

# AN ASPECT OF TRAGEDY

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# AN ASPECT OF TRAGEDY

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## AN ASPECT OF TRAGEDY \*

TONIGHT I WISH to put before you a few, still tentative ideas about the origin and nature of that "pity and terror" which most critics since Aristotle have regarded as essential to Tragedy.

Let me start with an attempted definition:

The pity and terror proper to tragedy are communicated by witnessing a protracted spiritual crisis involving the disintegration (or tearing asunder) of a personality (or self). This is accompanied by a revelation of the reality of evil.

I shall attempt to substantiate this definition in the following manner.

I. A very brief and possibly redundant argument to establish the interior nature of tragedy, by contrasting it with melodrama.

II. By examining their origins, I shall try to show (a) how both liturgical drama and tragedy, like the rituals from which they spring, are both concerned with the problem of evil, and (b) how they differ in their treatment of it.

III. I shall define what I mean by "personality or self"; then, by comparing a tragic hero's experience with that of a non-tragic sufferer, attempt to show that the difference consists in a "protracted spiritual crisis involving a tearing asunder of the self". This will be illustrated by a comparison of the heroes of a liturgical play, *Everyman*, and a tragedy, *The Oresteia*.

IV. I shall read central passages from plays, ancient and modern, which contain "a revelation of the reality of evil".

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V. I shall end with a brief glance at various dramatic answers to this revelation of evil.

## I

First, then, the interior nature of tragedy.

This seems to me to be one of the points on which Aristotle, usually so precise, has not been precise enough.

“Terror and pity may be raised by the decoration, . . . the mere spectacle: but they may also arise from the circumstances of the action itself: which is far preferable and shows the superior poet. For the fable (or plot) should be so constructed that without the assistance of sight, it's incidents may excite terror and commiseration in those who hear them only.”

Poetics, Part II, XIII, translated T. Twining.  
Everyman No. 907, p. 14.

Yet if terror and pity may be raised by the mere spectacle, a melodrama might qualify for the august title of tragedy. He admits, however, that the ear is more important than the eye. If he had carried this further, he might have specified the proper means for producing tragic pity and terror. Obviously it depends on the spoken word; and, as it is through the spoken word more than by any other means that we get to know the thoughts and feelings of people, we may take it that the type of pity and terror aroused by tragedy springs, in part at least, from internal, psychological disaster: not what is happening in the palace at Elsinore, which can be communicated in a thrilling dumb-show, but what is happening in the soul of Hamlet, which calls for words. It is this interior aspect of tragedy which distinguishes it from melodrama, which raises pity and terror by external means, and lacks any psychological depth.

## II

Similarities and differences between ritual, liturgical drama and tragedy, particularly in regard to the problem of evil.

Like many other arts, both Greek and Modern drama grew out of rituals which were concerned with the ultimate mysteries of Life and Death. These two words, in all societies, become loaded with a variety of meanings. Life suggests not only what supports life, — light, food,

warmth, shelter, — but what makes life worth living: affection; joy, sanity, beauty, order. And Death suggests not only his crude henchmen, — darkness, hunger, cold, exile, — but also hatred, boredom, strife, madness, chaos.

It is generally accepted that the rites from which Greek Drama grew were those of the god Dionysus. The pattern of his life, death and resurrection contained the following main episodes: his *agon*, or conflict with his enemy: his *pathos*, or suffering, downfall and defeat: then what might be called the triumph or revelation of Evil, (Death), his death and *sparagmos*, the tearing to pieces and scattering of his dismembered body: finally his resurrection and reintegration, his *anagnorisis* or recognition, which might be described as the second revelation, the triumph of Good, (Life).

Originally Dionysus is a vegetation god, the epitome of the seed that must die in order to live, and give life. Upon his seasonal death and resurrection, the crops, and hence the lives of his worshippers depend. Anthropologists give a most satisfying account of what agricultural processes are represented by the stages of ritual. It seems more than likely however, that from their inception, the stages through which the god passed in the annual rites, corresponded to certain movements of the individual psyche: that the *agon* and *pathos* stood not only for the struggle and suffering of animal and vegetable life in the face of winter cold or summer drought, nor the *sparagmos*, death and *anagnorisis* for the scattering of the seed, its death, and rebirth in the new crop, but for the interior process of dying to the old self and being reborn, a new creature. The rite is Janus-headed: it does service both for the external and the internal worlds.

The rite from which Medieval Drama, and hence our own, springs, is at once remarkably similar and radically different. The differences do not concern us here except to remark that the Mass, from the evening of its inception, was concerned with the destiny of the soul, not with the annual vicissitudes of the crops.

