THREE PAPERS ON TRAGEDY

F. D. Sinclair

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by

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1. The Jacobean Anguish

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THE JACOBEAN ANGUISH

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.

WEBSTER: *The Duchess of Malfi.*

* * * *

It was Stendhal who first made a literary point of the theory that an artist is truly appreciated only by an age for which his work holds a special significance, for which it is real, a part of experience. That this is true may be seen in the fact that so many writers owe their ultimate fame to discovery or rediscovery by a public far removed from them in time and manners. Stendhal is a case in point: when he said that his work would be appreciated only after eighty years, he was almost exactly right. And Donne and Pascal are similar cases.

For us of the twentieth century the Jacobeans have a peculiar attraction, one which arises principally from the similarity of the conditions in which we live to those of the earlier seventeenth century. The sense of restlessness, of insecurity and disgust of life upon which their greatest work was built is no strange sense to us today who live it and live with it, and are constantly being kept in mind of it by our foremost writers and artists. Our world, no less — and perhaps no more — than theirs, is a sick one; sick because bewildered by a disintegration with which it cannot cope, which it cannot understand although already aware of it. Bewilderment in itself is not harmful; may, indeed be beneficial; but when it is intensified beyond a certain degree it is almost certain to bring about an unbalance comparable with that achieved by Pavlov in his experiments with conditioned reflexes, an unbalance succeeded by break-down and neuroses.

An age which can go so far along the path of contemporary writers and artists as to produce the nightmares of Kafka, a philosophical system such as that of Jean-Paul Sartre, or a cynicism in its treatment of human bodies and minds such as is general in our time, would have appealed to the conventionally machiavellian in the Jacobeans. For much the same reasons, principally perhaps because they were less squeamish and less uncomfortably-conscienced than us, the Jacobeans come close to our hearts. It is not entirely without reason that *The Duchess of Malfi* was put on and had a long run in one of the great London theatres shortly after

the war. It is not for nothing that T. S. Eliot, possibly our foremost analyst of Weltschmerz and our foremost poet, should be deeply interested in the period and very much influenced by it in his own work. Bosola's lines are, indeed, because we can feel them at first-hand and apply them with full awareness, the key for us to a study of the Jacobean drama in general, and particularly to the comprehension of individual dramatists, their outlook and their expression of it.

Of the names which could be given to that peculiar quality which pervades the work of the Jacobeans and informs especially their character-drawing, I think that *anguish* is perhaps the best. The application of single terms to what takes much explanation and is in itself protean, is not satisfactory; but it is better to establish a symbol right at the beginning of any discussion, which will at least avoid undue vagueness throughout, than to flounder in a morass of parentheses and varying interpretations. The term *Metaphysical* as it is applied to the poets of the earlier seventeenth century is in itself extremely vague because it carries with it neither direct explanation, nor differentiation between widely distinguished writers; but it is extremely useful because it conveys a flavour and indicates a mental climate which may be said to be common to a whole group.

This quality of anguish which is common to the greatest dramatists of the period necessarily changes from man to man. Whatever the type of play, whatever its subject — and there is not a great deal of variety outside of the themes of revenge and of evil, the result of strong mediaeval and sometimes ill-digested renaissance influences — each work is given its character primarily by the individual approach of the dramatist, by his own appreciation of the common formula. Tourneur, Webster, Middleton, and Ford all handled similar material and were men, it seems, of similar temperament. But each of them had his own expression; so that while Webster's lines quoted above may be said to apply generally to the greater characters of all four dramatists, there must be considerable qualification in each distinct application.

"When the bad bleed then is the tragedy good."

For Tourneur the tragedy was especially good, because, with small exaggeration, all were bad and all bled. Ifor Evans, writing of the Jacobeans, says:

> Tourneur's mind seems pitiless, and his cruel world is one into which normality is never permitted to intervene. Unlike Webster, he never relents towards his tormented characters . . . Yet Tourneur continues to give the impression that this is no melodramatic holocaust, but a poetic view of the world, of a cruel, diseased, lecherous, revengeful world, from which there is no escape and in the midst of which there is no pity.

It seems to me, however, that there is more to it than just that. There is so much in *The Revenger's Tragedy* that savours of the mediaeval morality play that it is difficult to criticise it as presenting a true picture, a true conception even, of the world. Characters which bear abstract names must always indicate that allegorical ideas are not far behind the writer's actual expression, even if they are not present in it. Moreover, the logical progression and the consistency of this play, together with its obvious artificiality and its complete inhumanity (c.f. the humanity of *The Atheist's Tragedy),* put it in a class of its own.

In the light of what has been said above, the application to Vendice of Bosola's lines must have an entirely different significance from that of their application to, say, Flamineo in *The White Devil.* Vendice is, in fact, the moralist's delight, quite apart from his value to the psychologist. (There must, by the way, be few periods of literature which offer richer pasture to the student of psychology than the Jacobean. Even today, much behaviour of a comparable nature has lost the directness, the gusto, the almost pristine glitter of that of the earlier seventeenth century.) Vendice is the revenger, justifiably so, according to the convention; and a pure and virtuous man. Yet in his pursuit of revenge he shows himself more depraved, more positively evil than those of his fellows who are set up as examples *par excellence* of depravity. One is reminded, in this aspect of character, of a later Vendice — the Roger Chillingworth of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter,* a man diabolised by his obsession.

Vendice: Surely we're all mad people, and they
Whom we think are, are not, we mistake those,
Thus we are mad in sense, they but in clothes.

Hippolito: Faith and in clothes too we, give us our due.

Vendice: Here might a scornful and ambitious woman
Look through and through herself — see ladies with false forms,
You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms.
Now to my tragic business, look you brother,
I have not fashioned this only for show
And useless property, no, it shall bear a part
E'en in its own revenge. This very skull,
Whose mistress the Duke poisoned, with this drug
The mortal curse of the earth, shall be reveng'd
In the like strain, and kiss his lips to death,
As much as the dumb thing can, he shall feel:
What fails in poison we'll supply in steel.

Hippolito: Brother I do applaud thy constant vengeance,
The quaintness of thy malice above thought.

(The Revenger's Tragedy, III.5.)

This is, I think, wherein, in this case, the force of Bosola's "mist of error" lies; the inference being that there can be awareness of the mist or ignorance of it, but that all are equally lost in it; and that, whatever path a character takes, it leads him astray. The "hideous storm of terror" must, as far as Vendice is concerned, result directly from his knowledge of his own misdeeds, from a consciousness of sin that is counter-balanced by the consciousness of a hell that merely perpetuates his hell-on-earth:

> That's the greatest torture souls feel in hell,
> In hell, that they must live and cannot die.
>
> (*The Duchess of Malfi*, IV.I.70.)

