is at this point that we come once again to the question of what Aristotle means by *Tragedia*. For although he clearly means basically the same as we when he speaks of the best Tragedy as ending in catastrophe and when he chooses Oedipus Tyrannus as an example of it, he is not meaning the same as we when he describes the best tragic incident and speaks for an avoiding of the catastrophe. Nor can I agree with Professor Cooper when he says that the contradiction in Aristotle is not a serious one.¹ Surely it is a crucial one, one which causes us to doubt whether Aristotle means anything so limited as we do today when we say Tragedy. It appears to be prima facie evidence that Aristotle might be speaking of two somewhat different matters in the two passages, or otherwise speaking in both instances of a much more vaguely defined concept than we, one so broad as to accommodate both types without contradiction. Thus Else's statement about the meaning of *Tragedia* in Aristotle must be taken seriously.² But whether it is possible to decide what Aristotle means by *Tragedia*, we are here trying to discover what we mean. And we do not mean what Aristotle seems at times to mean.

On the other hand, pity for the sufferings of the tragic figure, who is brought close to all men by the oneness

¹Lane Cooper, Aristotle on the Art of Poetry: An Amplified Version With Supplementary Illustrations (rev. ed.; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1947), pp. 46-47.

²See Chapter I, p. 11.

of their plight, is surely a result of Tragedy. To this extent one must agree with Aristotle. But that to raise pity is the telos of Tragedy is a difficult conclusion to accept. Certainly I do not here wish to define the end or purpose of Tragedy in any final sense. I strongly doubt the possibility of one's doing so. But the end of Tragedy appears to be equally the full revelation of the meaning of the Mortal Condition, a necessary consequence of which, no doubt, is the excitement of pity.

So it is with fear. Perhaps Tragedy does cause one to experience fear, because of the certain recognition that one is by nature subject to the same kind of suffering as the tragic personage. But if so it would appear to be a different kind of fear from what is often supposed by students of Aristotle. Surely it is not fear that, unless one changes one's ways, one too will suffer. For Tragedy, as we have seen, is not, in its essence, moral exhortation.

Nowhere, moreover, does Aristotle account for the feeling (emotion?) of elevation that we gain from Tragedy. Yet this is an undoubted experience, and an essential one. Furthermore, it is one which is accounted for by the nature of the Mortal Condition. And it is an understanding of this concept that enables us to see what Tragedy is, which is our object.

And what of hamartia? Clearly the involvement of man in Evil, his sharing of guilt, is postulated by the

Mortal Condition. He is both guilty and innocent. In a sense, to be sure, he possesses a "tragic flaw," but it is the flaw shared by all mankind, the flaw of mortality. It is not, therefore, of itself a distinguishing feature of the tragic figure, except that in him we see the nature of the flaw more clearly than we do ordinarily in ourselves.

Moreover, this involvement of tragic man in no wise sets him apart from the wholly good man, unless by the wholly good man we mean an ideal man who cannot and does not exist; for the Mortal Condition as shown by Tragedy is shared and faced by all men, by virtue of their being men. Thus among real men no such creature as the wholly good man can be found, and could not be accepted or believed if drawn. Thus I can find no real meaning to the suggestion that his sufferings would bring not pity but moral revulsion.

And yet we do, apparently, ask that the tragic hero be a "good" man. And here one finds Else's explanation of Aristotle helpful.¹ By "good" man we seem to mean the man who strives for virtue, for good, for right, rather than the man who spends his life simply making money or seeking pleasure, or both. This kind of man, we agree, is worthy of being taken seriously, for he is serious and his life is serious. He is a good man, though as man he can never be simply good.

¹See Chapter I, p. 10.

One cannot help wishing, however, to find more application for Aristotle's hamartia. It seems always to hint at a profound awareness of the Mortal Condition. It does suggest, I believe, the mysterious intermingling of fated and free, of responsibility and no responsibility, of human and divine. And there can be no question that hamartia in this sense can be found as a cornerstone in the tragic conception of the Mortal Condition. In fact, the concept hamartia appears to be rather persuasive proof that Aristotle perceived (albeit fleetingly, perhaps) the very nature of Tragedy. But the insight seems to have been dimmed by its immersion in the depths of the category of serious drama called Tragedia. And this fact does much, I believe, to explain the difficulty subsequent students of Tragedy have had with the term. Finally, furthermore, one arrives to a perception of the worth of the term by an independent investigation of the nature of Tragedy, and sees its true value only after one has found the nature of Tragedy.

CHAPTER III

GREAT TRAGEDY

Oedipus the King

The myth of Oedipus has been variously explored and explained. Freud and his followers have seemed to find in it an expression of a universal psychical conflict which is experienced in some measure by all men. The Cambridge school of anthropologists has very convincingly demonstrated that the myth (along with all myths) has its origins in ritual and religious observance. And these are no doubt fruitful and pertinent studies in man's continuing attempt to understand himself. Indeed the latter line of investigation has had an enormous and fundamental effect on the modern view of man. But surely an equally valid, and for us more pertinent, way of approaching the myth is to view it as embodiment of man's tragic experience. Clearly the Oedipus story as a revelation of the mystery of human experience still holds the power to interest and affect us. And of the Tragedies of Sophocles (the most accessible and vital of the Greek dramatists today), Oedipus the King finds the easiest and best audience.

In Sophocles's play we find an employment and adaptation of the myth that focuses on the mystery of Evil and

renders the mythic (or allegorical) content of the story in an objective action that reveals and accentuates the Mortal Condition. "Begetter and begotten have long been one," the Chorus says of Oedipus when his full plight has been revealed.¹ And such always is tragic man. Like Oedipus, he both suffers and performs. Like Oedipus too, he is ultimately at the center of the condition which he attempts to combat. Since he cannot lift himself by his bootstraps, he can nowhere get a purchase on his burden.

As Sophocles employs the myth, it joins with the objective vehicle of action in the drama to present a study in the development of tragic self-consciousness. As Francis Fergusson says,

by starting the play at the end of the story, and showing onstage only the last crucial episode in Oedipus' life, the past and present action of the protagonist are revealed together; and, in each other's light, are at last felt as one. Oedipus' quest for the slayer of Laius becomes a quest for the hidden reality of his own past; and as that slowly comes into focus, like repressed material under psychoanalysis--with sensory and emotional immediacy, yet in the light of acceptance and understanding--his immediate quest also reaches its end: he comes to see himself (the Savior of the City) and the guilty one, the plague of Thebes, at once and at one.²

The quest is a journey into self-consciousness of an individual, the tragic figure, and mythically recapitulates the awakening self-consciousness of a race. The encapsulated

¹The Tragedies of Sophocles, trans. Sir Richard C. Jebb (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1904), p. 47.

²The Idea of a Theater (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), pp. 29-30.

time, the coexistence of all times in the mind of the individual, Oedipus, enforces a recognition of Oedipus's implication in the guilt, a recognition of the responsible self-aware person.

Oedipus, in Oedipus Rex, confronts the dilemmas of personal commitment as opposed to intellectual abstraction, of his own relationship to fate and freedom, of apparent existence and true being, of the acceptance or rejection of emergent selfhood; he is, in short, faced with the prime mysteries of human existence¹

At the outset of the play Oedipus, like the others, is still trying to externalize Evil, to set the blame for the plague wholly outside, on someone or something else--as he has always attempted to do. Heretofore he has apprehended Evil as a possibility in the scheme of things, a decree of the gods. That he would kill his father and marry his mother, acts that violate every sense of right he knows, is a prediction and constraint from without, one against which he can struggle and which he can hope to overcome. Perhaps, Oedipus realizes, there is an inescapable pattern to man's life (he fears the truth of the prophecy sufficiently to feel that he must oppose it), but perhaps also (indeed, he thinks "surely") there is a higher or larger order still, by which his view of right and justice can be vindicated. Thus his task is to apprehend that higher order or significance and then change the scheme of things (the condition of man) to fit it--to solve, in short, "the problem." This he attempts to do when

¹Hathorn, op. cit., p. 82.

he leaves Corinth in order to circumvent the Oracle (and which Laius did when he had Oedipus lamed and exposed).

This he attempts also when he solves the riddle of the Sphinx. And although the riddle itself is never stated in the play, it is of great importance to the drama as Tragedy. And it is always present: it is always present in the fact of Oedipus's reign; it is referred to several times, and significantly, in the play itself; and it is present in the association of the present plague with the Sphinx's terror and Laius's death. Thus one can never forget that Oedipus has solved the riddle and been the savior of his people, and that somehow his ability to release the Sphinx's hold is connected with his present trouble.

Oedipus's plight demonstrates clearly that when one gets beyond the superficial features of Evil he finds himself implicated. He cannot remain uninvolved in either the weakness or the guilt. Oedipus stood apart when he answered the riddle. He viewed man from without and saw that in the ordinary course of time he moves on four, then two, and finally three legs. To be able objectively to view mankind and to observe a part of the pattern of his life is no doubt helpful: it frees him from the primitive, dreaming response to nature that makes all unpredictable. But it removes evils, not Evil. It does not make the pattern any less true, only more predictable. And it is not an adequate description of man: it is an abstraction, an external view, incapable of

describing what happens to the individual within the riddle, where it is not a riddle but a mystery.¹

But mythically (and the material of the play is myth), Oedipus's solution of the riddle is a long step in the direction of self-consciousness and the consequent internalization of responsibility. It frees the Thebans from the external power that has borne them down and to which they have sacrificed their young men. It begins to bring the attention away from the gods, and fates, and other external forces, and to place it more and more on man himself. However, this mythic content does not subsist alone, or only in the myth: it is the infinitely suggestive symbolic content of the play's action that advances and reënforces its tragic statement. Moreover it is perfectly consonant with the view of Sophocles's interest expressed by Werner Jaeger:

The sense of beauty that produced the men and women of Sophocles arose from a vast new interest in the souls of tragic characters. It was a manifestation of the new ideal of areté, which for the first time emphasized the central importance of the psyché, the 'soul,' in all culture. In the course of the fifth century the word psyché acquired a new overtone, a loftier significance, which reached its fulness in the teaching of Socrates. The soul was now objectively recognized as the centre of man's life.²

Thus it is easy to see how this feature of the myth could

¹A mystery, Gabriel Marcel says, is "a problem which encroaches on its own data" (quoted in Hathorn, op. cit., pp. 81-82).

²Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, trans. Gilbert Highet (3 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), I, 279.

strike the imagination and intuition of Sophocles so that he would perceive its essential contribution to the Tragedy of Oedipus. For here he sees the mythic embodiment of the growing spirituality of man, the emergence of his soul in self-consciousness. The increasing self-consciousness of Oedipus, the internalizing of Evil so that it emerges, finally, as both internal and external, is joined and reënforced, therefore, by the mythic revelation of the same process occurring within the race.¹

Just as he must look within the walls of Thebes to find the murderer of Laius, so must he look within himself to see what man really is, what his implication in the general taint must be. He must focus his "mother-wit," his ability to discover the meaning of dark words, on himself if he is to understand his adversary. He too will become "a little soiled i' th' working." "Whoever regards himself as an instrument of justice," Hathorn says, "is apt to be blind to the fact that, since 'it is the mover that is moved,' justice is to be fulfilled on him as well as through him."² Then we discover that his attempt to separate himself from the external world when he determined to circumvent the

¹Moreover, as Professor Myers has said, "The artist in tragedy does not have it [the realization of the tragic relation between good and evil] in mind as a conscious goal. He experiments until he feels he has achieved a tragic attitude; nothing else will satisfy him. Although utterly free from theory, even although guided by false theory, he may be infallible in taste and feeling" (op. cit., p. 9).

²Op. cit., p. 31.

prophecy was futile. The ability to view the whole scheme of things and thereby to see the meaning of his actions could not be his. His actions had ramifications far beyond what he could foresee or control.