If we equate the Crucifixion with the *sparagmos*, the parallel between the patterns is complete: both contain a double revelation: a temporary victory of the powers of Evil (death, darkness and chaos), followed by a victory of the powers of Good (life, light and order). In the northern hemisphere, of course, Easter is timed to coincide with spring, so that the rebirth of nature provides a telling symbol for the new life in the soul.

The first Medieval plays were dramatisations of the ritual for Good Friday and Easter Monday, and were aimed at deepening the

worshipper's penitence and mortification, and his joy: to help him die to himself, that he might be reborn. The later dramatisations of the whole Bible were wider in scope: they portrayed the same pattern as it affected the whole race, not the individual: the fall of Man, his long *agon* and *pathos* in the Old Testament, his death and resurrection in the New.

Both ritual and liturgical drama, then, have an answer to the problem of evil. The believer, no matter how he suffers, is saved from a crucifixion or dismemberment of his soul, first, by his acceptance by faith of his God's victory over sin and hell and death, a victory which is his, if he submits to a moral discipline, — a denial of self, an abnegation of that pride which is the acknowledged tragic sin. A saint may suffer torments of doubt and physical torture, but provided he maintains his faith in ultimate victory, he is never tragic. The tragic hero, however, lacks or loses this assurance, or having it, refuses to submit to the moral discipline. He finds he cannot cope with evil on his own. His soul is torn to pieces. In his agony, he may or may not discover an answer.

Let us glance at the development of tragedy out of liturgical drama.

Tragedy proper comes in both Greece and modern Europe with the rise of nationalism, the secular spirit, and individualism. The stage reflects the spirit of the age. The god, or demi-god of the Greek ritual, or the patriarch, martyr or the saint of the Miracle play, is replaced by a figure symbolic of the new values: in the case of Greece, a hero of the Trojan war, the founder of a city state; in the case of England, a great king or warrior: not the Pantheon and the Bible, but Homer and Holinshed.

In England the process of secularisation is rapid and radical. The first great tragedy of our stage is Dr. Faustus. This play deserves a little attention, as it will conveniently illustrate the contrast between tragedy and its precursors.

Faustus is a genius who knows everything except what is forbidden. He rejects the commands of God, not because he does not believe in their validity, but because he finds them irksome. He wants to be a god himself:

“A sound magician is a demigod:

Here Faustus, tire thy brains to get a deity.”

Impelled by this magnificent ambition, he sells his soul to the Devil in return for enormous powers. In spite of his avowed idealistic

intentions however, he does not use these powers to build Utopia. He plays practical jokes on the Pope instead, and does conjuring tricks before the Emperor.

He is frequently assailed by his conscience "to abjure this magic and return to God."

„GOOD ANGEL: Sweet Faustus, leave that execrable art.

FAUSTUS: Contrition, prayer, repentance! What of them?

GOOD ANGEL: O they are means to draw thee up to Heaven!

EVIL ANGEL: Rather illusions, fruits of lunacy,  
That makes men foolish that do trust them most."

That is the matter in a nutshell. The real obstacle to faith, and hence to rebirth, is not intellectual, but moral. Faustus' unwillingness to accept "Contrition, prayer, repentance" springs from the tragic sin of pride. Having made a god of himself, he finds it impossible to fulfil the necessary conditions of rebirth, which seem "the fruits of lunacy" to his arrogant intellect. Under these circumstances only one revelation is possible: that of evil: hell. The play ends with the *sparagmos* of Faustus: he is torn out of this life by a bevy of devils.

The prototype of Humanism cannot escape the revelation of evil. He certainly experiences the suffering of Good Friday, but as he will not renounce himself, he cannot experience the resurrection of Easter Monday. He knows the first revelation only.

Now this is true not only of the isolated play, Faustus. Both Elizabethan and Greek drama, with certain notable exceptions, concentrate on the *agon*, the *pathos*, the *sparagmos* or crucifixion, and the death.

It would be possible, therefore, to account for the similarity of movement, and the presence of the evil revelation, in these two bodies of drama by their close proximity to ages of faith, in which the rituals were widely practised and the stages popularly known: but how account for its presence in the twentieth century, in the works of anti-clerical writers like Sartre, and in many secular plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, O'Neill, Williams and Miller? I suggest that the reason why dramatists of all Ages give us a revelation of evil, evil as against what is merely wrong or socially reprehensible, is because evil exists. Evil is real: the abyss is there. And as tragedy, like ritual, is an

honest attempt to get to grips with the complexity and mystery of life and death, it cannot avoid so large and important a portion of reality. One of the reasons why the pattern found in the lives of the gods repeats itself in tragedies which appeal to all Ages is that it corresponds to something fundamental in the nature of man himself.