One is reminded strongly here that Sartre has explored the same idea in detail, and in a peculiarly contemporary set of circumstances, in his *Huis Clos*. The hotel room, symbol of impermanence, of the furtive and precarious pleasures involved in the conduct of clandestine or adulterous love-affairs, becomes the utterly sordid, utterly hopeless hell of the seedy members of an improbable triangle, in this case truly an eternal one. But Sartre examines the result; for Tourneur the interest lies in the course, and in the characters' growing awareness. As they become more aware, made so by their actions, they become more outspoken, more clear in their commentaries on the situation and on their own predicament.

It seems to me thus that the great power of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, its dramatic effect and impact, lie in the fact that Tourneur has achieved a presentation of which it is impossible to say, dismissing it: "That was pretty good; a true story too. They're nasty types those Italians." Instead, because of the complete absence from the play of anything which can give it a local habitation and a name, the audience is faced with an unrelated pageant of evil, with which it must, in the very act of comprehension, identify itself.

* * * *

Beyond his savage morality, there seems to be some reason for seeing in Tourneur a certain abnormality of outlook from which Webster is almost entirely free. Pessimist though he may be — consider Flamineo and Bosola as vocal symbols of disillusionment — there is a kind of qualified humanism in Webster which puts him closer to Shakespeare than to the majority of his contemporaries. His insight into human character, his rich endowment with what Unamuno has called "the tragic sense of life", the recognition of human worth even in error and without hope in face of overwhelming odds: "the triumph of the inner self when all outward happiness is dashed to pieces" — all these give him that proximity.

Vittoria: My soul, like to a ship in a black storm,
Is driven I know not whither.

Flamineo: Then cast anchor.

Art thou gone
And thou so near the bottom? false report
Which says that women vie with the nine Muses
For nine tough durable lives! I do not look
Who went before, nor who shall follow me;
No, at myself I will begin and end.
While we look up to heaven we confound
Knowledge with knowledge. O, I am in a mist. . .
'Tis well there is yet some goodness in my death,
My life was a black charnel: I have caught
An everlasting cold. I have lost my voice
Most irrecoverably. Farewell glorious villains!
This busy trade of life appears most vain ,
Since rest breeds rest; where all seek pain by pain.

(The White Devil, V.6.)

The application of his own lines to Webster's work must necessarily show results other than appear in the case of Tourneur. For Webster, there is a deep note of pity, of regret, in the entire *recitation* of Bosola:

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.

It is not the fault of men that they should be so afflicted, so lost. They are possessed by an evil that is external, and act in torment. Ferdinand is, I think, the prime example of this anguish to be found in Webster. His is the self-hatred, caused perhaps by the sense of guilt arising from his recognition in himself of incestuous leanings, which makes him fiercely desirous of hurting others. There is no real hate in his words or in his actions other than self hate and hatred of life, else he could not say (IV.I): "I will no longer study in the book/ Of another's heart"; or, later, after the murder of his sister, the Duchess, have such a strong and sudden change of feeling. He wished to be rid of his sister, not for the given reasons — they are, with the possible exception of material greed, mere rationalisations — but because he believes that with her will die his sense of guilt and the torments of jealousy which he so violently expresses in 11.5:

. . . . Talk to me somewhat, quickly,
Or my imagination will carry me
To see her in the shameful act of sin.

* * * *

Ha! what art thou that tak'st away the light
Betwixt that star and me? I dread thee not:
'Twas but a mist of conscience.

Middleton — *The Changeling*.

De Flores's "mist of conscience" has a touch of bravado about it which at once puts him into the category of those who are aware of their mist of error, who make use of its screening darkness as a cover for their own conscious evil, and who know only too well that the same is being done by those around them. It is this awareness of evil in the characters themselves that makes of Middleton's theatre a much more realist thing than that of either Tourneur or Webster. There are a life and an energy in those characters which justify Lamb's comparison of Middleton with Chaucer, a vigour and a restraint, a discipline in their drawing that surpass his contemporaries.

Beatrice: Why 'tis impossible thou canst be so wicked,
Or shelter such a cunning cruelty,
To make his death the murderer of my honour.
Thy language is so bold and vicious,
I cannot see which way I can forgive it with any modesty.

De Flores: Push, you forget yourself, a woman dipt in blood and talk of modesty.

(*The Changeling* III.4.)

De Flores is nobody's fool, least of all his own. He is thoroughly aware of his situation, and opportunist because of his awareness.

The Jacobean anguish is then, with Middleton, not formalised or machiavellian as with Tourneur, not tempered, as in Webster, with the sense of humanity: it is pushed to the extreme of the satirist, but not of that satirist who, like Jonson, can laugh, even at his most despicable characters. It is deadly earnest, an unsentimental portrayal of evil people who are the more evil because they are real. Bosola's couplet means less for De Flores than for most of the other great figures in the contemporary drama, simply because he is more fully aware of his circumstances and more in control of himself. Ferdinand's loss of values is something which could not happen to De Flores: he is too completely master of himself and of any situation. The "general mist of error" and the "hideous storm of terror" are perhaps a little too poetic to be applicable to the direct and harsh materialism of Middleton's characters, and consequently to his general handling of dramatic materials.

* * * *

In the case of John Ford, Webster's pre-occupation with the analysis of the human soul in torment is carried further. Ford is primarily interested in the problems of love and sin, which he discusses in his plays with obvious sympathy for the characters whose problems they are. His inclination is towards a fatalism which will free his characters of their guilt; for what is predetermined cannot be used to reproach a man with as it might be were his will free. Indeed, Ford's morality has been cited as indicative of the decadence of the later Jacobean drama. It seems to me, however, that Bosola's couplet applies more exactly to the work of Ford than to that of any of his fellows mentioned here. His romanticised conception of a disordered world results in his plays, especially in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, in a treatment in which "mist of error" and "hideous storm of terror" are both very much evident. Throughout the play the first crops up instantly, almost as a formula, and the second is suggested repeatedly, as when the Friar says to Giovanni:

> I was proud of my futelage, and chose
> Rather to leave my books than part with thee;
> I did so: but the fruits of all my hopes
> Are lost in thee, as thou art in thyself.
> O, Giovanni! has thou left the schools
> Of knowledge to converse with lust and death?
> For death waits on thy lust.
>
> (*'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, I.I.)

Wells says of Ford's work: "The spiritual terror is even greater than the physical, and the drama is no more remarkable for its melodramatic shudders than for its play upon moralized emotions."