At the same time, we see that the assertion of responsibility by Oedipus in his struggle against the Oracle, an assertion that is based on self-consciousness, is the necessary prerequisite for solving the riddle, for it enables him to view man with a degree of objectivity, to see him as in some ways an atemporal spirit and as one who is not simply bound down by outside forces. Moreover, this arrogation of responsibility to himself is at the heart of both his guilt and his grandeur. We would hardly admire him (though we might pity him) if he absolved himself entirely of responsibility and made of himself a total cipher whose actions are determined wholly from without (as behavioral psychologists would have us view man). And it is not enough to say that he should not presume to see the world's meaning and to pursue an ideal of right action that is contrary to the scheme of things as it is apprehended by him. One can say that he is guilty of hybris, but he must also say that either Oedipus resists or he acquiesces in an action that goes entirely counter to his sense of right. The myth allows for no evasion; this dilemma, the mortal dilemma, must be faced. Furthermore, although it is possible to argue that to the Greeks this hybris was Oedipus's cardinal sin,

this does nothing to explain the power of this play on a modern audience. For even if we know intellectually that hybris was to the Greeks a sin, to us it is not--at least not in the same sense. And even more importantly, this view of Oedipus's guilt ignores entirely the central dramatic and symbolic concern of Sophocles's play.

Oedipus, through the entire action of the play, is involved in an attempt to isolate and remove Evil, just as in his actions on leaving Corinth he was attempting to evade it. And the latter is what the Thebans have wished to do. Most men, of course, simply struggle against the external features of the Mortal Condition. They are involved in it no less than the tragic figure, but they are usually not put into the situation of having to look on it bare. Their concern is with the immediate evils--the plague or the riddle. At the beginning of Sophocles's play, the Thebans do not desire, as they did not when Oedipus saved them from the riddle of the Sphinx, to penetrate the mystery. They wish deliverance from the present suffering, not deliverance from Evil. As they inform Oedipus, they were unable, when Laius was killed, to address themselves to the central problem of his death, for the Sphinx was upon them.

But Oedipus, the mythical embodiment of tragic man, must attempt to pierce to the heart of things, to find the ultimate solution of the "problem," to win a final judgment of victory. Evasion is no longer possible--not in Tragedy.

In a sense he is truly the Thebans' scapegoat. He solves their problem when he first arrives in Thebes, and he it is who must free them once more. He it is who must learn that to do away with one plague is to make room for another, until one finally comes up against the impenetrable barrier of the Mortal Condition. Though, in their absorption with the individual deaths that have been brought to them by the plague, the Thebans have not known it, Death (the death of the king) is still a present fact. Thus, although they ignore the heart of the problem, unaware of its meaning, what they are in effect asking is the elimination of the condition of mortal man, its major feature, Death. And so the Oracle informs them. Through Death Oedipus seemingly brought them freedom from their ills. "He arose from our land like a tower against Death" ¹ But he was in the mortal condition when he came to them, and their problem is that Mortal Condition. The freedom was temporary and illusory, as Oedipus must learn. "Enough, methinks, enough--when our land is already vexed--that the matter should rest where it ceased," ² the Chorus says to Jocasta when she asks the matter of the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon. But of course the matter has not ceased; it has hardly begun. The Evil will not stay outside. A hearkening to practical wisdom is not permitted

¹Sophocles, loc. cit.

²Ibid., p. 28.

to the tragic figure. He cannot simply accept the presence of Evil and resolve prudently to keep it at bay. He must make the grand assault. Oedipus must yet reveal to us through his actions and situation that in order to stamp out Evil one must stamp out man himself.

It is of course fruitless to question whether Oedipus acted from truly free choice or supernatural compulsion. Sophocles does not choose between them. He presents it as a mystery. Whether man does in fact have free will is a fascinating question, but it is an excursus into metaphysics that leads one outside the Tragedy. It would be better to remember this statement by Jaeger:

The irrationality of *Até* had puzzled Solon and exercised the minds of all serious thinkers of that age, but for Sophocles it is the basis, not the central problem, of tragedy. Aeschylus had tried to solve the problem of *Até*: Sophocles admits its insolubility as a fact. Yet he does not passively accept the unavoidable suffering sent by God, which Greek poets had from the earliest times lamented; and he has no sympathy whatever for the resignation of Simonides, who concluded that man must forfeit his *Areté* when cast down by inescapable misfortune. By making his tragic characters greatest and noblest of mankind, Sophocles cries Yes to the fateful question which no mortal mind can solve. His characters are the first who, by suffering the absolute abandonment of their earthly happiness or of their social and physical life, reach the truest greatness attainable by man.¹

Oedipus himself continues, after the discovery of his guilt, to affirm his responsibility (free will) and his commitment to an ideal of Justice. He puts out his eyes and carries out the full sentence he has pronounced. Despite

¹Op. cit., I, 283.

his attempts to avoid the horror of it, the prophecy was realized, both through and against him. The external and internal, finite and infinite come together. It was Apollo who caused him to put out his eyes, he says. "Apollo, friends, Apollo was he that brought these my woes to pass, these my sore, sore woes: but the hand that struck the eyes was none save mine, wretched that I am."¹ The mystery remains: both fated and free is Oedipus. But to the end he declares that he is the responsible agent of Justice. He is powerless to alter the Mortal Condition, but he is noble in his assault on it. "Make that my reproach," Oedipus says to Tiresias, "in which thou shalt find me great."² And in fact that which made him great at once brings about his downfall and makes him noble and inspiring. Even in defeat he proclaims his right and power to judge and punish himself. And even though this is an example of hybris, a taking on himself of the prerogatives of the gods, it is nonetheless a feature of his nobility and a further indication of the dilemma of man--man who must declare himself capable of judging even in the face of all evidence to the contrary. There is still an affirmation, as there is in the purest Tragedy, of Justice and of man's ability to know it. The play reveals "that a human being stands as a finitude in the

¹Sophocles, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

²Ibid., p. 19.

midst of an infinite cosmos and that with this infinity he has simultaneous relations of conjunction and discontinuity."¹ It shows that the answer to the riddle "What is man?" cannot finally be known by man within. The answer to the Sphinx's riddle is not adequate. Neither is Oedipus's belief that he is the final arbiter of his fate and determiner of its meaning. He shows that the suffering of man happens both to and through him. "It is the mover that is moved."

Tragedy is not a lesson in humility or in how better to conduct oneself lest one make the same mistakes. The Chorus in Greek Tragedy often suggests otherwise, but of course the Chorus is not privy to the meaning of the whole play. Its members are mortal and therefore caught in the net, and they are generally still persisting in the human desire to avert Evil, an external Evil. But it was not a mistake, a hazard of circumstance, that brought the tragedy, but the Mortal Condition itself. The mystery is affirmed. There is at once humility and exaltation. "To know oneself is . . . for Sophocles to know man's powerlessness; but it is also to know the indestructible and conquering majesty of suffering humanity."² Man is shown affirming his responsibility and dignity, championing Good and Justice, even while

¹Hathorn, op. cit., p. 29.

²Jaeger, op. cit., I, 284.

he defeats himself. And Oedipus the King is the great Tragedy it is, not so much because it does this better than other Tragedies, but because it does it with an almost absolute condensation and concentration.

Antigone

The Antigone of Sophocles presents an interesting and somewhat singular exploration of the tragedy of man's situation. Here one finds two principal tragic figures (Antigone and Creon) and a less prominent but nonetheless real third one (Haemon). It is true that in Oedipus the King Jocasta cannot be dismissed as a tragic personage: she has been in the past and is in the present of the play herself involved in the Evil and shares somewhat the guilt. Of course even in such great Tragedies as Hamlet and Othello there is some proliferation of the tragedy among other persons than the two principals. But in Hamlet the effect of this fragmentation is extremely slight: Hamlet is himself the tragic center, even more than Oedipus is in Oedipus the King, and clearly the action of Oedipus is the definer of the Tragedy. In Othello the tragic theme is carried by Othello's trials and actions, not by Desdemona's. In Antigone, however, both Creon and Antigone are sufferers of a tragic fall, and the central revelation of the nature of the Tragedy is achieved through the parallel and complementary positions of these two figures.

The basic conflict in Antigone is, of course, between the laws of the state and man (Creon) and the laws of Heaven and the Gods (Antigone). Antigone insists that no laws of man contrary to those of Heaven can be just or binding. Creon equally adamantly refuses to accept any infringement on the laws of the state. The clash that comes from this opposition appears, thus, to be one between the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God. And certainly Antigone appeals to the kingdom of God for approbation of her deeds. "One world approved thy wisdom," she says to Ismene when the latter refuses to join her in burying Polyneices; "another, mine."¹

But the more crucial theme of this conflict is the dilemma that tragic man finds himself in when he judges, when he seeks to unite the finite and the infinite, right and Right. Creon thinks, as firmly as does Antigone, that his proclamations have final sanction in Right and Justice. He is as certain as she that Justice is on his side. And each thinks the other a source of Evil. But the play shows there is (and can be) no final certainty that either is right. All that one can be certain of is that this feeling of certitude brings with it unhappiness and destruction. In the play as a whole there is strong accentuation of the finitude of "judgment." And from this finitude comes a restatement of

¹Sophocles, op. cit., p. 146.

the questions: Does the mortal law agree with the immortal?
Can one judge?

It would be easy to derive from this conflict between temporal and eternal allegiances a trivial and tiresome reduction to a conflict between love and duty (as Dryden and Lee have shown). And if the conflict were such a simple and clearly-defined one, the tragedy would have been still-born; for then Antigone, the tragic figure, would have been contending with social problems, laws that could be revoked so as to set matters aright. However, what emerges most clearly from this play is the inscrutability of man's predicament. "Alas!" the guard says to Creon, "'Tis sad, truly, that he who judges should misjudge."¹ And his words are far truer than he can know. For what he says is true, and equally true, Sophocles lets us see, is the fact that finite man must always be liable to such misjudgment, and uncertain.

Both Creon and Antigone externalize Evil. Antigone places it in the decrees of Creon; and he posits it in the disobedience of Antigone (and Haemon). But from the catastrophes that follow on the actions of these two, one can see that they must share the guilt. Creon's guilt is more strongly shown, of course. It is greatly emphasized by Tiresias's prophecy (in a scene strikingly parallel to the Oedipus-Tiresias scene in Oedipus the King) and by the

¹Ibid., p. 137.

suicides of Haemon and Eurydice. However, since there can be no assurance that Antigone's course of action was in fact the correct one, she must share in the guilt. Both Creon and Antigone insist on their right and capacity to see things clearly: both are responsible and self-conscious. And yet the mystery of Evil, the inscrutability of man's predicament, is all that is seen.

Here the Oedipus myth enters once again, breaking through to the present from its eternal presence in the background of the events of the play. "But in this ordeal thou art paying, haply, for thy father's sin," the Chorus says to Antigone after her sentence to death; and she answers "Thou hast touched on my bitterest thoughts--awakening the ever-new lament for my sire and for all the doom given to us, the famed house of Labdacus."¹ We cannot forget that Antigone (and Polyneices and Eteocles) is descended from Laius and Oedipus. And here we are reminded that the sins of the fathers are visited on their children. This point of the myth illuminates Antigone's situation, and Creon's as well. The passing of guilt down through successive generations follows easily from the basic tragic content of the myth. From the time when Laius first began to set himself against the gods as external, compelling forces; from the time, in other words, when he took responsibility for judging Right

¹Ibid., pp. 155-156.

and Justice (and thereby judging the gods), when he would no longer passively accept Evil as an unchangeable imposition of the gods on man--from that time forward, man (the children of Laius and their children) could no longer be free of guilt, for from that time forward he could and must presume to judge. Here we find the soul of man declared a blend of mortal and immortal. Indeed, when Antigone is being led away she makes an explicit comparison between herself and a goddess.

But with this view of man's spirit, and the dignity and responsibility it carries with it, comes the curse of guilt. It precludes the continued externalizing of Evil. "Nothing that is vast enters into the life of mortals without a curse."¹ It is at once the glory of man and the begetter of hybris, his sin.

Thus the Evil which Antigone resists is not merely social or institutional; it is woven into the very nature of man's existence. Her own situation seems to suggest more strongly than Creon's the mysterious and indefinable relation between mortal and immortal. And like Creon she is defeated by herself.