So much, in ridiculous brevity, for origins, developments, and affinities between ritual, liturgical drama, and tragedy.

### III

Let us now define "the self". Before doing this, however, it is necessary to utter a warning.

Under the influence of Aristotle, we have tended to lay far too much stress on the hero. Tragedy arises from the reactions of all the actors to a disaster. It may certainly involve one more than others and for the sake of convenience we may concentrate our attention on the main figure, but it is essentially communal. Nor is this all: tragedy is not concerned with an isolated incident, a nasty little eddy which occurs, quite inexplicably, on the calm summer lake, but rather with a whirlpool in the treacherous stream of Time, and we are never allowed to forget it. Tragedy looks before and after. All the great tragedies I know are set against a background of public disaster or disturbing change. Note how many Greek plays spring from the fall of Troy. *Oedipus* begins in the disaster of a plague, *Macbeth* with war, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *Juno and the Paycock*, *Murder in the Cathedral* with civil strife. Many modern plays are rooted in the class struggle: *Hedda Gabler*, *Lady Julie*, *Love on the Dole*.

Tragedy then, is political and social, not private. Further, it is metaphysical. It involves the Gods, whether modern, bloodless abstracts such as Liberty, or the old living metaphors of Olympus, or the Holy Trinity itself. In Greek plays the human conflict is often a reflection of a conflict between the Gods themselves. If the Gods are not present Fortune, Fate and Destiny are. Shakespeare, like the Greeks, is full of omens, spells, curses, witches, ghosts. Even Ibsen makes play of the number 13 in *The Wild Duck*. In other words, tragedy is endemic to the race and the universe, and the guilt is not merely individual, it is the guilt of Adam. We are all members of one body.

It seems to me that tragedians adopt all means to heighten the inexplicable, the unpredictable, as if to emphasise the littleness and



uncertainty of our knowledge, the extent to which we are moved and controlled by a universe which in our pride we think we can control. Yet they never give us a debased picture of man as a mere puppet. If tragedy is not possible with protagonists who have mastered the predicament by transcending it, it is equally impossible with beings who tamely submit to it. The will of man must rise, resist, revolt.

Let us now turn to the protagonist himself.

I must first attempt to define what I mean by "the self". I shall attempt a very elementary sketch, having done which, I shall outline what happens to this self as it passes on its way towards the revelation of hell.

How do we come to be individuals at all? What is an individual? These are questions which I shall not attempt: but I can say that imitation of, and reaction against other people, together with the employment of language, are two essential factors in the development of individuality. In fact, we are shaped through relationships and words, the media of drama. Our concept of ourselves is given us to some extent at least by the people we live amongst and the words we learn: this concept grows and alters with our concept of the world, and vice versa. There must be a perpetual process of adjustment between the two. But this is not the only dramatic relationship to which we are committed from birth. We ourselves are split in two: an official, organising self and an unorganised welter of energies, the not-self.

We conduct a drama within ourselves. Of the three actors in this triangle, the first and the last, the exterior world and the not-self, are perpetually surprising and sometimes betraying the official self. This is potentially tragic, as most people develop a rigid and unrealistic official self which they would rather die than lose. In order to describe the relationship between these three I must use metaphors.

Let us start with the official attitude toward the exterior world. How does Man achieve his partial mastery over the exterior world?

First, by taking things for granted, on faith: e.g. that his parents will provide him with food and shelter; that what his teachers tell him is true; he may even accept without question the proposition that the universe is to be understood by reason alone.

Next, by generalising from his experience—a process which involves abstraction and simplification, and hence, inevitably, an element of falsification. With these two instruments he maps the

universe, with remarkable success in some fields, but comparatively little in others. He tends to carry the confidence learnt in one field into another which may need utterly different techniques. Be that as it may, he cannot live without maps, and his glory is that he will keep on trying to make them correspond ever more closely to the universe. But the universe, alas, is so complex and manifold, and life is so short, that a man may have a perfect map for splitting the atom and not the most rudimentary one for falling out of love.

What happens in tragedy is a failure of maps. Man finds himself in a primitive country which he has been led to believe his grandfathers tamed and civilised: or the landscape undergoes an earthquake: or the map is simply inaccurate, or does not go far enough, or has been allowed to get mildewed round the fringes. But whether our maps be good, bad, or merely indifferent, we are perpetually prone to mistake them for the country itself. We accept the metaphor for the thing, the generalisation for the reality. Possibly one of the reasons why we enjoy tragedy is that it brings us into touch with the naked landscape, gives us an immediate perception of a reality not filtered through a neat grid of concepts.