In Ford's case, it seems, in fact, that awareness of his own implication in the "general mist of error", a guilty conscience in matters of moral and spiritual importance, a doubt in things religious that has not the courage to declare itself scepticism, all coupled with what Professor Neilson has called his "lawless idealism", have made of his work perhaps the most complete example of Jacobean anguish. Of Giovanni, Ford has made a vehicle for the expression of his own unconventional views, less by stressing his impiety and the nature of his sin than by sympathetic character-drawing. The success of the tragedy depends, indeed, upon that sympathy. Instead of being merely the English conception of a renaissance Italian, Giovanni becomes in Ford's hands a figure not unworthy of high tragedy, a figure in which personal charm and nobility are present in a high degree; and in Annabella beauty, gentleness, and a real purity have the same effect. The two are, clearly, as any characters so purely fictional must be, incarnations of Ford's own ideas, examples of how human beings,

worthwhile though star-crossed, should behave. (One must not forget that much of the violence and evil in the play reflects partly the general Jacobean conception of life in Renaissance Italy and partly the box-office requirements of the time. Many of our most popular films today are exactly the same, but are objectionable for different reasons because times and tastes have changed.) Ford is primarily interested in character, and it is this that carried him beyond an interest in subject-matter greater than the minimum necessary to the shaping of his play. It is perhaps not wrong to suggest that Giovanni's love for his sister has been put by Ford on the level of a *hamartia,* rather than his impiety; the implication being that Fate, which could not be responsible for impiety, is responsible for the unhappy love. His "mist of error" is likewise not of his own creating; he may be conscious of it but is powerless in it: love is stronger than considerations of right or wrong.

> So say I.
> Kiss me. If ever after-times should hear
> Of our fast-knit affections, though perhaps
> The laws of conscience and of civil use
> May justly blame us, yet when they but know
> Our loves, our love will wipe away that rigour
> Which would in other incests be abhorr'd.
> Give me your hand; how sweetly life doth run
> In these well-coloured veins! how constantly
> These palms do promise health! but I could chide
> With Nature for this cunning flattery.
> Kiss me again — forgive me.
>
> *('Tis Pity She's a Whore* (V.5.)

* * * *

It seems thus, that inside a common convention to which Bosola's couplet is loosely applicable, there is with the great Jacobeans a personal expression which gives its distinctive character to the work of each. I have attempted to note the main points in which four of those dramatists differ from each other, their various approaches and treatments, and in doing so have again been struck by the strong parallel between their outlook and expressions of it, and those of writers of our own day. The following words of Gide would not have come strangely from the mouth of Flamineo or Ferdinand:

> "A disgust, a frightful hatred of myself, sours all my thoughts the moment I wake up. The minute hostility with which I keep watch over every slightest impulse within me contorts it. Shortcomings or virtues, I no longer have anything natural in me. Everything I remember about myself fills me with horror."

THE MEANING OF KING LEAR

Shakespeare's *King Lear*, like any great work of literary art, and especially poetry, has many meanings, is susceptible of as many interpretations as there are mental directions among the human beings who read it. The richness of true poetry lies in its multiplicity of meanings, which make the experience of that poetry extraordinarily rich and full, and by no means a single one. But — and here is the most important point — all the many meanings are tributaries to the total meaning of the work; their value lies in amplification; but they are not independently of any great importance. It is the whole that matters.

Thus it is that the tragedy of Lear, a play with which most of us have been familiar since our schooldays, has, paradoxically, many meanings but only one real meaning. It is the old story of the wood and the trees. We see in the play the significance which most closely touches our particular temperament, which association has caused us to see, which a teacher or lecturer has suggested to us that we should see; but we do not see the whole; or, if we do catch a glimpse of it, we recoil from it in fear. Bradley put it less bluntly, but he said exactly the same: "The general reader reads it less often than the other (tragedies), and though he acknowledges its greatness, he will sometimes speak of it with a certain distaste." It is not difficult to understand why this should be so. The truth is that we human beings are fine ostriches, burying our heads in order to avoid seeing the unpleasant, the threatening; and forgetting that a careful inspection of that unpleasant may show us a means, not of overcoming it or avoiding it, but at least of standing up to it, of going to meet it proudly and without fear; without fear, because fear is of the unkown, the unexperienced.

That is, however, going too far ahead. What I wish to examine here is the significance of "Lear", and its total meaning, reaching that by way of a short consideration of a few of its more obvious levels of meaning and significance, which it is not difficult to see as no more than secondary, tributary; as being concerned with the more superficial of human values; one might even say, with social conventions. The tragedy of *King Lear* is so infinitely vaster than any one, than all, of these that, in comparison with the whole, they are without significance. *Lear* is, in a sense, beyond good and evil in its handling of both. Its significance is not merely human, but cosmic.

* * * *

There is no doubt about it that the play is, in one sense, "good theatre"; but if one is to accept it as such, that acceptance can be based only on a superficial evaluation, a false conception of the play's meaning; an evaluation which takes it as a child takes a cowboy film, full of bloody incident, replete with all the characters of melodrama, but with, unfortunately, an unhappy ending. It is good theatre in the sense that Marlowe's *Faustus* is so, because of the fireworks, the prancing devils, the magic and the japes. The fact that it is a negation of Tourneur's formula, "when the bad bleed, then is the tragedy good", in no way alters the fact that it is exciting and, to the immature mind, not even unduly harrowing. It is this conception of *Lear* which was responsible for the distortions of men like Tate, who gave it a "happy ending". Even if they had an inkling of the true force of the play, they realised, as showmen, that its surface value is the only one which can appeal to, which can be caught by the general audience, that audience which seeks to be entertained without being forced to think; and that, with a happy ending, it must be excellent "box-office". To the unimaginative, the storm scenes, the putting-out of Gloucester's eyes, are incident, spectacle, highly exciting emotionally, even disgusting, exercising the fascination of horror; but no more; because the force of the diction, the implications of the words, are lost in the representation of the action. Stage machinery, décor, the very movement, get in the way of the poetry, reduce its meaning to a mere commentary on the action. Similarly, the scenes of Edgar, Gloucester and the cliff, of Lear and the Fool on the heath, become either meaningless or comic in presentation; can, indeed, scarcely be otherwise, because horror of the harrowing kind which is implicit in these scenes can ultimately be appreciated only in the mind. It is not what is seen that carries the meaning; it is what lies behind the seen, what is suggested in the diction. In Act III, Scene 4, for instance, Lear, aware of the madness rising in him, and of the danger in thinking further along the lines which have brought him so close to it — "O, that way madness lies, let me shun that; No more of that" — still cannot cease revolving the same thoughts in his mind.

> " . . . nothing could have subdued nature
> To such a lowness but his unkind daughters;
> Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
> Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
> Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot
> Those pelican daughters."

The old man is here on the brink; he knows that his wits are turning, and we know it too from the intolerable strain and tension

in his expression. Then Edgar, catching on his words, chants stupidly:

Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill
A loo a loo a loo.