Antigone, though it brings the tragic recognition, does not have quite the tragic intensity of Oedipus the King, because of the fragmentation of the tragic sense and situation

¹Ibid., p. 148.

between Creon and Antigone. The spiritual elevation comes from Antigone. In her we see the nobility of one's resolve in the face of destruction, whereas the suffering of Creon, on which the play closes and makes its final comment, leads more to a note of sadness only.¹ On the other hand, the discovery of Evil as both external and internal is made mostly through Creon. It is necessary, therefore, to, in a sense, see Creon and Antigone as complementary halves of the tragic figure, and this somewhat weakens the effect. But nonetheless, the tragic nature of the Mortal Condition is fully realized in Antigone, and one experiences the power of Tragedy through it.

Hamlet

The Tragedy of Hamlet too focuses on the Mortal Condition. It is not so sharp a focus as that of Oedipus the King: there is a certain amount of looseness and diffusion in this play that one does not find in Oedipus the King; and the "story" of Hamlet does not so perfectly and essentially reveal the meaning of the Mortal Condition: it lacks the myth's exactitude of paradox. But the center of the Tragedy is the same. Hamlet too is brought face to face with the Mortal Condition so that he finds himself, the instrument

¹But Creon's sufferings are great indeed. He has begun to see his guilt, and this recognition makes his suffering all the more unbearable. Moreover, like Oedipus, he understands just enough to intensify his sorrow, but not enough to alleviate it. He recognizes his guilt, but the Mortal Condition still remains inscrutable to him.

of revenge and Justice, involved in, in Maynard Mack's words, "the general taint."¹

The play moves from Hamlet's "initiation" into the world of the Mortal Condition, to the full recognition of what that condition is. When he first appears, Hamlet is an embittered and disillusioned young man, who stands apart from and above the world in his revulsion, and doubts the existence of any absolute values or spiritual significance to man's life. What has seemed to him a garden in which the controlling hand of Justice and Virtue could be seen and even partially supplied by man is now conceived by him to be a world of decay and corruption, lust and bestiality, injustice and evil.

Because of his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage (and the general revelling which marked its acceptance), his entire conception of mankind is blackened. His mother had seemed to him pure and virtuous and good; yet he can now only conclude that she is not. She had seemed to love his father; but she did not. She is, in fact, to Hamlet the picture of lust.

You cannot call it love, for at your age
The hey-day in the blood is tame, it's humble,
And waits upon the judgement, and what judgement

¹"The World of Hamlet," Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 252. Although I draw quite different conclusions about the Tragedy of Hamlet from those of Mack, I am very indebted to his brilliant and incisive essay.

Would step from this to this?¹

But hers is worse than bestial lust, for a beast that lacks reason would have waited longer before mating again. Moreover, she is to Hamlet the epitome of mankind: lustful, base, and carnal.

It has never seemed difficult to Hamlet to distinguish the good from the bad or the beautiful from the ugly. That his father was better, in every sense, than Claudius has seemed to Hamlet as certain as that Good is not Evil. And of this latter he has had no doubts. He has believed that man is a spiritual creature as well as a carnal, and that his spiritual nature rules him and leads him to a recognition and embracing of eternal values. But all around himself he finds evidence of the ascendancy of the body and its lusts. All appears the opposite of what it was. Foul is accounted fair (Claudius is taken by his mother to be a fitting replacement for his father), evil is proclaimed good (a usurper takes the throne with general accord), and the death of the noble is received with rejoicing (the funeral of his father is capped with a wedding celebration by the dead man's wife). Thus he can say,

Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio--.²

For not even that seemingly impossible event could more have

¹Shakespeare, op. cit., III.iv.68 ff. All quotations from the play are from this edition.

²I.ii.182 f.

upset his view of the world. Thus Hamlet begins to suspect all appearances, all seeming. Everything is deceptive, especially beauty. What seems beautiful is so only on the surface, covering the essential canker. It is a false show that leads one away from the truth:

. . . The power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd, than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof.¹

And the tendency to dissemble is an innate bent, especially apparent in women.

I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another, you jig, you amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance; go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad.²

This is the attitude that prompts Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia. She is not beautiful and pure but only seems so, and besides, this is a world of sinners. And this is the attitude that sends him to her chamber to gaze with bewilderment (and sadness) on her apparent beauty and purity. The spirituality that man has seemed to possess does not exist. He is at base finally a beast. Hamlet's conclusion, then, is that man is only flesh, and therefore carrion. The world is devoid of meaning. It consists of putrefaction and the generation of maggots from a decaying carcass. Even Ophelia is a carrion from whom maggots might spring if she should

¹III.i.111 ff.

²III.i.145 ff.

stay in the sun of the world. All of life is an endless round of this generation and decay, the world a vast graveyard for the flesh and bones of rotten and rotting man.

Thus Hamlet is confronted with the Evil of the world. And this Evil has two aspects: there is the evil nature of man as Hamlet discovers it, and there is also the murder of his father. But they become increasingly and inseparably one, the Evil which he wishes to stand against. His desire is to revenge murder and achieve justice and also overcome the baseness of man: to redeem his mother, to punish the guilty, and to put an end to the generation of base and evil man. In short, Hamlet wants to change the world of mortal man so that there can be no equivocation, no confusion, no dissembling. He wants a world in which Good and Evil are clear opposites and in which the former is triumphant. For despite his revulsion and dejection Hamlet must continue to affirm the existence of the values and ideals by which he judges the world and man degenerate.

But throughout this judgment of the world and man runs the question "what is man really?" Is it possible that he is no more than dust? The graveyard scene reveals Hamlet still pondering this question. Can the apparent spirit of man be dismissed as inconsequential or nonexistent just because there is no physical residue? This is also perhaps the primary meaning of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy. Is there in fact a spiritual immortality for man? Does his

life have significance beyond the decay of the body? Is there a law by which his acts can be tested and which will give meaning to his life? Hamlet is mysterious with question, as Maynard Mack has observed.¹ And the principal effect of the searching questioning is to point up the mysteriousness of Evil and of the Mortal Condition.

Hamlet, however, attempts to penetrate the mystery, to isolate Evil and destroy it. Throughout four acts of the play he tries to find that point outside the drama of life from which he can see life clearly and wholly. For he must, before he can act, before he can take revenge and achieve justice, satisfy himself that Good and Justice do indeed exist and that man can judge and proclaim authority. Thus Hamlet's delay is simply his continuing struggle to transcend the limited view of man and to look on Justice's face uncovered, to know that Evil can be recognized and opposed, to verify that his "godlike reason" is godlike indeed.

But what is to act? An act, says the clown, is of three parts: "to act, to do, and to perform."² For Hamlet and the audience, it becomes more and more impossible to distinguish among them. Is one what he seems, or does he play a role? And when one plays a role, is the role really other than what he is? Moreover, does one, when he chooses to do

¹Op. cit., p. 252.

²v.i.11 f.

something, merely perform a part he did not choose? Where is the truth and where one's responsibility? These questions the entire play asks, but does not answer.

Yet the self-conscious, responsible individual must attempt to answer them. Thus Hamlet steps into the arena and "acts." He will become its investigator and judge, and Claudius's executioner. He also takes the role of a madman to enable him the better to manipulate and observe the whole of the action. But once he has taken a "part," he is involved in the Evil and the mystery of it in the world. The more he tries to find answers to his questions, the more he is involved, and the farther the margin of the unknown recedes from him. He functions as the playwright when he alters the "mousetrap" play; but this play-within-the-play is the only one to which he can be simply audience. This only can he see whole. From this must come his judgments of the import of the action of which he is a part. He is unable to get outside and understand the play in which he finds himself. There is no way he can foresee the end of his actions or their function. Indeed, he cannot even control the ramifications of the "role" he chooses. His feigned madness is involved in, to some extent, the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosenzanz, Guildenstern, and Laertes. His determination to see justice done is the mainspring of the action that leads him ever deeper into the general guilt.

It is true that if one allows his unweeded garden to

go to seed "things rank and gross in nature"¹ will stifle the flowers. But since weeds often bloom and flower, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them. And when man himself is the garden in which grow Good and Evil, is himself both flower and weed, the simple choice becomes impossible. Hamlet comes to understand that he is not, even though he must still attempt to be, free of the ambiguous and mixed nature of man. "Virtue," he tells Ophelia, "cannot so inoculate our old stock, but we shall relish of it" ² And again,

I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck, than I have thoughts to put them in: what should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? we are arrant knaves all³

He was rash and intemperate, he later sees, in killing Polonius and fighting Laertes in Ophelia's grave. He is not the unblemished man apart. These judgments of himself cause him not only to question the significance of man's actions but also to doubt his own motivations. This gives him further pause.

Hamlet does, of course, come to a kind of personal resolution of the problem. Unable to find a key to the meaning of the world and its evil, more and more obviously

¹I.ii.136.

²III.i.177 f.

³III.i.122 ff.

caught up in the questions to which he seeks answer, but constrained by his very nature to believe that there is meaning and purpose to it all, he acknowledges the impossibility of apprehending the meaning of life from the limited mortal view and accepts belief in a providential order, in "a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will."¹ Here he would not say "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."² He is convinced that there is both Good and Evil and that one must try to sort them out, even though he cannot distinguish clearly. He has accepted the mystery. The pattern of life, he now thinks, can only be apprehended from a transcendent view, by God.

But we the audience perceive the fullness of the Mortal Condition, through his confrontation and clarification of it, more comprehensively than he. We are the audience who can perceive the wholeness of the drama of which Hamlet is a part, the drama which reveals the tragedy of his condition. But we, like Hamlet, cannot discover the meaning of the drama of life, of which his is the epitome. Shakespeare renders the mystery of life. He offers no simplifications of the questions through which the play lives. Rather, he directs and limits our attention so that we must discover the inexplicable nature of this Mortal Condition. It is vain to

¹V.ii.10 f.

²II.ii.252 f.

speculate about whether Gertrude is more foolish than evil or whether Hamlet is more nearly really mad in one scene than in another. The point is that the madness of the world is not simple or predictable. Hamlet plays mad, but he is part of the madness, at the center of it; and it is also at the center of him. When he becomes involved in the "general taint," as man must when he "acts" in this world, there is no longer any possibility of determining where acting, doing, or performing leaves off. What is the limit of one's freedom to choose his role? The play weaves this question into the mystery and leaves it so. "Or I could make a prologue to my brains they had begun the play."¹ One must assume, Shakespeare seems to say, that there is meaning to a play, that all the parts fit the whole, that the entire work can be comprehended. And this is the attitude that the tragic figure must take toward his world. But Hamlet shows that there are plays within plays and that mortal man, both actor and maker, player and playwright, finds his roles overlapping and breaking the bounds of the action of which he sees them to be a part. The "godlike" view and the human view show vague and indefinable outlines. Is there in fact a meaning and order to life, albeit undiscovered? This too is the mystery.

But the tragedy is that man finds himself in this Mortal Condition and must perforce act. Hamlet starts his

¹V.ii.30 f.

action because of a noble dedication to Good and Justice, but we see him become immersed in "the destructive element" of man. "The mover is moved." His opposition to Evil leads inevitably to his guilt and destruction. And Hamlet still acts for Justice. Like Oedipus, Hamlet must fail to externalize the world completely, to isolate Evil outside himself so that he can identify and fight it. But even with the failure he continues to act as though he could. Thus he both acts and suffers: he is defeated by the Mortal Condition.

"What a noble mind is here o'erthrown,"¹ we echo Ophelia. For we know, as we did with Oedipus, that he was and is a noble mind. There is no question of the validity of Claudius's observations that death is common. And perhaps there is what we ordinarily think of as worldly wisdom in his statement

Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died to-day,
'This must be so.'²

But we know that Hamlet's refusal to thus passively and "wisely" accept "the nature of things" is not merely peevishness or petulance. His opposing Evil, of which the death of

¹III.i.153.

²I.ii.100 ff.

his father is only part, even to the disastrous conclusion, is nobler than Claudius's or Polonius's politic acceptance of it. Polonius, too, vowed to get to the heart of things, but his approach, always on the surface, stops short, as it always will, of the sobering discovery of man's involvement, enigmatic and terrible, in Evil. Hamlet's nobility makes us proud that we are man. The clear revelation of the Mortal Condition of man does not cause us to rest in despair and sorrow for our lot, but to feel that we can be the greater for it. There is no blindly optimistic assurance that the aims of God and man are finally one. But there is restrained hope that it is so. And there is nobility in Hamlet's stand in this position of mystery. He sustains "our belief that our finest moments are real and no illusion."¹

Othello

The similarities of Hamlet and Othello are many and striking. Like Hamlet, Othello, in being brought to a critical "discovery" of Evil, undergoes disillusionment. He too determines to isolate and eradicate this evil. And in the process he finds, as do Oedipus, Creon, and Hamlet, that as instrument of Justice he is part of the guilt, that he is judge and judged, executioner and executed.