I have used the image of a map because man's life is conveniently likened to a journey through life. But this metaphor will not do for the inner life. The self is largely an artificial creation: an organising, governing centre, a little Athens, or Sparta, controlling, drawing nourishment from an unsophisticated countryside of intuition, memory, appetite, instinct — a troublesome and yet at times delightful hinterland, forever forming pressure groups, forwarding petitions to the centre, demanding satisfaction from the exterior world. The self acts as the parliament, stock-exchange, the market place, the post office, the link between exterior and interior worlds. Needless to say there is an extensive black market of unconscious observation, smuggled pleasures, of disguised visitors; many exchanges which escape the notice of the censor. Even the diplomacy conducted by the self is not all above-board: it has, for instance a favourite face-saving device known as rationalisation.

Peculiarly vulnerable, subject to attack from without and revolt from within, this little citadel, this little self, is the subject of tragedy. Trouble may start at either end, or from both simultaneously. Very often something exterior but fundamental to the self or the not-self, is removed by accident or design. An interior political crisis results: the citadel is besieged, cut off from both the outer and the inner realities, from the environment it knows and which has shaped it. This

results in an anxious questioning of the maps of the exterior world and the laws which should govern the inner. The answers may reveal that both have been false; the character then is lost and does not know where or who he is. The foundations of the official self are shaken. Perhaps they crumble in hysteria, madness, violence or suicide. Once the organising principle in the personality loses command, the self disintegrates: there is a breakdown of frontiers between conscious and unconscious, a tearing up of maps, a frantic search for others, a contact with an intolerable reality. This is the *sparagmos*, the tearing asunder.

Let us now look at the first stage in this process: the deprivation resulting in isolation. This is usually extremely complicated and multiple. Let me however attempt to describe in metaphor the effects of a fairly simple deprivation: the loss of a husband or wife in a happy marriage.

Imagine two trees whose stems are a few feet apart. In spite of this they do not seem to hamper each other in any way: they operate to form a single, roundtopped silhouette. In winter they trace a single pattern as symmetrical and fine as the veins in a leaf. You notice, however, that one comes into blossom a week before the other. This disturbs you slightly splitting, as it does, what you took to be a reassuring unity. The "inevitable" happens, of course. One of the trees dies. The living tree is locked to a dead skeleton. Here and there its green appears incongruously among the lifeless brown. When the dead tree is removed, not only are some of the living branches torn away but the whole volume of air which it had occupied now seems a void, a vacuum into which one or two living branches stretch and find nothing. Most distressing of all, from the side where the dead tree stood, you can see the living tree in section, from the inside as it were: not the fine exterior of leaf and twig, but the crude main branches, the bruised and broken members, the warp and twist of the main structure. Its privacy is gone. It looks isolated, exposed and vulnerable.

This corresponds to the *agon* and the *pathos*: it is pathetic, not yet tragic. The tree may recover fairly quickly, sending out new growth to cover its naked side. To be tragic the main structure must be attacked and hurt, rent by a storm, struck by lightning, uprooted, cut to pieces. In other words, deprivation and isolation are preliminaries only.

This brings us to the *sparagmos*, the rending asunder of the self.

The metaphors I employ this time are from the tragedies themselves. In tragedy after tragedy, usually during the climax, when the process of deprivation and isolation is far advanced, two simple cries are heard: first: "Where am I"? or "I am lost"; and "I am undone".

The metaphor in the first is geographical. The world has changed so radically that the speaker does not recognise his surroundings: the signposts are pointing to places he does not know, or of which he is terrified.

The second metaphor is taken from binding. The rope which has bound diverse elements into a unity has been cut, and the strong fasces is a disordered jumble of sticks.

The first may be taken as the type of the many metaphors which tragic writers use to convey the experience of basic exile and alienation from the world; the second as the type which conveys the experience of inner chaos, loss of self. Both find their fullest expression in two common characteristics of tragic figures: exile and madness. Both are intimately related to each other, since one is the outward, the other the inward glance of the tragic eye. In fact, once a character starts doubting who he is, once the chorus starts asking "What is Man?", once the events on the stage raise this basic uncertainty in the minds of the audience we are, potentially, in the world of great tragedy: the world not merely of physical deprivation and nervous fear, but of spiritual panic, anxiety, suspense. This raises the pity and terror proper to tragedy—a tearing asunder, a falling apart in a protracted crisis, which threatens to conquer, and sometimes does conquer, the self.

In order to establish this point, crucial to my thesis, let us glance at two plays, the one written during an age of faith, the other as an age of faith is waning.

The first is the Medieval allegory, *Everyman*.