The effect is instant. The ridiculous words, echoing Lear's "pelican", break, not in laughter but in tears. The piling of the ridiculous upon the mounting tragedy, has the effect not, as is generally suggested, of lessening the tension, of gearing down its movement, but of heightening it to the degree at which it becomes unbearable. The action, the whole background, can add nothing, can, in fact, but take away. It is not in vision, but purely in our intellectual awareness of the situation that the tragedy lies. The real action is internal, within the mind. And when the Fool, following fast on Edgar's words, but addressing no-one in particular, turns and says: "This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen" it is not the wit, the wry humour of the words and their provenance that touch us, but first a vague idea that none of the three is either fool or mad, and then a still vaguer apprehension that the cold night is not just the temporal night in which these creatures struggle: a night rather, of blackness and violence, of utter helplessness, under which we all, perforce, keep desperate vigil.

The same is true throughout the entire play. It is not the sight of Lear with the dead Cordelia that affects us, theatrically successful though the scene may be; it is not the sight of the dying king that harrows us; but Shakespeare's language, which carries with it a reality of sorrow far beyond that of any specific situation. We are, in fact, forced to the conclusion that the classical idea that plot and character are the most important parts of a tragedy, is a false idea; that the diction is the play, and that everything else although related and necessary, is subservient to it. It is something that Dr. Johnson, that imperturbable and unimaginative, although penetrating critic, should confide in us that "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor". Notice that Johnson here says *read*, and not *see* or *hear*.

So much for *Lear* as theatre. It is a successful stage play if only the factual meaning is considered. People love and hate, and do terrible things to each other. There are action and spectacle enough to make the play a thorough-going melodrama, which, on the most superficial level, it is. And for those who see it as that, or perhaps a little more than that, for those for whom it is either mere entertainment or emotional stimulation — both of the dubiously healthy variety that is afforded by the prize-fight or the bull-ring, — Lamb's contention that "the *Lear* of Shakespeare cannot be

acted", can be no more than nonsense. It is only when one gets beyond the first two obvious levels at which the play has significance, the levels of immediate impact which make it appeal, first as something spectacular, and then as an emotional experience, that it becomes possible to see what Lamb is driving at.

As far as emotion is concerned, *Lear is* extraordinarily powerful, most of all for those who go to the theatre to live vicariously, to experience even at a remove, at second-hand, something of the biting reality that they sense in life, but which they have not known themselves. Our existence has become so artificial, so bound up in a mass of conventions, all of them designed to set up a protective barrier between us and reality, that all we are left with amid the jungles of complexity is a certain awareness that life is something more than what we have; more, not less, because a whole rather than an accumulation of disjointed and unrelated details. So that what we call escapism is rarely *from* reality *into* unreality, but from one unreality into another. Garcia Lorca's "gin and warm milk" is a symbol of this existence, his violent and lustful wind-god — who is identifiable with Pan, and represents a fusion of the human and the non-human, in other words, nature — a symbol of life as it is.

Preciosa tira el pandero
y corre sin detenerse.
El viento-hombrón la persigue
con una espada caliente . . . .
Preciosa, corre, Preciosa,
que te coge el viento verde!
Preciosa, corre, Preciosa!
Mirarló por donde viene!
Sátiro de estrellas bajas
con sus lenguas relucientes.
Preciosa, llena de miedo,
entra en la casa que tiene
más arriba de los pinos,
el consul de los ingleses.
. . . El inglés da a la gitana
un vaso de tibia leche,
y una copa de ginebra
que Preciosa no se bebe.
Y mientras cuenta, llorando,
su aventura a aquella gente,
en las tejas de pizarra,
el viento, furioso, muerde.

(Romancero Gitano.)

And it is this vague awareness which we have that makes for us the emotional experience of *Lear* a tremendous one. The frighteningly unequivocal loves and hates of the play cannot fail to have an immense impact on those whose environment is one of "gin and warm milk". We hate and love today with as much *potential* passion as in the distant past, but how many of us for a moment will consider showing that hate or that love, much less acting upon it. Whether our hypocrisy is a good or a bad thing is a point not relevant here; but the fact remains that the emotional freedom of *Lear* is stimulating for us by its very identity with what we feel but will not admit, are perhaps not even entirely conscious of feeling; and by its contrast with the artificiality, the primarily deliberate, ultimately habitual, hypocrisy of our lives.

> The weight of this sad time we must obey, Speak
> what we feel, not what we ought to say.
>
> (V.3.)

We *feel* the passions in ourselves because we are capable of them, and it is a release to see them worked out upon the stage, harmlessly for us sitting here uninvolved. It is because the emotional force of *Lear* is so great that we fail to go beyond it, accept it as the whole of the play, a tragedy of the passions, and not of one man only, but of a whole group. Ridley, in his introductory volume to the *Temple Shakespeare,* puts it very clearly when he says: "It is not here a particular manifestation of evil that oppresses . . . and our suspense is not only for Lear." Thus far we see well, because the play is so; but it is much more than that. A melodrama, a tragedy of the passions, yes; but that is only the beginning, a fraction of what it is.

* * * *

When one begins to think about *Lear,* not just in the slight degree possible during a performance or a reading, but freely and at leisure, it becomes evident that one is dealing with more than a stage-play. What Keats says of it is true — as far as it goes; for Keats seems to me by no means the ideal Shakespeare critic. He has not the breadth of intellect of Lamb, the critical acuteness of Hazlitt; perhaps because he is a poet, and a poet of the lyric only. The mind which can conceive, or think in terms of the epic, which can, at times, get outside the limits of man's circumscribed thinking, is the only mind which can adequately criticise the *Lear* of Shakespeare, the *Faust* of Goethe, even the *Iliad* itself. Other minds can but touch on them, here and there. By that I do not mean to suggest that Lamb and Hazlitt are ideal Shakespeare critics: only that they have the qualifications, the ability to think in wholes, in a higher degree than Keats.

Keats says this:

> When I read *King Lear* two impressions are left on my mind . . . *King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but it seems to me *not* his best play. And I find that I tend to consider it from two rather different points of view. When I regard it as a drama, it appears to me, though in certain parts overwhelming, decidedly inferior as a whole to *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. When I am feeling that it is greater than any of these, and the fullest revelation of Shakespeare's power, I find I am not regarding it simply as a drama, but I am grouping it in my mind with works like the *Prometheus Vinctus* and the *Divine Comedy*, and even with the greatest symphonies of Beethoven and the statues in the Medici chapel.

He is here saying what Lamb has also said; but whereas Lamb attempts to explain *why* this is so, Keats merely asserts it, leaves us in agreement, perhaps, but not much the wiser.

The best reply to emotional criticism of *Lear* — that is, the kind which springs from personal distaste, from "feeling about" rather than from any critical assessment or from honest judgement and good taste — is, in any case, the unanswerable remark of Longinus in his essay on the Sublime:

> I know perfectly well that the highest natures are the least faultless . . . . Low and middle natures, never setting all to the touch or aiming at the summit, remain as a rule free from danger, while *great things totter through their very greatness*.