But if Hamlet is mysterious with question, Othello is uncertain with suspicion. There is not simply Othello's

¹William G. McCollom, Tragedy (New York: MacMillan, 1957), p. 48.

growing suspicion that Desdemona (and Cassio) is false: this particular suspicion is only a part and grows out of the general suspicion of mankind that marks Iago's approach to the world. To Iago it is inconceivable that man could have any motivations other than total self-interest and lust; Man is, to him, a beast with a clever wit, with which he manipulates the idealistic values of men as simply counters in the game of self-interest that is life. Love "is merely a lust of the blood, and a permission of the will."¹ Desdemona's "love" for Othello is a craving of the body which will soon be satisfied. And "Virtue?" Iago does not, like Hamlet, believe or hope that there is a correspondence between the tending of the garden and a universal, infinite meaning to the garden.

Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus: our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners, so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop, and weed up thyme; supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many; either to have it sterile with idleness, or manur'd with industry, why, the power, and corrigible authority of this, lies in our wills.²

Man's will and judgment are the sole arbiters, and the values man sets are purely relative and human. This is not merely an affirmation of the free will of man, but rather a

¹The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, ed. Una Ellis-Fermor, *Othello*, ed. M. R. Ridley (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1958), I.iii.335 f. All quotations from the play are from this edition.

²I.iii.319 ff.

declaration that it can have no meaning outside itself and is therefore an end in itself. Thus man who does not follow his own self-interest is a fool. For him there is no such thing as Evil. From this judgment comes the view that the very epitome of the fair and wise woman is fit only "to suckle fools, and chronicle small beer."¹ Iago, in fine, suspects that all are like him, bestial lust led by a corrupted will. Thus when he says that he suspects not only Othello with his night cap but Cassio as well, the effect is to make us think that Iago is suspecting not one other man, but all men (and women).

The contrast between this view of man and that held by Othello cannot be too heavily stressed. We are both told and shown that Othello thinks men honest and good. He accepts men as virtuous. But above all, Othello sees Desdemona as the very physical embodiment of Virtue. She is both the symbol and real presence of Virtue in the world. There is no hyperbole in Othello's statement, "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself, / I'll not believe it."²

Therefore, when Othello begins to succumb to Iago's view of man, when he begins to suspect that man is bestial and lustful as Iago believes, when he suspects Desdemona herself, the implications of this suspicion are far greater

¹II.i.160.

²III.iii.282 f.

for Othello than for Iago. As he comes under Iago's sway, he finds, as Hamlet did when he viewed the apparent corruption of his world, his view of man, his place in the universe, and the meaning of that universe called into question. He too begins to doubt whether there is a spiritual significance to man's life. The suspicion becomes a part of him. And as he acquiesces in this view, he echoes the very language of Iago, who has continually spoken of sexual relations in terms of beasts: the beast with two backs, a black ram tupping a white ewe, a Barbary horse begetting gennets, prime goats, hot monkeys. But Iago has not seriously entertained the possibility that man could be otherwise. Othello, however, for whom such a view is as loathsome as it is new, begins to use, in a kind of ecstasy of revulsion, the most revolting of images in his references to copulation.

I had rather be a toad,
And live upon the vapour in a dungeon,
Than keep a corner in a thing I love,
For others' uses¹

Or as he says later, when in his fullest acceptance of Iago's view he treats his wife's bedroom as a bawdy house, his wife as a prostitute, and Emilia as a bawd:

The fountain, from the which my current runs,
Or else dries up, to be discarded thence,
Or keep it as a cistern, for foul toads
To knot and gender in!²

¹III.iii.274 ff.

²IV.ii.60 ff.

The result is that Othello, even more than Hamlet, comes to conceive of man as degenerate and unredeemed. And his jealousy can be seen as the counterpart to lust, not to love.¹ But even in this degradation, Othello still maintains a belief in Virtue, even though he does not now believe that it is operative in man. Thus for him the lustful action of which he thinks Desdemona guilty is the Evil which he determines to kill. This is Evil which makes men beasts; and it must not be suffered. "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men."² Here he has posited Evil; here it can be opposed. Thus, for Justice he "executes" Desdemona.

But he is, of course, wrong about Desdemona's guilt. Hamlet is right in his judgment of Claudius's guilt, as Shakespeare lets the audience see; but the guilt is not, certainly, "proven" by the mousetrap play. He cannot know from Claudius's reaction that he is guilty; but he must, of course, act as though he could, because his judgment, although finite and questionable, is his only rational tool. So it is with Othello, but he judges wrongly from the evidence. But this brings one to another facet of Hamlet's problem: can one judge accurately whether things are really as they appear?

Both Claudius and Polonius, of course, are convinced that if they can but get all the details, if they can observe

¹M. R. Ridley, op. cit., p. LVI.

²V.ii.6.

carefully enough, they can discover the cause of Hamlet's madness. Polonius is certain that he can sufficiently comprehend the evidence to make the right decision. Likewise, Hamlet long believes that he can answer the overwhelming questions that he must ask himself. But all are ultimately wrong. And Othello accepts Iago's "rational proof" in place of his faith in Desdemona. It is, to be sure, a flimsy proof. But it is the "proof" that is given and accepted.

Reputation, Cassio says to Iago, is "the immortal part" of man.¹ But reputation is the product of man's judgment of a person's worth and character. And we see in Othello that this judgment is most fallible. Most notably, of course, Iago's reputation for honesty fails completely to suit with his character. He does, indeed, "appear" to be honest, but to judge on the basis of that appearance, which is the only evidence one has, is to judge wrongly in this instance. On the other hand, Desdemona's reputation for honesty and virtue is well founded and accurate; but Iago believes that it conceals a super-subtle Venetian, and Othello comes to accept this view. Honor, reputation, good name-- are these in fact indices to the worth of the individual soul? Is good name "the immediate jewel of our souls," since good name is determined by men? Can man, in other words, hope accurately to identify the reality of individual worth by reputation?

¹II.iii.255.

But because of Desdemona's meaning to Othello, the import of Othello's judgment is far greater than that of simply assessing reputation. In Desdemona Othello sees the embodiment of the virtues, the ideals, that he holds, and which he thinks man capable of realizing in his person. She is truly a living symbol of Virtue to him. A judgment against her is a judgment against a view of man and his meaning, a rejection of an entire world view. For again like Hamlet, Othello is judging himself deceived, not simply in his evaluation of Desdemona a woman, but in his evaluation of mankind.

Had it pleas'd heaven
To try me with affliction, had he rain'd
All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head,
Steep'd me in poverty, to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my hopes,
I should have found in some part of my soul
A drop of patience; but, alas, to make me
A fixed figure, for the time of scorn
To point his slow unmoving fingers at . . . Oh, oh.
Yet could I bear that too, well, very well:
But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,
Where either I must live, or bear no life,
The fountain, from the which my current runs,
Or else dries up, to be discarded thence,
Or keep it as a cistern, for foul toads
To knot and gender in!¹

Suffering and affliction, even those of a Job, could not have affected him so, for this present affliction seems to call the very existence of Heaven or Virtue into question. How can he have faith when it is Faith itself that is assailed and besmirched? Heaven mocks itself indeed. Of course

¹IV.ii.48 ff.

Othello's situation is actually much like Job's. Job wondered if God were not a criminal; and Othello seems to be feeling that God and Heaven are Evil. And like Job he is questioning the view of God and Evil that is offered by a theodicy. But the suggestion is that Othello is even more sorely tried than was Job, that his loss of faith must have even more shattering effect on him: the conclusion for him is, not that God is a criminal, but that Heaven does not exist, nor the values of man based on a belief in it.

But this calling into question, this judging of Meaning, is done on the basis of that limited information and perspective that man in the Mortal Condition must perforce employ. Othello can no more transcend the limitations of his position in the world than Hamlet could his. He cannot, as we can, for instance, even stand apart and see Iago in a fuller perspective. Much less can he discover with clarity and surety the meaning of the universe as it shows forth in man's actions.

Much of this theme is, I believe, carried in the handkerchief as symbol/proof. The handkerchief is, as has often been remarked, a flimsy foundation for such a weighty structure as the destruction of Othello. But in the full context of the Tragedy this appears to be more of a virtue than a fault. Certainly the handkerchief is slender proof of Desdemona's infidelity, and yet it is the only "proof" that Iago can offer when proof is violently demanded of him.

But proof is to man itself symbolic of reality, or of a portion thereof. It is his way of declaring that he can truly discover the "reality" of a situation. Yet the handkerchief is also a prior symbol for Othello. It is itself the Virtue of Desdemona, who is in turn symbolic proof to Othello that finite and infinite, mortal and immortal, spiritual and physical meet in man. It is a symbol of the truth of a symbol. But more than that, it is a symbol of man's proof of that symbol. By means of this handkerchief, this proof, Othello is presuming to assess the full worth and meaning of man and the nature of Evil. But the play, the Tragedy, asserts that, because of the blindness imposed by his own involvement in that which he must try to circumscribe with his judgment, man (Othello) cannot with certainty make this assessment. Thus the flimsiness of the handkerchief and the fragility of the fabric of inference and decision, of which it is in part both warp and woof, emerge as evidence of the inadequacy of human judgment as an instrument for piercing the mystery.

Yet, clearly, in his revulsion at the new view of man that he partially embraces, Othello is still championing Justice. The revulsion comes, in fact, from the disparity between that view and his dedication to an idealistic one. He is never fully Iago, even in his lowest moments. Always the two views war. There is the constant vacillation between contrarieties, an untenable and insane position. In his life

"chaos is come again,"¹ and he is "perplex'd in the extreme."² Thus he must, to bring order and meaning to his life again, discover and destroy the Evil that makes him mad. This he thinks to do in the murder of Desdemona.

But the Evil is not Desdemona and Cassio. It is in the Mortal Condition of Othello himself. Most often students of Othello view Iago as Evil incarnate, as Satan himself. And indeed there are many instances in the play that force an association of the two upon us,³ but if we make the identification of Iago and Evil, if we insist on externalizing and localizing it, we are failing to see the essential form and nature of Evil as it is revealed in the Mortal Condition by the dramatist. Iago is, to be sure, the only example in the play of total Evil, the only one in whom are found all

¹III.iii.92.

²V.ii.347.

³For example:

Iago. If sanctimony, and a frail vow, betwixt an erring barbarian, and a super-subtle Venetian, be not too hard for my wits, and all the tribe of hell, thou shalt enjoy her [*Italics mine*] (I.iii.355 ff.)

Emil. If any wretch ha' put this in your head,
 Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse.
 (IV.ii.15 f.)

Lod. Where is this viper? bring the villain forth.

Oth. I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable
 If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee.
 (Wounds Iago.) (V.ii.286 ff.)

the forms of Evil. But Iago's success is dependent upon the evil in man, together with the limitations of man's vision that proceed from the nature of his existence and which form a part of the Evil which he must contend with. Iago is, in fact, a sort of midwife to the potential evil in man. He brings out the evil that is already latent in Othello--jealousy, rage, intemperate judgment and slander. He delivers up the evil of Roderigo--envy, cupidity, and murderous passion. He causes the weakness of Cassio to predominate for a moment and therefore to come forth as evil. Thus Othello demonstrates that the tragic figure must finally confront the Evil in himself. He discovers that he is a part of the Evil which he pursues.

It is, of course, possible to view, in one sense, Iago and Desdemona as the contending parts of Othello's character, as almost his good and bad angels. Certainly from the point of the "seduction" of Othello by Iago in the third act, to the revelation of Desdemona's innocence, the internal struggle between the view of man that Iago supplies and the faith Othello has in the ideals that Desdemona symbolizes for him renders him a truly divided man. But the point of this psychic division and battle is not whether his baser or nobler part will triumph, but that, in the condition of mortal man which the Tragedy defines, the division and battle exist. And this fact is, moreover, a part of the central paradox of the play and of the Tragedy: belief in Desdemona

the symbol is what causes Othello to kill Desdemona the woman. For when Othello comes to accept the view that Desdemona is unfaithful, he more strongly than ever clings to belief in Virtue as an ideal by which she must be judged. And in trying to bring the ideal and individual man together, in attempting to remove the possibility that they cannot be joined, he, like Hamlet, himself emphasizes and extends the division.