God sends His "mighty messenger", Death, to Everyman, summoning him to present an account of his life. Now Death is precisely one of those portions of reality which we find uncomfortable and therefore tend to forget. We leave that range or river off our maps, although we may have to cross it at any time. Everyman staggers at the news, and immediately the process of disillusion and alienation starts. He asks his best friends to come with him, friends who have (to mix the metaphors) been major reference points and signposts on his map: Fellowship (Society, the kindly comity of men, the club, the common-room); Kinsmen (his family, wife, parents, daughter, son and heir), Goods (his property, house, farm, business, professional practice). They all prove men of straw. This, not unnaturally, makes

Everyman feel like a man of straw himself. His eyes are opened, and he looks towards himself:

“Thus may I well myselfe hate.”

Isolated, his fear deepens to panic. He knows he is lost, the map has failed. The panic, however, does not spread to his deepest self, for his Good Deeds, the nearest he has ever got to reality, comes to the rescue, bringing Knowledge with her, who shows him how illusory his view of himself and the world has been. He sheds illusion in humility and penitence, and restored to hope by faith in Christ, dies to his old self, and goes towards his grave. Although the moment of panic is past, his agony is not over. As he approaches the grave he has to say good-bye to his Five Wits, his Beauty, his Strength, his Discretion, in fact all the things which helped to build the official self, the partial image which cannot survive the grave. Good Deeds alone enters the grave with him. Although sore afflicted, his last words are confident. He trusts in his God who has won the victory over sin and death for him.

“Into Thy hands, Lorde, my soule I commende.

Few people would call *Everyman* a tragedy. Is it because the ending is in essence a happy one? I do not think so. A terrible ending is not essential to Tragedy. Think of the God-given solution with which the *Oresteia* ends, of the apotheosis of *Oedipus at Colonus*, of the ecstatic reconciliation of Anthony and Cleopatra in death, of the sublime hush at the close of *Samson Agonistes*.

Let us look at the first mentioned of these: the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus' trilogy. The three plays which compose this work are concerned with a conflict of duties so profound that it involves the gods themselves: the duty to avenge a murdered father and the law against matricide.

In the first play, the *Agememnon*, Clytemnestra kills her husband as he returns from the ten year war at Troy. In a sense, he gets what he richly deserves. Not only had he offered their daughter as a sacrifice to ensure a favourable wind to sail for Troy, but he has brought home as his unwilling mistress, Cassandra (who, incidentally, introduces the element of madness). Yet the gods had called for the sacrifice. Moreover he is a member of a house with a curse upon it. The chorus wonders if the curse will ever be lifted. With his murder a primitive sort of justice is satisfied: the justice of the family or clan, which demanded vengeance for the murder of a member.

In the next play, his exiled son, Orestes, returns. He is not yet a tragic figure, although he has been deprived of his father, his throne,

his homeland. Apollo, who here appears as the god of tribal law, expressly lays upon him the duty of avenging his father, although it involves matricide. Orestes kills his mother. So far he has followed what might be called a traditional map of behaviour. So far the arena has been mainly exterior, the city of Argos. It now becomes the soul of Orestes. He is immediately set upon by the furies, symbols of an intolerable, dementing guilt. Yet Apollo, who layed the task upon him, must surely share this guilt.

The next play, *The Eumenides*, opens with Orestes prostrate before the statue of Apollo, surrounded by the furies and haunted by the ghost of his mother. Apollo promises help, but cannot give it himself. How can he? The same law which demanded the death of Agememnon should demand the death of Orestes. He sends the guilt-laden man to the shrine of Athene, the goddess of counsel and wisdom, where we next see him. He has travelled far and wide, serving a time of exile and penance. Athene undertakes to arbitrate between Orestes and the furies. The mechanism of reconciliation is too complicated to trace here, but, in short, he is relieved, and restored to his senses and his kingdom by the goddess, who, working through a wise council of men, modifies the crude old law of an eye for an eye. Orestes is freed from the furies; and the curse is lifted.

I have given this extremely crude outline of the *Oresteia* because it presents what might be called the complete tragic pattern: the questioning of the old answer or map, the deadlock or the state of crisis, followed by the new answer or map: in fact, the double revelation of the ritual. The difference between Everyman and Orestes is that Everyman never for a moment doubts or questions God, nor himself: his soul is not torn asunder, while that of Orestes is. Orestes gets his answer only after protracted agony of exile and madness. Yet his suffering has achieved not only a more reliable map, but has done something for all men. Tribal law has given place to wisdom, Apollo to Athene. The problem, be it noted, has not been answered, but transcended, and the social context is no longer the clan, but the state.

What conclusion can we draw from this comparison?