If Longinus two thousand years ago had known his Shakespeare as well as any Dover-Wilson, he could not have made a critical point more exact as far as *Lear* is concerned.

It is significant, then, that it is only when one begins to think about it that the play shows its vast implications. One becomes aware that it is less a representation of action, an imitation of reality, than first an analysis, a sounding, and then a frightening statement, unhesitant and sure. What it sounds and analyses is human behaviour, the human heart and mind, and it does so with an honesty, a frankness, which appal. There is no soft-pedalling, no letting-up; only a relentless movement forward — not of the plot itself, for that is neither steady nor unbroken — but an unflinching exposure of the evil of which human-beings are capable, of which they are, possibly, the instruments rather than the originators. Only Lear himself is fully aware of what is happening — Lear and perhaps the Fool; and he shows his awareness by his acceptance, when his madness has left him, and even, in flashes, during

his madness, of a scheme of things which can be scarcely more than guessed at by those who shelter behind their barriers of an imagined security, who bury their heads in the sand of material possessions and assiduous self-delusion. Lear is stripped of everything that can be a protection against the eyeless evil of reality. It makes him mad, but it makes him wise, it makes him great as a human being, as a living creature. There is an irrational means of arriving at the truth — Rimbaud's "il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens" — and it is beyond reason that Lear knows what is happening. He finds, too, in his distraction, pity for those who have, like him, "gone over the edge", have come to the end of all illusion:

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless night,
> How shall your houseless heads, and unfed sides,
> Your looped and window'd raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these?

It is, in its own way, the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross. Lear pities not only particular men in the physical storm which rages about him, but all those who, like himself, are at the mercy of the tempest of the seeing mind, the tempest from which there is no protection; the searching rain and wind, the exposing lightning, the terrible thunder of the naked mind.

This same idea is repeated throughout the play. It recurs again and again, and there is no doubt of its meaning. We meet it first in Act II, Scene 4, when Kent, in the stocks, tells Lear of his daughters' behaviour, and the Fool says "Winter's not gone yet, if the wild geese fly that way". The suggestion of cold and storm is in germ in the phrase. And then again in the same scene, the Fool, disguising wisdom in his wit, sings to Kent:

> That Sir that serves for gain,
> And follows but for form,
> Will pack when it begins to rain,
> And leave thee in the storm.

At the end of Act II comes the first mention of the physical storm, which breaks when all is set for the breaking of the storm of evil, of passion, and of madness which has been led up to by the action so far. These things have been marked, all along, by the Fool's comments, his reference to winter, to storm, to desertion, in fact, to the whole situation as it later develops. Cornwall says: "Let us withdraw; 'twill be a storm"; and the second act ends with his exhortation:

> Shut up your doors, my lord, 'tis a wild night;
> My Regan counsels well, come out of the storm.

Lear is to be left to both storms, the real and the mental; the others are to withdraw to their imagined security in evil, which Gloucester is invited to share. With the third act, both storms have broken, and we watch the destruction of evil and good alike.

Lear has been stripped, together with his material kingship, of the illusion which keeps most men sane; and then, defenceless and shocked, he has come face to face with an evil that is all-pervading. That he goes mad — no, that his wits turn; for he is not wholly mad — is an indication of his strength. A lesser man would have become abject. Lear, old and infirm as he is, retains a power and a nobility that make our pity for him a kind of admiration. Although all else has gone in which he once had faith, although belief itself is gone, there remains yet the conviction — one can say, the knowledge — that there is yet a justice in nature which *cannot* allow to go unpunished such crimes as those of which he is the victim.

But the forces to which Lear prays, in the wrath of which he has such deep faith, are not the gods, either of classical or christian times: they are, at the same time, much more and much less. They are nature itself, primitive nature, which actively resents any crime against its own order. Lear is only too well aware that reality is bitter; *that* he accepts, and inveighs only against what is unnatural. It is for the sin against nature that he demands revenge, and gets it.

> No, you unnatural hags,
> I will have such revenges on you both
> That all the world shall — I shall do such things, —
> What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep;
> No, I'll not weep: I have full cause of weeping;
> But this heart shall break in a hundred thousand flaws
> Or e'er I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad.
>
> (II.4.)

The revenge is not Lear's: he does nothing, has nothing to do. The unnatural and the evil destroy themselves as surely as the good. And it is nature that does it all.

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

Gloucester's words carry a dreadful meaning, suggest man's utter helplessness, are a negation of free will and of a purpose in existence. That is why people speak of *Lear*, as Bradley says weakly, "with a certain distaste". But these words are tempered by Lear's own:

You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave.
Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that my own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

(IV.7.)

The words, themselves, with all their infinite weariness, pain, and longing, imply an attitude other than Gloucester's, an attitude which can, although the man is worn out with suffering, still permit of the serenity and hope which find their expression later, in Lear's speech to Cordelia:

Come, let's away to prison:
We two will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out,
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, pacts and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by the moon.

(V.3.)

Lear is in ecstasy, is become, in a sense a mystic, the seer whom Rimbaud has described as arriving at the unknown by way of the derangement of the senses. There are, in fact, some remarkable parallels here between the two poets. Lear's "you do me wrong to take me out o' the grave" has, intellectually, the same meaning as Rimbaud's "je suis réellement d'outre-tombe"; his "And take upon's the mystery of things, As if we were God's spies"; the same again as Rimbaud's "J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage". What has happened is that Lear has, through suffering, "arrived at the unknown".

"Ineffable torture . . . où il devient entre tous le grand criminel, le grand maudit, — et le suprême savant! — car il arrive à l'inconnu."

We are here brought back again to the realisation that wisdom of the kind that we call vision is an essentially irrational thing. We know what Lear means when he says "And take upon's the mystery of things, As if we were God's spies", but see at the same time that the thought is not arrived at logically and by reason. Although it makes the passage great, it is scarcely relevant to its literal sense; is an example of that incantation of which F. L. Lucas writes as being the core, the soul of poetry, and more full of meaning than any carefully worked-out thought.

After all that Lear has known, his utter loneliness in the high

places of evil, this return to the world of human warmth and love is like a benediction; he knows that a prison is no prison for the mind, which is everywhere free to explore the vastnesses of existence. But that means little to him any more; he has crossed his desert, and welcomes the idea of physical imprisonment because it will keep for him the contact with humanity to which he has struggled back through such tremendous and unpeopled wastes.