Moreover, when Othello discovers his implication in the guilt, in the Evil, he continues to act from his commitment to the ideals of Virtue and Justice.¹ He killed Desdemona as an act of Justice. Now he can only continue to affirm that Justice by carrying out the execution on himself. Like Oedipus he is both punisher and punished. And certainly Othello's nobility is greater at this point than ever before in the play: he unflinchingly stands by his earlier practice even when he knows that he must himself be the victim. Just as in former times he was justicer to those who traduced the state, so now will he be to him who has traduced Virtue.

The play ends affirmatively; Othello declares the

¹It does appear that insight into the true nature of his predicament by the tragic figure is a necessary part of Tragedy, inasmuch as it focuses the separate strands of the play's discovery of the Mortal Condition so that we can see it clearly as revealed. However, the degree of insight varies (Oedipus, for instance, recognizes his true situation somewhat more fully than Hamlet, but perhaps less than Othello). But the fullest awareness of the tragic meaning of the Mortal Condition is that of the audience, for to them only is the total significance revealed.

validity of the ideal in his execution of himself, so that although he is defeated on the physical plane he is nonetheless victorious. But the victory does lie in the tragedy of Othello's (tragic man's) predicament, which must bring him to this paradoxical conclusion. And there is still the possibility that finite and infinite have not met. The mystery of Evil is clearly revealed, while at the same time mortal man makes his inevitable and quixotic assault on it as a problem. The Mortal Condition prevails, and from it comes Tragedy's mournful note of noble elevation.

CHAPTER IV

THEODICY

More often than not, works which are sometimes loosely termed Tragedies manage to blunt or dull to some extent the sharp and painful blade of Tragedy. Often, of course, matters of form and style serve to mar the tragic effect; but as was observed earlier, an investigation of these specifics is not truly an investigation of the nature of Tragedy, but rather of literary form. The more central reason for the impurity of most "Tragedies" appears to be the absence, loss, or abandonment by the poet of the point of view of man in the Mortal Condition, the ground of Tragedy. At times this view is absent from the start; at others it is inadequately maintained or contradicted; at still others it is rejected in favor of a transcendent and resolving view.

Many great works of drama would appear to be of this latter type. Some examples are obvious, notably those works which are patently religious in flavor and intent. Some, like Milton's Samson Agonistes, are perhaps somewhat less obviously of this type, but still generally enough recognized

as such to demand no demonstration. Others there are, however, which, though they are basically of this type, are often thought of as Tragedies. The confusion is by no means surprising. These are the plays which demonstrate the most pressing need for a theodicy, for a resolution or solution to suffering man's problems and questions about his universe. They present the same uncertain, mysterious, painful world as Tragedy; they recognize, in varying degrees, the Mortal Condition. Often, apparently, none of the crushing force of man's Tragedy is lost to the writer of the theodicy. In fact, it is from an awareness, and experience, of this Tragedy, that the theodicy proceeds. In our western culture no serious and profound theodicy has attempted to gainsay the agonies, physical and spiritual, of humanity. These agonies are the life blood of the theodicy, just as they are of Tragedy. The Tragedy and the theodicy are therefore more than similar in material: they are identical. The difference is in the point of view from which the material is presented. And this is a crucial difference, a clear understanding of which must further clarify our understanding of Tragedy.

Philoctetes

The Philoctetes of Sophocles is a case in point. It is a beautiful and affecting play. But what kind of play is it? Is it a Tragedy, as it is usually classed? Surely it is vastly different from such a Tragedy as Oedipus the King.

But how different? Is it simply a matter of an injudicious choice by Sophocles of a concluding incident? Do we simply apply Aristotle's advice against the poet's use of a deus ex machina to end his play? Why should he not? Is this more than a formal fault?

To answer these questions one must go back to the Philoctetes with our definition of Tragedy as a tool.

Clearly, through most of Philoctetes, there is a strong accentuation of the mystery of Evil. There is a kind of continuing circular search for the cause of Evil, a search that, though it is primarily Philoctetes's, is in large measure shared by Neoptolemus. And up to the appearance of Heracles at the end, the play's presentation of this search mostly reveals uncertainty. At times Philoctetes makes the gods the authors of Evil (his evil in particular): "How am I to deem of these things, or wherein shall I praise them, when, praising the ways of the gods, I find that the gods are evil?"¹ At other times he places all the blame on the Atridae. Likewise, Neoptolemus alternately blames himself and Philoctetes. And through it all runs the suggestion, often voiced by the Chorus, that Philoctetes must bear at least part of the blame for his affliction, since he is too stubborn in his adversity to submit to what he is assured is the better course.²

¹Sophocles, op. cit., p. 341.

²The Chorus says to Philoctetes: "'Tis thou, 'tis

But how can Philoctetes and Neoptolemus be sure which is the right course? By their own lights, of course, they cannot. Each of these two men is firmly committed to an ideal of Justice by which he must judge others and their actions. When, like Job, Philoctetes is judging the gods criminals, he is, again like Job, still affirming the existence of this ideal, by which they can be so judged.

Yet what, the play asks, is the right action? And by its entire action it stresses that the man caught in the uncertain condition of mortality cannot by himself judge without fear of error. Neoptolemus is at one time Philoctetes's friend; at another his enemy; and seemingly at times both. Moreover, Philoctetes is unquestionably partly responsible for his situation by virtue of his dedication to the belief that the Atridae and their cause are inherently unjust. Also, the ambiguous role and utterances of the Chorus reflect this uncertainty: they too join in deceiving Philoctetes, even while lamenting his condition and offering philosophical reflections on it. One is, of course, tempted by sympathy with Philoctetes, and by a natural inclination to simplify the moral problem, to pronounce the Atridae guilty of pure and simple evil. However, the play makes clear that, even though they are guilty of great inhumanity,

thou thyself, ill-fated man, that hast so decreed; this fortune to which thou art captive comes not from without, or from a stronger hand: for, when it was in thy power to show wisdom, thy choice was to reject the better fate, and to accept the worse" (Ibid., p. 363).

they too are pursuing a conviction that their course of action is just. And we are not given grounds for judging them wrong.

In fine, this play shows man engaged in the always human attempt to identify Evil and then to act accordingly. And it shows that from this attempt come confusion and uncertainty. To this extent, the play conforms perfectly to the view presented in Tragedy. But with the appearance of Heracles this view ceases to prevail. The mystery that has clouded the lives of these men is dismissed by the declarations of Heracles, when he points the way and explains the significance of the suffering of Philoctetes. The vision of the meaning of life given here transcends that of man in the Mortal Condition--Tragic man.

The significance of the myth on which the play is based is not clear. But it appears to be something of this sort: the mingling in man of the immortal (bow and arrows of Heracles) and mortal (wound inflicted by the serpent) brings suffering. There are echoes in it of Antigone: "Nothing that is vast enters the life of mortals without a curse." But the tragic uncertainty that surrounds man's experience of this mingling of mortal and immortal, the possibility, for example, that Philoctetes's conviction that there is Justice which he can accept and stand on is mistaken--this is not accentuated at the end. Here the play

takes on the cast of a theodicy.¹ We are nearer to Job than to Oedipus the King. Philoctetes does not persist in affirming his own view of Justice. He submits to Heracles (God) just as Job does. He accepts the mystery. He confesses his inability to penetrate it.

Moreover, Philoctetes does not rise through and above suffering and defeat. He is, to be sure, defeated in a sense. But it is a wholly positive defeat; that is, its meaning is clear. The play declares that his life has meaning in an ordered scheme, and that Justice will in fact be done. But the tragic uncertainty is gone. And his suffering is not made a condition of his glory, except from a divine point of view--a very different thing. The play ends hopefully and affirmatively. And although one can say that it is a melancholy thought that in his uncertainty and human limitation man will and must suffer, as that observation is presented by this play it remains only melancholy and not fully tragic. There is pity, but not elevation.

Thus we can see that the Philoctetes, though possessed of many of the features of Tragedy, is not pure Tragedy. It is much nearer to Tragedy than many poets were ever able to come. But it ends up in the class with Job. This is, of course, worthy company for any play. Job is undoubtedly one of the greatest literary expressions of man.

¹See n. 1, p. 25, for a definition of theodicy.

But it is important to keep clearly in mind that Job does not end on a truly tragic note. It, like Philoctetes, stresses the profound mystery of Evil in man's life and the essential suffering of his lot; but again like Philoctetes (with no doubt more profound religious conviction), it moves to the resolution that can come only from God and God's view. Obviously these two works are not simply expressions of optimism; but neither are they Tragedies. They are, in fact, a marrying of the two. But it is the view of the theodicy that finally rules the whole. The Mortal Condition does not prevail.

Oedipus at Colonus

When, in his contemplation of suffering and Evil, man shifts his gaze from the mystery of man's involvement in Evil and his paradoxical role of victor and victim, to the function of the mystery in a divinely-ordered universe of purpose and meaning, he rejects Tragedy and accepts theodicy. He does not deny suffering; it is suffering (and Evil) itself that brings him to justify and resolve. Without the need to account for human suffering, what we know as theodicy would not exist. But the need to account, to explain, to justify--this need, when pursued to the construction of a theodicy, takes one beyond the experience of suffering man; it overcomes the Mortal Condition by means of a transcendent view of man's position in the world. The mystery remains, to be sure; but for the uncertainty which arises from an

immersion in the Mortal Condition, in the destructive element, is substituted a certainty that is derived from God, for whom there is no mystery. There is no logical necessity why one cannot view the life of man as both Tragedy and theodicy. Indeed, it seems likely that a recognition of the tragic attitude will precede the statement of theodicy. But they do not exist in true simultaneity: they are alternative views. And though not of necessity mutually exclusive because of philosophical or religious commitment, they are exclusive because of point of view assumed: the one proceeds from the unflinching view of man suffering his mortality; the other comes from the view of man declaring his immortality.

The Philoctetes as a whole makes this latter declaration. The simply tragic implications of the mystery are denied or rejected. And whatever glory is affirmed for man is that of man immortal, while Tragedy affirms the glory (paradoxical as it is) of man mortal. But in Philoctetes, as in Job, the tension between the two views is great indeed. The resolution is that of theodicy, but the potentiality of Tragedy is at all times on the point of realization. There is a curious ambivalence about the point of view chosen: it is that of both Tragedy and theodicy, with the latter gaining an inconclusive victory. The Oedipus at Colonus, on the other hand, maintains the transcendent view that marks theodicy. Here the Tragedy of Oedipus has been left behind.

Here serenity prevails, for despite the agonies of Oedipus, and despite the mourning and despair of Antigone and Ismene (they are still, after all, in the Mortal Condition themselves and will in their persons yet participate in Tragedy)--still, a calm optimism pervades the play.¹ No tragic assault on Evil is made here. The questioning is quiet; the discovery of the mystery is played down. Even Oedipus himself exhibits nothing but reverence for the gods in his

¹This is the ground bass of the play, so to speak. Specific instances of its strong sounding are many, but none better, perhaps, than when the Chorus describes the beauty and comfort and sweetness and bounty of Colonus, and where the mention of the "gray-leaved olive" suggests the mystery of immortality:

"Stranger, in this land of goodly steeds thou hast come to earth's fairest home, even to our white Colonus; where the nightingale, a constant guest, trills her clear note in the covert of green glades, dwelling amid the wine-dark ivy and the god's inviolate bowers, rich in berries and fruit, unvisited by sun, unvexed by wind of any storm; where the reveller Dionysus ever walks the ground, companion of the nymphs that nursed him.

"And, fed of heavenly dew, the narcissus blooms by morn with fair clusters, crown of the Great Goddesses from of yore; and the crocus blooms with golden beam. Nor fail the sleepless founts whence the waters of Cephissus wander, but each day with stainless tide he moveth over the plains of the land's swelling bosom, for the giving of quick increase; nor hath the Muses' quire abhorred this place, nor Aphrodite of the golden rein.