Both heroes are confronted with an evil with which they cannot cope, and both discover an answer. One play is considered a tragedy, the other not. It seems to me that the determining difference lies in the presence in one of what I have defined as a protracted "spiritual crisis involving a tearing asunder of the self".

#### IV

My next task is to establish the presence of "a revelation of evil as a reality". This I shall do by reading passages taken from the crises of



plays, ancient, Elizabethan and modern. You will forgive me if I preface these passages with a short note on the poetic means employed to communicate this revelation.

I have already pointed out two common metaphors which occur during the crisis: and suggested their derivation from two fundamental fears: homelessness, exile, not belonging; and loss of self, shame, disgrace, madness. These fears are communicated in several ways: by symbolical movement and gesture, by external deprivation which we know will have an internal effect: but none of these is as important as the use of metaphor in the spoken word.

Certain metaphors recur so often in Tragedy as to be called stock (as stock as the use of light to indicate life, and darkness, death)—permanent metaphors, in fact. Most common and powerful, I think, are those drawn from storms: storms which envelope both sea and land in a destructive fury—wind, water, thunder, lightning; images of shipwreck, washaway, inundation, drowning. Next, images of fire, burning, scorching, thirst, drought. Fire and flood are the oldest enemies of man: the primordial foes of his element, land, the destroyers of his house or city: obvious images of destruction and chaos. Then there are metaphors taken from the animal world, springing either from our fear of the tooth and the claw, or, more likely, the terror of our consciousness for the unconscious dog beneath the skin: the terror of reverting to bestiality; and images springing from a terror of disease and maiming, of an intimate decay, of the disintegration and putrefaction of the grave. There are others, but those examples will suffice. *King Lear* draws from all the above sources.

Before I give extended examples of this peculiar revelation which accompanies the *sparagmos* or rending asunder of the personality, here are one or two ordinary usages which show that this is no esoteric experience: "During the disaster he let *himselſ* go to *pieces*" or "He told the hysterical girl to *pull herself together*".

The following single lines from Shakespeare contain a clear element of *sparagmos*.

Hamlet sighs as if "to shatter all his bulk and end his being".

Othello cries: "If she loves me not, chaos is come again."

Richard the Second, at his abdication, smashes the mirror in which he sees the "brittle glory" of his face.

Let us now look at a few longer passages which contain the element I am speaking of.

## OEDIPUS REX

Oedipus, deranged at the revelation of his birth, has blinded himself, thus exiling himself from a world which is no longer tolerable.

OED:

O agony!  
Where am I? Is this my voice  
That is bourne on the air?  
What fate has come to me?

CHORUS:

Unspeakable to mortal ear,  
Too terrible for eyes to see.

OED:

O dark intolerable, inescapable night  
That has no day!  
Cloud that no air can take away . . . .  
Apollo, friends, Apollo  
Has laid this agony on me . . . .  
What should I do with eyes  
Where all is ugliness?

CHORUS:

It cannot be denied.

OED:

Where is there any beauty  
For me to see? Where loveliness  
Of sight or sound? Away!  
Lead me quickly away  
Out of this land. I am lost,  
Hated of gods, no man so damned.

## KING LEAR

King Lear, hurt to the soul by the heartlessness and malice of his daughters, is an exile in his own kingdom, an old man staggering about in a storm, with only fools and madman for company. He is going mad himself.

LEAR:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout  
Till you have drenched our steeples, drown'd the cocks!  
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
Singe my white head! And thou, all shaking thunder,  
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world,  
Crack nature's moulds, all germins spill at once  
That make ingrateful man!



FOOL:

O nuncle, court holywater in a dry house is better than this rain water out o' doors. Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughter's blessing: here's a night pities neither wise men nor a fool.

LEAR:

Rumble thy bellyfull! Spit, fire, spout, hail!  
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters.  
I tax you not you elements, with unkindness:  
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,  
You owe me no subscription: then, let fall  
Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave,  
A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man.  
But yet I call you servile ministers  
That have with two pernicious daughters joined  
Your high-engendered battles 'gainst a head  
As old and white as this. O! O! 'tis foul.

#### THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

In an attempt to break her spirit, her brothers have exiled her from all that matters to her. Imprisoned in her own castle, she has just been led to believe that her husband and eldest son have been murdered. Her brothers have filled her house with madmen, in the hope of driving her to despair. When these withdraw, Bosola comes to kill her. Bosola is an exile of the Elizabethan type: the melancholy man. This scene is interesting because the spirit of the main protagonist is not broken: she keeps her faith in herself: so much so that it is Bosola who starts to question himself. Having murdered her, he becomes her avenger. Of her brothers, one goes mad, the other dies with a splendid, if diabolical stoicism.