And when, later, the crash comes, when the rat-trap snaps shut and Cordelia is dead, the ideas, the obscure faith behind the words, are not quite negated: because Lear is no longer the same person. When he laments, when he enters, as Ridley says, "with Cordelia in his arms, he is no longer the great king in ruin; he is an old man with his dead daughter; he is no longer tragic, but pathetic. And it is this, I think, that makes the quiet ending of *King Lear* the most profoundly moving conclusion in Shakespearean, and perhaps in any, tragedy".

"*Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change.*"

The remarks of Charles Lamb upon *Lear* fall into place here, after these loose considerations of the implications, and pointers to the vast scope of the play:

> But the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted. The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear: they might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton upon a stage, or one of Michael Angelo's terrible figures. The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passion are terrible as a volcano; they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. This case of flesh and blood seems too insignificant to be thought on; even as he himself neglects it. On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear, — we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms; in the aberrations of his reason, we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning, immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life, but exerting its powers as the wind blows where it listeth, at will upon the corruptions and abuses of mankind. What have looks, or tones, to do with that sublime identification of his age with that of the heavens themselves, when in his reproaches to them for conniving at the injustice of

> his children, he reminds them that 'they themselves are old'. What gesture shall we appropriate to this? What has the voice or the eye to do with such things? But the play is beyond all art.

What Shakespeare has done in *Lear* is what no other artist has done fully and clearly. Instead of setting man against nature as a kind of backdrop, of regarding human life as something distinct from the scenery amid which it has its action, he has put man in his *context* in nature, has treated him as a part of the whole, a word in the context; which, in fact he is. Without that word the sentence is not complete, but without the rest of the sentence, the word has no identity, no real meaning. Man may have an existence of his own, a peculiarly human existence, but it is not independent of the rest of existence; and, if it attempts to make itself so, it becomes purposeless and so is destroyed. The "evil" characters in *Lear* deny this identity of man with nature — I have already quoted Cornwall's "Shut up your doors, my lord, 'tis a wild night; My Regan counsels well, come out o' the storm", as an example of that denial — and are forced by bitter experience to recognise their error. And it is because he has done this that Shakespeare is such a great artist, and *Lear* such a great work. Out of man's courage in the face of overwhelming odds, a certain nobility is born. That is *truth,* and Shakespeare has not flinched from it. The odds are overwhelming, man is puny and essentially alone, always alone, before them. By this courage he earns his place — a not insignificant place — in the scheme of things. If he is arrogant, and pretends to an importance which puts him apart from, and above nature, he ceases to be worthy even of that place which is his by right.

André Gide is on the same track when he says "What I admire is not *man,* but his courageous despair"; and Shakespeare's contemporary, Nashe, when he says that it is a puny fear that is not courageous enough to despair. There is none of the perennial "noble savage" nonsense in these ideas. Man is accorded his full place in the world; but no more than that.

The meaning of *Lear* is, then, this: that man is part of nature, is helpless before it, and certain of punishment if he offends against it. He is governed ultimately by the laws which cannot be altered, and not by the laws of his own making. In seeking to assert himself, to make himself more than a part of nature, he transgresses against these laws, and so is punished by being destroyed, in the circumstances most inopportune and in the way most horrible for his own temperament. He is, in fact, made to destroy himself. It is not even a question of retribution; the justice for which Lear looks can scarcely be called justice in our sense of the word: it is something automatic, reflex, by which nature excises a cancer in itself, a cancer in one part which can infect the whole. And in the operation,

good and bad suffer alike. The idea crops up many times in Shakespeare'; in *Hamlet,* it is put into words:

> Their virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
> As infinite as man may undergo,
> Shall in the general censure, take corruption;
>
> (I.4)

but in *Lear,* it has been made the whole matter of the play.

That is why I say that *Lear* is a frightening statement, unhesitant and sure. It is clear too, explicit in several places throughout the play, perhaps most clearly so in the scene between Albany and Goneril:

> That nature which contemns its origin
> Cannot be ordered certain in itself;
> She that herself will sliver and disbranch
> From her material sap, perforce must wither
> And come to deadly use.

and then:

> If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
> Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
> It will come,
> Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
> Like monsters of the deep.
>
> (IV.2.)

Hamlet's scorn and disgust are real, and come of a true perception of the vileness of which human beings are capable, when he says:

> What a piece of work is man. How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form, in moving, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?!

There is a chastening thought in all this.

We, today, in the beleaguered West, will do well to read *Lear,* to read it carefully and to grasp its meaning; and to recognise, not just casually, intellectually, that we are still the same human beings as those of whom Shakespeare wrote. Our "gin and warm milk" existence will not protect us against the wind-god of reality, against Pan, outraged. Our sin, be it regarded from the christian or from a pagan standpoint, is still the same. It is the sin against nature. And nature is already unleashing the storm of its anger. The verdict of the watchers may well be Albany's words:

> This justice of the heavens, that makes us tremble,
> Touches us not with pity.
>
> (V.3.)

ARISTOTLE, SHAKESPEARE, AND TRAGEDY

I

Before attempting to discuss a play's attributes as a tragedy, in trying primarily, to discover whether it is a tragedy at all, it is necessary to have a clear idea of what a tragedy should be, or rather, of what a tragedy theoretically is. But even to have the definition at one's fingertips, and to be able to apply it, does not imply that those plays which fail to measure up to its rigid demands are not tragedies. There has been so much change in the course of the theatre's development, parallel, after all, with the development of the Western mind, that it is sometimes difficult to find, in what is certainly a tragedy, exactly those qualities demanded by Aristotle, the first and still accepted theorist of the drama. Hauptman's play *Die Weber,* is, for instance, undeniably a tragedy of the highest kind, in that it deals with the problem of man in his relation to the cosmos, the time-honoured subject of destiny; and yet it obeys the classical rule only in secondary clauses, as in the fact that it deals ultimately with one incident. The hero is missing, unless one takes the weavers collectively as a dubiously heroic element. And then the hamartia is missing, unless one allows it to rest in a single error of judgment.

II

The ideal tragedy is, summarily, according to Aristotle (*Poetica* VI.2), the representation, in such a way as to promote in the audience a purging of the emotions of pity and fear (katharsis), of a single action of considerable relative importance, in which a man, necessarily great or gifted or otherwise a superior human being, is destroyed, the instrument of his fate being his own besetting sin, the major flaw in his character (hamartia).

That is the classical definition of tragedy. But English tragedy, it must be remembered, has inherited the traditions not of the Greek but of the Roman stage. The purity and simplicity of the Greek ideal, the religious significance of its drama, fell away with the development of the Roman stage, for which the drama was a secularised, sophisticated shadow, considerably narrowed in scope, of the original model. Moral and didactic purpose, the use of stock types of character, the introduction of horror for its own sake, and the general growth of crudeness, are characteristics of the Roman tragedy which can be seen at work in such early English plays as *Gorboduc* and *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. The influence of Seneca, who had genuinely admired and deeply studied the Greek drama,

but who had, nevertheless, in his own plays — literary rather than stage works — succeeded in keeping or in recapturing none of the Greek spirit, is the first great influence on the growth of English tragedy.