"And a thing there is such as I know not by fame on Asian ground, or as ever born in the great Dorian isle of Pelops,--a growth unconquered, self-renewing, a terror to the spears of the foemen, a growth which mightily flourishes in this land,--the gray-leaved olive, nurturer of children. Youth shall not mar it by the ravage of his hand, nor any who dwells with old age; for the sleepless eye of the Morian Zeus beholds it, and the gray-eyed Athena" (Sophocles, op. cit., pp. 86-87).

attitude and speeches. Despite his suffering, he has faith in them: he does not rail or question. And in Oedipus's death we see not defeat but victory, an unequivocal victory.¹

Oedipus at Colonus does not show the mystery of Evil by presenting tragic man attacking it as problem; rather, it postulates the mystery from the first and stresses the need for an affirmative acceptance of the mystery. The central concern here, as in Philoctetes, is with the acceptance by the people (by man) of this mystery, as a necessary step toward a realization of his (man's, not the tragic figure's) immortal potential--toward, in other words, the validation of theodicy.

Strikingly enough, both these plays deal with the exile of polluted man; and even more strikingly, both insist on the necessity of his return for the glory and welfare of his people. In some fashion, these plays seem to say, the sin, evil, or pollution of these men is an essential feature of the success of the people. But as we consider these

¹That the choral and lyric assertion of the desirability of death as an end to the natural suffering of man is a feature of most all Greek drama does not alter the significance of this distinction. The fact is, simply, that no matter with what frequency they utter such thoughts, the Greeks exhibited in the dramas do cling to life. Indeed, this lamentation appears to be no other than an expression of a feeling of self-pity in the face of suffering; not so jejeune, no doubt, but no more literal than the more common "I wish I were dead" of today. Moreover, Oedipus's death is not shown as only an escape from, but a victory through life.

plays, we are struck by the realization that the emphasis is on the connection of this badge of mortality, as we may call it, and the well-being of the people, not on its connection with the tragic "victory" and glory of the individual. In fact, the emphasis is on the taking back itself.

In the Philoctetes, of course, there is more ambiguity, more "discovery" of mystery. The question remains whether Philoctetes is being reaccepted into the society of man on his journey to Troy or simply used (although Philoctetes's own future career is given unambiguously enough). But there is no question whether Neoptolemus finally accepts the whole man, badge of mortality and all. In a gesture of humanity and compassion, he embraces both his strengths and weaknesses, just as the Athenians wholeheartedly accept and protect Oedipus, with all his sins and afflictions known. The Thebans wish merely to use Oedipus to their advantage, without according him the dignity of membership in the race; likewise, the Atridae want only to bring the bow and arrows back for the conquest of Troy, also without acknowledging the worth of the man. And one cannot fail to note that each of these groups attempts to accomplish its end in much the same way as the other--or that both the Athenians and Neoptolemus give their protection along with their acknowledgment of the humanity of the sufferers.

In each play we witness a contest of sorts, over who will receive the benefits that the exile alone can bestow.

And we are left in no doubt by either play as to the reality of these benefits. In Philoctetes the benefits are clearly enunciated by Heracles himself. In Oedipus at Colonus the apparent translation of Oedipus bodily and miraculously to the "other world" is itself sufficient proof of the more than mortal importance of Oedipus. Moreover, the contests are decided, finally, in favor of those who admit the sufferer's claims on their humanity. It is not a question of which ones recognize the power he can bring to their cause: all contenders accept unquestioningly the statements of the Oracles. But only the Athenians are willing to receive Oedipus because of his suffering, and because he is a man. And only Neoptolemus feels more for the sufferings and wrongs endured by Philoctetes than for the glory to be gained by having his aid in the destruction of Troy. Thus the emotional appeal of the unfortunate central figure is joined with the central dramatic and thematic concern of the play, to give direction to the one and content to the other.

What we seem to meet, then, in the dramatic handling of these two myths, is the idea that man must recognize his kinship with the polluted, the sinful; that he cannot drive sin and pollution out with the exile; that he is himself wearer of the same badge of mortality. But all of this is part and parcel of Tragedy, and these plays do not stop here. They insist that so long as one attempts so to exile the sin of mortality, so long must he be incapable of achieving the

transcendent view that annuls Tragedy. Man cannot realize his full humanity, these plays say, a humanity that is in fact aligned with the immortal, until he has accepted his mortality. And this is the point of view of theodicy. It asks for a rejection of the tragic attempt to solve the "problem" of Evil. The acceptance of Oedipus by the Athenians (and of Philoctetes by Neoptolemus) argues an acceptance of this adjuration, a refusal on their part to continue to attempt to penetrate the mystery. They now take the mystery to their bosoms, and with it come awe and hope of salvation. And the hope is given overtones of certainty or conviction by the miraculous conclusions of the plays. The mystery has become, not tragic, but religious mystery.

Athalie

Racine's Athalie, an uncharacteristic neo-classical work, but one that is recognized as an important, if troublesome, play, is an interesting example of the differences between Tragedy and theodicy. This somber and majestically restrained treatment of the Biblical account of King Joash and Athalie shows how closely allied the two points of view can be in what is ultimately a theodicy. Moreover, it indicates the poet's difficulty, in such a close alliance, in keeping his purpose consistent and clear.

Through all the action of the play leading up to the triumphant accession of Joash to the throne, the potentiality of Tragedy is present. The high priest Jehoiada's

unwavering certainty that God will second all their attempts and set Joash on the throne in the midst of powerful and ruling enemies is not shared by the rest of the Hebrews. The possibility that he is over optimistic is expressed often by Jehosheba and the Chorus. Their recognition of the inscrutability of man's fate and God's intentions serves to establish a somewhat skeptical air around all of Jehoiada's declarations and assurances. The present peril of their people, their past persecutions--these join in their assessment of the chances for success in the present venture to cause us to anticipate a reversal. Jehosheba questions whether one can know God's intentions when Jehoiada is assuring her that they will have God's protection in their enterprise of proclaiming Joash king:

Who knoweth if this child was for their sin
Not doomed at birth, like all that impious line;
Or if God, setting him from such a race
Apart, for David's sake will show him grace?¹

And when she prays that her love will not prove hurtful to Joash,² the possibility of the tragic reversal, the possibility of the emergence of paradox and mystery in their attempts to defy the evil they have identified in the destruction of Joash and the line of David--the possibility is so strong that it sets up an expectation in the beholder, an

¹Jean Baptiste Racine, The Best Plays of Racine, trans. Lacy Lockert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), p. 331.

²Ibid.

expectation which is underscored when Jehosheba asks Jehoiada,

In blind assurance is there no offence?
Using mankind to carry out his plans,
Did not the Lord himself arm Jehu's hands?¹

The tragic uncertainty grows particularly strong as the play moves on toward the climax. A sense of tragic involvement marks the songs of the Chorus: Jehoiada's prophetic vision gives them no ease.

Salome

At last God deigns to speak his will;
But of what he doth now to his prophet reveal,
Who shall teach us to know the sense?
Doth he arm for our defense,
Or to crush us under his heel?

All the Chorus, Singing

O the hope! O the threat! O the darkling mystery!
Both what good and what evil seem here interwoven!
How can ever with so much anger be
Made accord so much love?²

But the expectation is not answered. The play offers no Tragedy. Athalie dies, to be sure, defeated by God; but Athalie is not the subject of the play, as Racine points out in the preface.³ The drama ends in complete triumph for the Jews and their God. Joash is crowned and rules; Jehoiada's blind conviction has been vindicated; and God has destroyed his enemies.

By this end, fearful yet to justice owed,
Learn, King of Judah, nor forget thou e'er,

¹Ibid., p. 372.

²Ibid., p. 376.

³Ibid., p. 315.

That rulers have in heaven a Judge severe
 Who aids the innocent in their distress
 And is a father to the fatherless.¹

The point of view from which the play is presented is one that has left questioning and mystery behind. What remains is triumph and assurance. The individuals, with the exception of Jehoiada, live in the uncertainty of the Mortal Condition, but theirs is not the point of view of the play. In order to justify the ways of God to man, Racine had to move to the God-like point of view of the theodicy. The open question of whether Justice triumphs in man's world has given way before the omniscient assurance that it does.

This appears to me unquestionably to be the nature of Athalie. But a further complication should be noted. The proleptic vision of Joash's future defections, which is given by Jehoiada in his trance and which is recalled somewhat ominously in the last speech of the play, "nor forget thou e'er,/That rulers have in heaven a Judge severe"--this vision works in opposition to the prevailing point of view. It cannot, of course, completely cancel it out and transform the play from theodicy to Tragedy, but it can and does give a slightly mixed conclusion to the work. Whether this mixture results from an unconscious inclination toward the point of view of limited judgment on the part of Racine, from a greater sympathy with the tragic point of view which he constructed

¹Ibid., p. 405.

the play to cancel out than with the intellectual one he promoted, or whether it shows Racine's confusion about what he wished to do or was doing, it would seem to argue that Racine was too uncritically influenced by the Biblical account as he constructed his drama. And the result is a slightly impure work.

Doctor Faustus

Marred as it is by textual corruptions, Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is still one of the most powerful and compelling of Elizabethan "Tragedies." One must look far to find a more overwhelming statement of loss and destruction, a more concentrated focus on a soul's damnation. Yet surely it is a puzzling play, one which, though we "feel" that it is Tragedy, we have difficulty accounting for theoretically, with its strange and wonderful mixture of Renaissance and Medieval themes, with its Renaissance man caught in a Medieval world. For we know that the problems which the play raises cannot be handled in terms of "dramatic craft." The problems of this play, we feel sure, are not that elements of the Medieval morality play are joined whole to the emerging form of Renaissance drama. This seems more to be the symptom than the ailment. Or, to put it another way, the problems raised appear to be both anterior and posterior to these formal idiosyncracies. Can we be satisfied to call Doctor Faustus a tragic morality play?

Let us consider a moment. What, first of all, are the tragic features of the play? We know by the end of Faustus's first speech that he is unwilling to accept the limitations on man's mind and spirit that he finds acknowledged by all the disciplines of study. Divine theology, the last and best of these studies, carries only one melancholy message to Faustus: "The reward of sin is death,"¹ and all men are sinful. Not, Faustus thinks, a very hopeful or reassuring message.

Is this not a recognition of Evil in the very mode of great Tragedy? Indeed it would seem so. The play has hardly begun when Faustus identifies the Evil that besets him and determines to oppose it. Mortality is Evil. The wages of sin is death, and all men are sinful. Except that Faustus will not have it so. This is, he judges, an unjust law, and cannot be tamely borne. Therefore he seeks through magic, through necromancy, the freedom and immortality which the Mortal Condition will and can not allow.

Faustus's pursuit of this ideal, or flight from mortality, leads him obviously deeper into guilt and to his own destruction. His very life testifies, at last, to the truth of the law: the wages of sin is death, and all men are sinful. His denial of the theme of mortality has

¹Christopher Marlowe, The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, in The Chief Elizabethan Dramatists, ed. William Allan Neilson (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), Scene I, l. 39.

provided the instrument on which the theme can be played. It is the music of Tragedy. And its theme is clearly the mystery of Evil as well as the suffering of man within this mystery, of which he is an unwilling part.

While we are thus resting in the judgment that Doctor Faustus is a Tragedy, however, we suddenly realize that the Evil with which the play concludes has placed us on another plane. The Evil has ceased to be the Mortal Condition and has become eternal damnation. Faustus's soul is eternally damned for his sin, and Faustus knows it. But this is a new element in Tragedy. The uncertainty is gone. Where is the hope that Faustus may have been destroyed in the defense of a greater and more noble ideal than the one he found existing round him? It has been left behind with the man in the Mortal Condition. All the meaning of Faustus's life is made clear. His relation to infinity, the relation of God to man--these we now know. For the point of view is that of God; the statements about Faustus's life, those of theodicy.

One can, I think, argue that Faustus's pursuit of sin and Evil, even in the face of all certainty that it is Evil, is further clarification of the Mortal Condition and contributes to Tragedy; that is, that Faustus's inability to swerve from this pursuit even though he knows it will win him eternal damnation is evidence of how man is constrained by his nature to follow error and pursue his destruction. But if this argument is valid, one must, I believe, reach

another conclusion. As has been said, the point of view which lets us know precisely what is the final meaning of Faustus's actions is one that presumes to understand more of the meaning of life and its outcome than mortal man can know. It is a view that transcends that mortality. Therefore, a theodicy which presents the world of Doctor Faustus is one which focuses not so much on the tragic experience of it as on the pessimistic (nihilistic?) understanding of it.