BOSOLA:

I am come to make thy tomb.

DUCHESS:

Ha! My tomb!  
Thou speakest as if I lay on my deathbed,  
Gasping for breath: dost thou perceive me sick?

BOSOLA:

Yes, and the more dangerously, since thy sickness is insensible.

DUCHESS:

Thou art not mad, sure: dost know me?

BOSOLA:

Yes.

DUCHESS:

Who am I?

BOSOLA:

Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best but a salvatory of green mummy. What's this flesh? A little crudded milk, fantastical puff paste. Our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in: more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth worms. Didst ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body: the world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads, like her looking glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison.

DUCHESS:

Am I not thy duchess?

BOSOLA:

Thou art some great woman, sure . . .

DUCHESS:

I am the duchess of Malfi still.

A little later, just before the executioners enter, Bosola comments as follows on life:

“Of what is't fools make such vain keeping?  
Sin their conception, their birth weeping,  
Their life a general mist of error,  
Their death a hideous storm of terror.”

## JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK

The following verses are spoken by Mary, whose lover has left her, and who has just been deserted for the second time:

An' we felt the power that fashioned  
All the lovely things we saw,  
That created all the murmur  
Of an everlasting law,  
Was a hand of force and beauty  
With an eagle's tearing claw.

Then we saw the globe of beauty  
Was an ugly thing as well,  
A hymn divine whose chorus  
Was an agonising yell:  
Like the story of a demon  
That an angel had to tell:

## MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

The following extracts are from the chorus which is spoken while Beckett is being murdered by the drunken knights. You will notice the language of panic, the sense of exile and loss in a world that is "Wholly foul":

"Clear the air! Clean the sky! Wash the wind! Take stone  
from stone and wash them.  
The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts and ourselves defiled  
with blood.  
A rain of blood has blinded my eyes. Where is England? Where  
is Kent? Where is Canterbury?  
O far, far, far in the past; and I wander in a land of broken  
boughs: if I break them, they bleed: I wander in a land of  
dry stones: if I touch them they bleed.  
How can I ever return, to the soft quiet seasons? . . . .

But this, this is out of life, this is out of time,  
An instant eternity of evil and wrong.  
We are soiled by a filth we cannot clean, united to supernatural  
vermin,  
It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the city that is defiled,  
But the world that is wholly foul.  
Clear the air! Clean the sky, wash the wind! Take the stone  
from the stone, take the skin from the arm, take the muscle  
from the bone, and wash them. Wash the stone, wash the bone,  
wash the brain, wash the soul, wash them, wash them."

I hope that these passages, short as they are, have shown what I mean by a revelation of evil in tragedy.

In these examples it is superbly articulate, but in many plays the statement is not so direct. It may be achieved by loading two characters or concepts with every possible incompatibility and then violating the one by the other: by pouring the sweet milk of concord into hell. A modern example of this is the rape of Blanche du Bois by Kowalsky in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The revelation of the details of her lover's suicide to Hedda Gabler is another. One of the major problems of a realistic technique, however, is to make the revelation articulate. Much

can be done to suggest it by the use of dancing and music: there is the superb scene during the seduction of lady Julie. Much can be done by a set of interrelated symbols: the sea, swamp and forest symbols in *The Wild Duck*. But without the catalysing clarity of poetry, I do not think we shall ever be able to do anything but whisper shamefacedly in the presence of Aeschylus and Shakespeare.

But whatever the technique employed, I am satisfied that the communication of terror by this means is something which all tragedies worthy of the name must have.

## V

It only remains to say a little about possible dramatic answers to this revelation of evil. This section is the most tentative of all.

The problem is complicated by the fact that a single play may contain several responses to the disaster, some hopeful, some hopeless. In some plays we will be misled if we attend only to the destinies of the protagonists. What matters is the world in which they act: the author's judgment of them, his intentions. For instance, although the Duchess of Malfi dies nobly, firm in her faith: although her death ennoble her murderer and turns him into her avenger, although her brothers are punished, and her son is to come into her estates, the total effect of the play is pessimistic if not nihilistic. We may even have, as in *King Lear*, the complete tragic pattern of death-to-self and regeneration, but it is all to no purpose as the universe in which this takes place knows nothing of such a process. The ending is disastrous, and the spirit stoical: "Men must endure their going hence even as their coming hither."