Senecan tragedy is not, however, the whole background of English tragedy, although his use of the theme of personal revenge, so dear to the Elizabethans, made the Roman's influence a lasting one. The mediaeval religious drama and Italian renaissance culture have an extremely important place in the whole scheme. But the rise of an essentially English comedy, the growth of national consciousness, and the consequent leavening of the purely derivative tragedy with native stuff, brought into being a tragedy that speedily became, under the later Elizabethans and Jacobeans, wholly and characteristically English. Thus the English conception had, in Shakespeare's day already been three times modified, at least four times removed from that of Aristotle: through the influence of Rome, of the drama of the church, of Italy and other European countries, notably France and less directly, Spain; and, finally, in its own purely English development.

III

In discussing Shakespearean tragedy, it is then necessary to bear in mind that Aristotle's definition may be applied only in modified form, that each succeeding interpretation of the main points of his theory has necessarily varied according to period and prevailing ways of thought; and to the increasing independence of the artist of the old established rules. Marlowe's conception of Faust as a tragic figure, Goethe's, Lenau's, and Thomas Mann's, are illuminating examples of the influence of the Zeitgeist on conceptions of the tragic hero.

But Shakespeare, apart from the influence on him of time and manners, seems to have gone further than any other dramatist, either before or for long after him, in establishing a conception of tragedy which, entirely without explicit theorising, was first tested, in the earlier plays, and then put into full practice in his block of great tragedies: *Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, Anthony and Cleopatra,* and *Coriolanus*. It is in this matter of a peculiarly Shakespearean conception of tragedy that I am interested.

IV

The theory of tragedy which may be deduced from a study of Shakespeare's work in that genre, has been neatly set down by Ifor Evans in his *Short History of English Drama* (p. 64):

> The tragedies have a sufficient number of features in common to support the conclusion that Shakespeare from his long practice in the history plays had matured a conception of tragedy.

> . . . The protagonist was a man, and one who, as king, prince, or leader, involved a whole people by his actions; so that at any moment his personal conduct might become part of the 'world's debate'. Each possessed a great nature and outstanding gifts and yet had some weakness or corruption which made him unequal to the situation with which he was faced . . . . Each play is able to appeal on a number of different levels. The theme is in one sense so obvious, and the characters so clear, and the incident so strong and active, that anyone interested in human life will be moved. But accompanying this there is a range of suggestions in the language and there is a subtlety in the characters which endless exploration never seems finally to exhaust.

To drive home this point, Evans goes on to quote the passage from *Hamlet* in which the theory of the "vicious mole of nature" is put forward. But I cannot help feeling that even that does not give an idea of the full scope, of the breadth of Shakespeare's conception.

A comparison of this present, if shadowy, idea of a theory, as it emerges in Shakespeare, with that of Aristotle, will show how much the classical conception has been modified, and how far the uncompromising nature of its basic rules has been softened and loosened by the humanism of the renaissance mind as exemplified in Shakespeare. The idea of the good man or the great man is still there, the idea of *katharsis,* the idea, much broader now, of the *hamartia;* but the curbing and exact rules have gone, the rigid form of the original is lost in the demands of increasing realism. The action is no longer purely a matter between hero and gods or what they may be taken to stand for: the involvement of others is noted, personalised emotions emerge, the whole becomes real instead of symbolic. For the Greeks the event was the important thing, for us it is the preparation for the event that matters; which necessarily implies that for the Greeks character was relatively unimportant. For us it is almost all of the tragedy.

In this connection, a reading is valuable of those passages of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*[1] in which Spengler discusses the conception of tragedy of the Euclidean mind, as typified in this instance by Aristotle, and that of the Faustian mind as typified by Shakespeare. The two widely differing spiritual approaches to the same goal are exhaustively, and not at all easily explained; and the stock terms of tragedy — Greek, after all, and become a little vague of meaning in the course of nineteen centuries — firmly

1. Spengler: *The Decline of the West,* tr. Atkinson, Allen & Unwin, London.

pinned down and defined. Writing of classical tragedy, Spengler makes two observations which seem to me to be of particular value in an attempt to back up the argument for Shakespeare's separately evolved conception of tragedy.

> It took all the aesthetic industry and assertiveness of the Baroque and of Classicism, backed by the meekest submissiveness before ancient texts, to persuade us that this (the Greek conception) is the spiritual basis of our own tragedy as well. And no wonder. For the fact is that the effect of our tragedy is precisely the opposite. It does not deliver us from deadweight pressure of events ,but provokes active dynamic elements in us, stings us, stimulates us . . . . That is Shakespearean effect.
>
> (Vol. I, p. 322.)

The second passage is more direct:

> But with tragedy it was another matter. Here there was the possibility of a mighty drama, purely Faustian, of unimagined forms and daring. That this did not appear, that for all the greatness of Shakespeare the Teutonic drama never quite shook off the spell of misunderstood convention, was the consequence of blind faith in the authority of Aristotle.
>
> (Vol. I, p. 323.)

Behind this lyricism it is possible to see clearly what Spengler is getting at. But it is his suggestion that Shakespeare had gone far towards the realisation of a new and non-Aristotelian tragedy that I wish to stress.

V.

The argument that, if one is to call *Antony and Cleopatra* a tragedy, it is necessary to find a new category into which to put *Othello* and *Macbeth,* is, I believe, a fallacious one. It could legitimately be argued, as I have stressed, that none of Shakespeare's tragedies is a tragedy if judged by rigidly academic standards. The fact alone should put us on our guard against any particularised suggestions such as the one in question.

There are differences, admittedly, of considerable profundity, in the whole treatment of the plays; but those differences lie primarily in the varying demands of differing materials. *Othello* and *Macbeth* are tragedies which approach more nearly the old ideal: they are more direct and more concentrated than *Antony and Cleopatra,* and are, superficially, at least, tragedies of the hamartia. *Antony and Cleopatra,* is a play, a kind of late echo of *Romeo and Juliet* in its love theme, which deals with the story of an unfortunate and adult passion in an adult way, and in the infinitely

greater context of the policy of empires. What is stressed is not hamartia, not love itself, despite Shakepeare's magnificent poetry, but character; that and the consequences of the love of Antony and Cleopatra, not only to themselves, but to the others who are involved in their fortunes.

The story of Antony and Cleopatra provided the matter for a tragedy of the type produced by a sophisticated age. Whereas the stories of Othello and Macbeth were relatively direct and had to be treated accordingly, this story, by nature of its less compact chronicle form and greater diffuseness, gave more rein to the dramatist and so considerably affected his handling of it. That is wherein the difference between the plays essentially lies. Tragic matter in the hands of a great dramatist will yield a tragedy. And in essence, Plutarch's account of the Antony and Cleopatra affair is as valid as tragic material as Cinthio's Italian tale, or Holinshed's Scottish chronicle.