A comparison of Faustus and Milton's Satan will help to clarify this point, perhaps. Satan, as Milton presents him, falls because of his refusal to accept limitation. While still in Heaven, he denies any limitations on his power and freedom. After his expulsion, he continues to refuse to accept the limitations which he now recognizes all too clearly. The core of his being is this refusal; the nature of sin, his persistence. He justifies his expulsion and damnation, therefore, with every moment of his existence. He will choose Evil as his good.

Likewise, Marlowe's Faustus chooses Evil, knowing, as does Satan, that it is simply Evil. He refuses to repent. He says, of course, that he is tormented unspeakably by devils when he thinks of repentance. But no possibility of accepting this defense is allowed by the play. We are told unequivocally that if Faustus would repent he would be saved. Like Satan he chooses Evil as his good.

Such a picture of man has striking implications when given from the point of view that defines theodicy. It suggests that man will always choose Evil; that, like Satan, it is his nature to do so. No salvation is possible to him, therefore. He will necessarily suffer damnation. This is hardly a Christian view. Doctor Faustus is very unlike Paradise Lost, which is also a theodicy. In Milton's work it is Satan, not man, who must be damned. Marlowe's play might almost be called a Satanic theodicy. It is a theodicy of despair. God is not only not denied but affirmed. And his omnipotence is admitted. But he works toward Evil, for man, because man is so constituted as to be incapable of salvation: he can only have damnation. Here is the attitude of despair that critics have often seemed to find in Tragedy, the attitude which has seemed to preclude Christian Tragedy. (One is tempted to think, indeed, that recognition of the implications of this play by Marlowe's contemporaries was the major cause of his being branded "atheistical.")

But the despair that marks Doctor Faustus is not a function of Tragedy. Most of the ingredients of Tragedy are present in the work, and much of the play produces a tragic note and response. But the Tragedy is vitiated, because the point of view goes beyond Tragedy to despair. Of course one pities Faustus: his exit is deeply moving and rending. But pity does not seem to belong solely to Tragedy, just as it does not seem, by itself, to distinguish Tragedy. Marlowe

attempts to do more than show the meaning of mortality as man experiences it: he states the meaning of mortality as it is, seen from the light of eternity. Perhaps one can usefully term Doctor Faustus a tragic morality play, if he makes a great many reservations and modifications. But it seems to me more helpful to judge it by the definition of Tragedy employed here. For then, I think, one better sees what Doctor Faustus is, by seeing what it is not--Tragedy.

CHAPTER V

THE TRAGEDY WITHIN: LOVE AND HONOR

Very few people would maintain today that the heroic plays of the Restoration stage are effective Tragedies, or even effective plays. Indeed there appears to be a unanimity of opinion among students of the drama that the heroic play is simply bombastic, artificial, and trivial. The worst (and that is most) of heroic plays are cold, and often empty, exercises in purple rhetoric as an end in itself. And surely this makes them bad plays. But does this judgment in itself tell us that they are not Tragedies? Not unless our definition of Tragedy is that it is a good play. And yet the general reaction of readers of these plays is to say that they are wretched pieces of work and therefore not Tragedies. Moreover, this reaction has given rise to a commonplace of dramatic criticism: that the conflict of love and honor (the fundamental conflict of the heroic play) is incapable of yielding Tragedy.

If nothing more were at stake than the reputation of the characteristic heroic play, one would be inclined to allow such reasoning to pass: the readers' sensibilities

have not misled them. These plays are, in general, hopelessly bad. But the heroic play is the neo-classic type, and its theme is that of virtually all neo-classic Tragedy. This is the kind of Tragedy written, for the most part, by Corneille, Racine, and Dryden. It is the kind of Tragedy that characterizes "the last great age of Tragedy."

Therefore, we must demand some better reasons for declaring that Tragedy cannot derive from the conflict of love and honor. For when one comes to deal with a good play whose theme is that conflict, without a better theory of what constitutes Tragedy he is hard pressed to judge what is before him. What, for instance, does one make of Phaedra, or Polyeucte, or Britannicus, or All for Love? Seldom are these plays dismissed so cavalierly. They are, in fact, commonly called Tragedies.

But are they? Certainly this is a question which any study of Tragedy must attempt to answer. It is not, of course, the purpose of the present study to survey or define neo-classic Tragedy. However, a consideration of neo-classic Tragedy would seem to be helpful as clarification of the definition of Tragedy. For to the extent that one can point to limitations of that Tragedy, to that extent he can more accurately perceive what he takes Tragedy to be.

In order thus to clarify further my theory of Tragedy, it seems best to attempt to characterize heroic Tragedy by way of an historical question: why did Tragedy

devolve into the heroic play? For an answer to this question can best show, I believe, by negative example, some of the essential features of Tragedy.

The question itself is, of course, a common one.

Herbert Muller works into it thus:

Beginning with Beaumont and Fletcher there was an obvious falling off in intensity and seriousness, as tragic drama declined into romantic story and symbolic imagery became merely decorative. This decline is somewhat puzzling, since it did not reflect an era of increasing order and security. Rather, there was more reason for tension. Political, economic, and religious strife was to culminate in the beheading of Charles I. In the world of thought, men were catching on to the implications of what Galileo had discovered with his "fantastic glass" (mentioned by the wicked cardinal in The Duchess of Malfi). Sir Henry Wotton reported to King James that Galileo "hath overthrown all former astronomy--for we must have a new sphere to save the appearances." John Donne despaired of the appearances. As a result of the "new philosophy," he wrote in his "First Anniversary,"

"'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,
All just supply, and all relation
The world's proportion disfigured is."

Such tensions help to explain why he and the other "metaphysicals" wrought their poetry of paradox. And although this cerebral poetry was ill-suited to drama, it forces the question why both thought and feeling grew more superficial in contemporaneous drama.¹

The basis of Muller's question appears to be the assumption that such intellectual ferment as rocked the seventeenth century, especially in the first half of the century, and the loss of stability, the "dissociation of sensibility," should produce, rather than a less vital and serious drama, a more serious one, and one well suited to the production of Tragedy. Why, in other words, he is asking, is not the

¹Op. cit., p. 200.

generation of greater doubt and insecurity a fertile ground for Tragedy, as it would seem to be?

The answer is not, I think, far to seek. It is potentially present in the remark of Sir Henry Wotton that Galileo "hath overthrown all former astronomy--for we must have a new sphere to save the appearances."

That the growth of science and the attendant mechanization of the universe which tended to separate man from his world caused seventeenth-century man to experience a kind of spiritual isolation is also a commonplace in the history of ideas. The new astronomy, we know, broke the circle of perfection of the Medieval world and set man apart from a world which was increasingly seen as mechanical and impersonal, and above all external. Marjorie Nicolson puts this view succinctly:

Modern cosmology, like all the earlier ones, is based on analogy. But we are aware that it is an analogy. We know that we are attempting to explain the nature of the universe, the world, and man by figures of speech deliberately drawn from historians and natural scientists. We describe our world in similes. Our Elizabethan ancestors thought of their world in metaphors. The world was not simply like an animal; it was animate. The repetition of pattern, design, function they found in the body of man was not invented by human ingenuity; it actually existed in the three worlds made by God in His image. There was basic correspondence between man's body and the body of the world, between man's soul and the soul of the universe.¹

But what Miss Nicolson describes is probably better seen as a change in the world of perception than in the world of

¹Marjorie Hope Nicolson, The Breaking of the Circle (rev. ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 2.

thought; that is, a change in a way of apprehending the world rather than in the way of thinking about it.¹ It seems at least likely that Medieval man (who was not only the ancestor, but part, of Renaissance man) perceived a unified (or at any rate, more unified) world. He probably perceived a more numinous world and made less rigid distinctions between "mind" and "matter" and, therefore, between himself and the "external" world. Thus his metaphors were not products of conscious comparisons, but rather of simple perceptions. He did not only think of the world in metaphors but so perceived it.

All of this, I should guess, Miss Nicolson more or less sees, and it underlies her clear and perceptive comments on the "world view" of the time. But it is the nature of the change from that way of perceiving the world to the later "scientific" one that is the crux--the change that determined that most men of the seventeenth century would perceive a more external and mechanical world. And the nature of this change has not, I believe, been clearly understood by most historians of ideas, including Miss Nicolson.

One must distinguish between what one perceives (the given data of one's experience) and what one thinks about

¹All of the following discussion of perception, together with the discussion of "saving the appearances," is based on Owen Barfield's brilliant books Saving the Appearances and Poetic Diction, to both of which I am completely indebted for the basis of whatever insights into the development of consciousness in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries I might have had.

this world he perceives. The latter process clearly starts from the first. If one perceives a more numinous world, that is the world he will reflect on (or theorize about). If one perceives a world of unity and a world that reveals God's image in macrocosm, geocosm, and microcosm, then one will, insofar as one theorizes at all, construct theories to account for or explain that world. But this is a distinction that Miss Nicolson has lost sight of when she comes to say that Ptolemaic astronomy had been for centuries man's supreme proof that the universe, like the soul of man, was spherical.¹

Here we are back to Wotton's "saving the appearances." Wotton's remark, like that of Milton half a century later, is a harking back to an older and dying attitude toward the nature of truth and the relationship of speculation to that truth.

Or if they list to try
Conjecture, he his Fabric of the Heav'ns
Hath left to thir disputes, perhaps to move
His laughter at thir quaint Opinions wide
Hereafter, when they come to model Heav'n
And calculate the Stars, how they will wield
The mighty frame, how build, unbuild, contrive
To save appearances, how gird the sphere
With Centric and Eccentric scribbl'd o'er,
Cycle and Epicycle, orb in orb:²

The function of astronomy was to "save the appearances," to "account for" the motions of the heavenly bodies. The calculations of the astronomers, their hypotheses, were intended

¹Nicolson, op. cit., p. 50.

²John Milton, Paradise Lost, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1962), p. 186.

to give a consistency to observed change. And of course "the same appearances could be saved by two or more quite different hypotheses, such as an eccentric or an epicycle or, particularly in the case of Venus and Mercury, by supposed revolution around the earth or supposed revolution around the sun."¹

But what was happening in King James's time was not merely that a new astronomy, one which saved the appearances by adding a new sphere, was being put forward as an hypothesis, which would have no essential relation to truth: the Copernican astronomy put forth "a new theory of the nature of theory; namely, that, if a hypothesis saves all the appearances, it is identical with truth."² This hypothesis ceased to be the hypothesis of which Milton wrote and became a theory that claimed to be in fact physically true.

Obviously Copernicus and like-minded men were beginning to perceive a somewhat different world from that described by Miss Nicolson. Nonetheless, the writings of Copernicus, Galileo, William Gilbert, William Harvey, and Francis Bacon show more than residual traces of perception of an animate world. The great separation of spirit and matter, of self and a wholly external world was yet to come. And it came rapidly; for theories about one's world do

¹Barfield, Saving the Appearances (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 49.

²Ibid., p. 51.

perforce affect and change one's perception of that world. Thus, as this new theory about the nature of theory advanced, man's perception of his world "advanced" with it. A theory that declares the final truth of the view that the world runs on in accordance with natural law, completely apart from and in spite of man himself, must, with its acceptance, produce a more isolated, a more self-conscious, a more internalized man. And this man perceives a vastly different world from that of the early Renaissance man.

If, from this point, one looks back on the earlier characterization of the world of the Renaissance by Miss Nicolson, he sees that, perceptive and suggestive as it is, it has actually reversed the positions of the "pre-scientific" and the "scientific" ages vis-à-vis theories about the world man lives in. As a description of perception, it is accurate; as a description of the attitude toward scientific theory, it is not. "Modern cosmology," she says, "is based on analogy. But we are aware that it is an analogy." Perhaps we are; but modern cosmology has, after all, grown out of and largely maintained the same theory about the nature of theory that grew up in the seventeenth century. And the men of the seventeenth century were not aware of the analogy, because it was not held to be one--not finally. The scientific pronouncements on the nature of the universe were maintained as true, simply and wholly. The new astronomers were not saving the appearances, whereas the earlier

cosmology, based of course on a perception of the reality of the unity of man and the universe, was a conscious construction, based solely, as construction, on analogy, in an attempt to save the appearances.