Unless the ending of the play in some way justifies the *agon*, the *pathos* and the death, the pattern is incomplete. In the complete pattern the pain need not be explained—indeed, who can explain pain?—but we must be satisfied that as a result of a victory over it, the universe makes better sense. Not only must the inner chaos be mastered, but the outer world must appear to be capable of mastery. Man may still seem an exile on earth, but he must be assured of a home in the Universe. There must be a possibility of heaven after hell and purgatory. There must be a revelation of good as well as evil.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me make it quite clear that the absence of a resolution such as we saw in the *Eumenides* has nothing to do with the greatness or otherwise of a play: a resolution is simply one of the ways in which a tragedy may end.

I think, however, that it might be possible to classify endings under three heads: Nihilistic, Stoical, Religious or Transcendental.

By a Nihilistic ending I mean one which leaves an impression of suffering to no purpose in an alien or apathetic universe. Plays which

leave this impression on me are *The Trojan Women*, Racine's *Andromache*, *Hedda Gabler*, Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

I would use the word Stoical to describe plays in which the impression is very much the same, but partly redeemed by the fortitude and dignity of humanity in the face of a capricious and inexplicable universe: the flies in the hands of the wanton gods bear themselves nobly. Here I would place *King Lear*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Sartre's *The Flies*.

I would apply the terms Religious or Transcendental to plays in which an answer is found in something bigger than intellect or law, something which springs from the principle of sacrifice itself, the principle which lies at the heart of the germinal rite: a dying into life. It might be described as the discovery of an ultimate solvent, love or *agape*, of a map which includes so much of reality that the Furies themselves have become the Eumenides, and the sin of Adam the blessed fault. Plays, apart from those already mentioned, which I would include in this group, are Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Shelly's *Prometheus*, Goethe's *Faust*, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*.

*The Family Reunion* is particularly interesting, as Harry, the hero is a modern Orestes, who has to break out of his haunted, unreal world by way of expiation and forgiveness. Eliot, in attempting to do this, has had to say in one play what Aeschylus said in three. And here we are up against the technical problem of the limits imposed by acting-time and the capacity of the audience. It is difficult enough to achieve tragic effects in two hours without saddling oneself with the provision of a resolution as well. The single play does not allow time enough, perhaps, to concentrate on both the death and the rebirth; perhaps one has to choose where one will lay the emphasis.

It is not surprising that Mr. Eliot's next play, *The Cocktail Party*, neglects the way into the dilemma, and concentrates almost entirely on the way out of it. It is interesting to note, too, the answers he gives: two are to be stoics, to make the best of a bad job: one has not yet got as far as asking the tragic question and therefore gets no answer; another is reborn.

I mention this play, a tragi-comedy — because it may be a portent. The modern theatre has so far been non-committal in the face of the tragic question. It has concentrated on the *pathos* and the *agon*. Now there is a certain delight in tragedy when one's own world and consciousness are relatively secure: but there comes a point at which further contemplation of the abyss is intolerable. Perhaps we are

reaching that point: perhaps the long-neglected portion of the tragic pattern is to come into its own.

Is this wishful thinking? Possibly. But I would like to close with a piece of evidence in favour of my suggestion which concerns the dramatist who looked deeper into the abyss than any other: Shakespeare.

After centuries of misunderstanding, of being called fanciful and even preposterous, of being patronised as the work of a failing genius, the last plays of Shakespeare are being taken seriously: *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*. It is as if Shakespeare lived through the pattern himself, and wrote these last plays when he had transcended the problem of evil. Whether this is so or not, these last plays all concentrate on the way out of the dilemma, and the way out in all is basically the same.

There are parallels, not to be pressed too far, between Lear and Cymbeline; both old autocrats who lose, and find, their favourite children. *Lear* ends in a revelation which is as futile as it is sublime, the victim of wanton gods, with gloom and ruin on the realm. *Cymbeline* ends with reconciliation: 'pardon's the word for all'. Incense and psalms ascend to the gods, and peace links the kingdoms of Britain and Rome.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare had depicted the diabolical power of jealousy. In *The Winter's Tale* he returns to the "green-eyed monster", and tames it by humility and penitence. The climax of the play, you will remember, is a symbolical bringing to life.

In both these plays, and in *The Tempest*, the whole world seems to be reborn: it is the world of spring; and the bearers of grace and forgiveness, Imogen, Perdita and Miranda, are like no one so much as the Madonna of the Medieval Lyrics.

Lastly, *The Tempest*: the wronged Prospero, the exile, turns all his Faust-like powers to heal and not to revenge; the stupendous intellect is gentle, humble before a reality which is not ultimately but immediately mysterious. His last words, and possibly the last verses Shakespeare penned, are these: they are an acceptance of the conditions of rebirth which Faustus had rejected.

Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,  
And my ending is despair  
Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierces so that it assaults  
Mercy itself and frees all faults.  
As you from crimes would pardoned be  
Let your indulgence set me free.