VI

If the hamartia is missing from *Antony and Cleopatra* (and I believe that Antony's vacillation, Cleopatra's capriciousness, have scarcely the stature of such a flaw; in any case the tragedy was inevitable without them), it is necessary to examine the play for traces of those other characteristics by which it may qualify as a tragedy. A stumbling-block is the fact that the play has a "double hero": that is, both Antony and Cleopatra are of such supreme importance that without one or the other, the story would not exist. But that does not in itself, I think, interfere, even with the classical conception of tragedy and is no more than an augmentation, as, in music, a fugue may have two subjects and still be a perfect fugue. *Macbeth* displays, after all, another case of the "double hero", although in less urgency; and there is no quibble about its status.

The idea of the downfall, not unqualified, of the good or great as the *sine qua non* of tragedy is in *Antony and Cleopatra* fully present. Of Antony's goodness, of the superiority of both the protagonists to the average human being, we are left in no doubt. A glamour surrounds the reckless and irresponsible pair, no less as queen and general than as royal courtesan and infatuated patrician. Of the idea of whore and errant husband one has to be reminded several times. That last is perhaps a little harsh, although it is true that in sum Cleopatra is no more than a courtesan, a *Dame aux Camélias* in a more exalted, and consequently more potentially tragic position. It says much for Shakespeare's handling of his theme that we jib at the sordid idea: the *kothurnos* has not been lost to the tragic stage: the characters are still heightened above life-size.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* we are dealing with love in a way

which was unknown to the Greeks and to the ancient world. Shakespeare's working out of the tragedy rests upon his presentation of the protagonists as renaissance beings. They are alive, in the sense that they are free to work out their own destinies. Where, on the Greek tragic stage, can a real parallel with this be found? For the Greeks, tragedy lay in the event; for Shakespeare, and for us, it lies in the directional behaviour of the free human being, in the workings of the unfettered mind. The Greek mind was blinkered by convention and by religious tabus. In Shakespeare deterministic ideas are also to be found, but the conception of an inevitable personal destiny, ready worked-out and waiting, the postulate of helplessness, despite struggles, in the face of what is to come, has been passed beyond.

VII

A reading of *Macbeth,* will show that, while it is for us indisputably a tragedy, the argument may be legitimately put forward that it breaks the classical rules and is therefore not so. It is again a question of whether we are to judge it by Shakespearean or by Aristotelian standards.

The very conception of Macbeth is one which would defeat the comprehension of the Greeks. Beginning as a notable but by no means great man (the opening scenes give no indication that he is, or is held to be so), he becomes, as he grows more and more evil, steadily a more and more outstanding, great, not noble, figure; this in the sense that he grows in strength of character, in dramatic stature, and is not like the Greek hero, largely static, presented to and withdrawn from us modified, but still the same man. As Macbeth becomes increasingly hardened to his deeds, he completes, as it were, his own hamartia, which had hitherto prevented the working of the actual tragedy by its lack of firmness of purpose. Ambition without resolution would yield no positive tragedy. That resolution, late-found by Macbeth, yields the real tragedy: that of the fine soldier, the human being, who becomes progressively dehumanised, and ends up like a wild beast. As Ridley says (*New Temple Shakespeare,* Introductory Volume, p. 96 ff.):

> ". . . Macbeth forfeits one by one all the many claims on our admiration with which he started . . . ; there is not the least sign of any recovery of nobility; he has lost, I think, even his love for his wife (though a famous remark is susceptible of different interpretations); he dies with the snarl of a trapped animal on his lips, and with the mere animal courage of despair."

How unlike this is the noble death of antique tragedy, of classical tragedy like that of seventeenth-century France.

In a play such as *Macbeth* we are faced again with not a generalised situation, a symbolic presentation of events, but with a study of individuals, a humanism that goes beyond all generalisations, that indeed contains them in itself, and gets into the souls of the protagonists in a tragedy which is one of people and not of stock specimens from a gallery of types; I had almost said, of allegorical figures.

VIII

In *Othello,* the superficial tragedy is one of jealousy, and it has been convenient to leave it at that. But Othello's hamartia does not explain away the tragedy itself; only a part of it. The tragedy as a whole is of Iago's making; the hamartia only lays Othello open to Iago's suggestions and machinations; which is, after all, the working of the hamartia at one remove. It is a play too, in which the *actual* tragedy is only part of an organic whole, in which the katharsis is, I think, more strongly felt than in any of Shakespeare's plays except *Lear,* but in which it is decentralised and diffused through the whole work. Thus *Othello* owes less to the classical tradition than is generally allowed: more, probably, to the earlier Elizabethan Senecan tragedy, in which gratuitous evildoing, horror and personal revenge play a large part. It is in Granville-Barker's words, less "a spiritual tragedy", than one in which Shakespeare is working on the problem of *l'acte gratuite*. Iago is the key to *Othello*. The hero depends on him; which is far from being in accordance with the classical idea. But that does not make the play one whit the less a tragedy, one of the two most consistently harrowing of all Shakespeare's, and probably the most finely constructed.

IX

Thus it emerges that these three plays, *Antony and Cleopatra, Macbeth,* and *Othello,* if judged by one set of standards are none of them tragedies, if by another, are all tragedies, with some reservations in the case of *Antony and Cleopatra*. And I think that the doubts there may be cleared by consideration of the fact that the historical matter is less essentially dramatic material. But it is tragic material in the broad sense, and under Shakespeare's treatment becomes a stage tragedy of the first class, even if it does lack the more violent impact of the other two.

It is, then, in the case of these three plays, impossible to regard any one as other than a tragedy in the Shakespearean sense; which is also the modern sense. That they differ is undeniable. But that is explained by the already argued fact that for Shakespeare the classical conception of tragedy no longer fully held good (see Spengler, Vol. I, p. 320 ff.). He had himself modified and developed the various aspects of its set of demands as

they had reached him, until he had made of tragedy an infinitely wider thing than any earlier culture had known. What he produced is, however, tragedy in the profoundest sense of the word, in the universal sense.

The day has gone past in which the theorist or critic is accorded more reverence than the creative man. But we are always in danger of falling into that error. Aristotle discussed an ideal tragedy, Shakespeare made a real one, in which the old rules are used or ignored as occasion and aesthetic considerations demand, and not just blindly accepted and obeyed. One is reminded of Schumann's reply to criticism of his harmonic procedure: "what sounds right is right". In Shakespeare's case it is a question of what is *theatre*. None of his plays is not, least of all perhaps *Antony and Cleopatra*.

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