We need not wonder too much, then, at the seeming incongruity between the growing uncertainty and instability, and the diminished sense of Tragedy in the drama of the seventeenth century. The heroic play which mostly defines neo-classical Tragedy seems, indeed, to be the logical outcome of the development here briefly described. It is our best example of the true implications for Tragedy of the change.¹

As man continued to study the external world of laws and motion through his "fantastic glass," his view of himself seemed to be taken from the reverse end; and as the glass grew in power, he shrank ever smaller, and receded farther into the distance. This was a world from which he was cut off, and any connections with which he could only feign with his diverting, but inconsequential instrument poetry.² No

¹There are, of course, many other elements that contributed to the development of the heroic drama, but the central one seems to me to be the one defined here. And since the present attempt is not to develop fully the contributing strands that produced heroic drama, but to isolate the reasons why it is not Tragedy (and thereby better to understand both it and Tragedy), consideration of these other contributing factors would be irrelevant.

²In The Seventeenth Century Background (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953), Basil Willey points out that "Prose was for conveying what was felt to be true, and was addressed to the judgment; poetry was for conveying pleasure, and was addressed

real identity could be made, no justification from a simply physical universe hoped for. These are more our thoughts than his: they are thoughts about what were for him perceptions.

How is this man to perceive the tragic situation of man? What will he see the mortal condition to be? What is the evil he discerns? There is, of course, no possibility of the noble and vaulting declaration that Justice is one and his, that his notion of justice coincides with that of an external and purely physical universe. For him evil cannot be revealed as a mysterious linking of himself and the cosmos, terrible as that revelation might be. Neither can he, in consequence, emerge as the paradoxical champion of Justice, wreaking vengeance on his own head in his heroic attempt to rid the universe of Evil.

His world is narrowed to self and society. He turns inward on himself, and there in his introspection he finds the diminished subject of his study and the source of his tragedy.

Of course he still experiences evil; he is mortal and must be aware of the suffering to which that mortality can lead. But the evil is vastly reduced, drained of all (or all but all) cosmic and supernatural force. And the

to the fancy" (p. 88). This split was caused by the dualism between truth, as apprehended only by mathematics, and feeling, the characteristic response of the human being.

battleground is no longer the whole world, both objective and subjective, natural and supernatural, spiritual and physical: it is now himself, a strictly subjective and insular self (or at best the structured forms of self provided by society). There were, in general, two kinds of certainty for the man of the seventeenth century: one internal, the other external.¹ The latter, or external, certainty was the province and product of mathematics. It was concerned with the world of mechanical causation (truth), and mathematics was the only tool for finding its reality, the only way to see things-in-themselves, for only mathematics was real. The other, or internal, certainty was the one on which he could exercise his reason, for it was the world of morals or ethics, which answered to the light of reason. In this limited sphere of private and public "self," this sphere of psychology, actually--here was the battleground of man against evil.

But the evil was wholly internal. "Passion and reason self-division cause" might well stand as the neo-classic poet's definition of Tragedy. In the world he perceived, the struggle was all within. The mystery that we find in purest Tragedy was not perceived, or rendered. The two halves of man were at war: therein lay the evil he knew "tragically." As we know, this self-division is indeed part of the Mortal Condition that defeats man in Tragedy. What

¹Cf. Willey, op. cit., Chapter IV.

denied the farther reaches of Tragedy to the neo-classics was the equation of self-division and Mortal Condition.

The resultant drama tended to be a latter-day psychomachy. Man himself was the battlefield and his warring halves were the contestants. Love and honor, passion and reason became essentially allegorical figures, as one would expect. And in his attempt to extend the struggle, the writer of heroic drama tended to make the various characters themselves allegorical: each figure tended toward a representation of one or the other of the halves of divided man. Thus the more the poet proliferated the characters in the struggle (an internal struggle), the more difficult it became to keep any kind of tragic focus; the more the play tended toward rant. No amount of bravado, no amount of rhetoric, no amount of pseudo-Elizabethan imagery could change the play from what it was--a psychomachy. To be sure, the writers of the period tried to change it. They still felt that there was a kinship between themselves and the Elizabethans (and with the later Elizabethans indeed there was). So they invoked spirits, declared cosmic ramifications of the actions of their characters, and extravagantly plastered over their works with imagery that attempted to recall a less mechanical world; but all these attempts must seem finally to be untrue and artificial. The world they perceived could admit no such extension of meaning to man's actions. The focus was too narrow, the scope too limited. Man's world was an

internal one, and no amount of posturing could make it otherwise. Moreover, since this was so, the actions and figures could bring no expanding and deepening symbolic force: they were allegorical only, and schematized only that world of perception which gave them rise.¹

One can find, I think, no better example of this failing of the heroic tragedy than Dryden's All for Love. Dryden is the best writer of "serious drama" of the last half of the seventeenth century in England, and perhaps of the entire neo-classical age. And this is surely Dryden's best play: it is carefully and lovingly constructed, and contains his best dramatic poetry. Moreover, since it is free of the grosser faults and flaws of the drama of the time, since it reveals the best that Dryden could do in the way of Tragedy, the nearest thing to Tragedy that the age had to offer, it is a better example than the weaker, more notorious, more bombastic plays, for one can keep his focus on the one question and not be misled by more obvious (and less central for our purposes) faults of the play. Here we can view heroic tragedy at its best, and therefore see just what it is and what it is not much better than by viewing the type at its worst. And finally, because All for Love is a

¹One obvious effect of this process was an oversimplification of character, for the more they became allegorical figures, the less the characters were likely to be complex persons. Compare, for example, Dryden's Cleopatra with Shakespeare's.

very good play, no doubt the best piece of "serious drama" in English between 1642 and the twentieth century--then we can reveal its shortcomings as Tragedy without the risk of confusing this demonstration with a judgment either that the play is bad or that a very good play of this type is therefore Tragedy.

Obviously the story of Antony and Cleopatra is, in itself, a kind of embodiment of the conflict between passion and reason. However, the extent to which the poet emphasizes this feature of the story is solely within the discretion of the poet. Clearly Dryden chose to make it the heart of his play. The theme of the play might well be Antony's exclamation "O my distracted soul!"¹ The Antony of this play, the soul of this Antony is literally pulled apart. He is constantly torn between the demands of honor and reason, love and passion. In every way Dryden draws attention to this sundering of Antony. He identifies Rome with reason and honor, and Egypt with love and passion. He has Antony torn between the attractions of two women, one his wife Octavia, who carries with her an atmosphere of reason and honor; the other, Cleopatra, who is all in all love and passion.² He

¹John Dryden, All for Love, in Works of John Dryden, ed. Sir Walter Scott and George Saintsbury (18 vols.; Edinburgh: W. Paterson, 1882), V, 390.

²As Cleopatra says of herself to Iras, when the latter asks her to call reason to her aid: "I have none./And none would have; my love's a noble madness . . ." (Ibid., p. 361).

makes Antony's inner conflict the cause and scene of the struggle between Ventidius, the reasonable and honorable Roman soldier, and Alexas, Cleopatra's Pandarus. And he also makes Antony's person the battleground for the struggle between Caesar (cold and boyish) and Cleopatra. In short, the conflict within Antony is extended both spatially and fragmentarily into the other major characters. At all points one cannot help being aware that the contending persons are at bottom representatives of one or the other of the struggling halves of Antony. And the action of the play serves as a diagram of the vacillation between these two poles of his person that marks the life of Dryden's Antony.

To this extent, then, the play is a psychomachy, an allegorical charting of the war within. But Dryden attempts to extend it. By identifying Antony with Mars and Cleopatra with Venus, and by stressing that the Antony who gives himself over to passion and love is the ruler of half mankind while the reasonable Caesar rules the other half, Dryden manages to suggest that the struggle within Antony is a universal one, that man is by nature torn between two supernaturally great inclinations, and must, therefore, be pulled apart. Here is the mortal condition of neo-classic tragedy. It is this against which the tragic hero must struggle. But if the tragic note is sounded by touching what is truly one of the strings of the Mortal Condition, its sound is muffled within Marc Antony, and no echoes or vibrations are felt in

our own souls. The extension of the conflict remains an allegorical one, and the struggle remains within Antony. Moreover, although we know the self-division of Antony to be part of mortal man's problem, we also know that it is a very limited part. Antony's struggle gives us no sense of the determination to rise above the Mortal Condition that Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra does. No attack is made on it in All for Love. For all practical purposes, Dryden's Antony is a passive battleground, as are all the heroes of heroic tragedy; and their hysterical attempts to assert themselves only argue some kind of awareness by the playwrights of this fact. This play reveals no significantly tragic involvement and particularly no strong commitment to any ideal. The ideal is (as, I believe, it is in heroic drama generally) alternately passion and reason. It would be difficult to argue convincingly that the ideal is simply a life without the split, though this would be a significant commitment. But something of the kind does seem to be the closest we can come to what Antony is engaged to seek.¹

At the end, then, the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra do not bring home the tragic recognition. The active engagement with the Mortal Condition is missing. They merely continue helpless in its grasp and despair of living so,

¹I should say, by contrast, that this is more or less what both Antony and Cleopatra attempt to establish in Shakespeare's play.

which is a far different thing from failing to live so because one willfully attacks that which, by virtue of the Mortal Condition, he maintains. From the essential passivity of these figures comes neither the mystery of suffering and defeat nor the paradox of spiritual elevation.

What one does seem to get from the play is a realization that reason, the grand ideal of the age, is no security against the destructiveness of man's natural division. Alexas, who is "reason undisturbed,"¹ has brought much of the destruction to pass. His undisturbed reason, when it attempted to resolve the dichotomy of man's soul, could only accentuate the split and bring the suffering inherent in it to fruition. These, certainly, are the seeds of Tragedy, but they are planted in no tragic figure, nor nourished by any vision of the Mortal Condition. Thus they lie dormant, or else issue forth as a brief, melancholy lament on the age.

Dryden came close to Tragedy in All for Love. And the general excellence of the drama, and the many beauties of the poetry almost make one accept it as a successful attempt. But even though he looked steadily and hard at the Mortal Condition, he saw it through the glass provided by the seventeenth century. The evil he saw man contesting with was an evil within, and only within. No tragic figure could seek to chase Evil into the corner of the world and then find

¹Ibid., p. 363.

himself that corner. Evil, and all else of man's problems, had already retreated into a span, from which he could not get them out. The eyes had turned inward, and what they saw suggested no connections with infinity, no dealing with immortality, no mystery. The world of man was finite indeed; within these limits Tragedy could not find room.

AFTERWORD

It should come as no great surprise to one, if, in his application of the definition of Tragedy here outlined, he should discover that examples of pure Tragedy are relatively few. The discovery has been made by the sensibilities of generation after generation of readers. The problem has been to find a way of clarifying and defending these discoveries. Furthermore, judged by even the loosest of criteria, the dramatic literature of the world can show only a small percentage of what we have been accustomed to call Tragedy.

Neither should one conclude that because pure Tragedy is not plentiful the class is too near empty to be of any practical use. Few literary forms are pure. And the epic, at least, is a genre that is ordinarily held to offer at best a handful of more or less pure examples. Students of Tragedy are often puzzled by the great differences among so-called Tragedies, and find themselves at a loss to see the essential likeness. I believe the present definition can be of assistance to them in these quandries. Obviously the lack of a clear understanding of the nature of Tragedy prevents one's discovering the real differences among "Tragedies"; it

prevents one's being able to determine which are truly Tragedies, though perhaps flawed, and which are works of another kind, fine though they may be. This isolating of the nature of Tragedy, therefore, is very valuable in any attempt to find out what is the center of interest and nature of content of a particular work which obviously deals with the predicament of moral, mortal man.

Finally, there has been much speculation in the past about the kinds of ages during which Tragedy can appear. And interest in the question appears to be growing. Such a definition as this one should be a valuable aid in any such investigation, which, of course, it has been no part of my purpose to conduct here.

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