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OEDIPUS AND THE TRAGIC SPIRIT

By H. G. MULLENS

The necessity of reading Oedipus Tyrannus once again for the purposes of Higher Certificate has raised afresh in my mind certain thoughts about the nature of Tragedy and the Tragic Hero. Aristotle’s ‘recipe’ for a tragic hero is given in the following words: ἔστι λε τοιούτος ὁ μήτε ἅρετή διαφέρον καὶ δικαιοσύνη μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν άνυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ λι’ ἁμαρτίαν τινά τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ λοξῆ δόντων καὶ εὐτυχίᾳ, &c. (Poetics, 1453A). It may be summed up in three points:

1. He is no better than other men in virtue and justice.
2. He falls into misfortune (a) not through vice or baseness but (b) λι’ ἁμαρτίαν τινά. (The meaning of this we will discuss later.)
3. He is a man of good position and reputation, and he is prosperous.

The second of these is the really basic characteristic, and also the most obvious. This we will take first.

The only way to understand the tragic effect is to catch ourselves experiencing it. The tragic hero falls into misfortune. But we hear of many people falling into misfortune without feeling anything more than mild pity, which no one would attempt to equate with the tragic effect. If we saw it actually happen, our only feeling might be one of physical revulsion. It is not tragic for a child to be knocked down by a bus. It is merely unfortunate and unhappy. Take the case of the Lambs. Mary stabbed her mother. This was not tragic. Yet we get a tragic effect from it. If we take the trouble to find out where the tragic effect comes from, we find it is from the letters of her brother Charles. It was probably a tragedy to Mary as well, but we do not know it. Oedipus killed his father and married his mother. Doubtless he is not the only person who has done this; and the deed itself is not tragic. Even his realization of what he had done is not tragic, although this brings us a step nearer. The tragedy lies in the emotions aroused in Oedipus by this realization and our perception of them. We get the tragic effect because we see the result to Oedipus of the
realization and feel that the result is unjust. Hence comes pity. In fact, the tragic effect is not produced by actions but by the resultant emotions and effects; and to us who live twenty-three centuries later, Aristotle, as often, seems to have been superficial in making the plot the chief part of a tragedy.

This feeling of injustice is the ‘tragic fact’ of life which in the sphere of action is the least important, in the sphere of thought the most important, aspect of life. The wicked flourish, ‘they go to and fro in the evening; they grin like a dog, and run about through the city’; while the good are cut down and cry in blank amazement ‘How long will ye give wrong judgement, and accept the persons of the ungodly?’ The course of goodness seems to lead inevitably to destruction. For one blunder, however trivial and innocent, a man pays with his life. Or perhaps not even for a blunder, but merely a flaw—a temperament too sensitive to react in anything but a violent way to certain events. To the eyes of man, the Life Principle, god, or what you will, stalks through creation trampling on the hearts of men.

Needless to say, in a tragedy this feeling is rarely in the foreground of the picture; and, when it is, it is seldom shown so vividly. But it remains all the same as a background of smouldering flame. In the Prometheus Vinctus the tragic sequence has been arrested; and, for one play in a trilogy, we have an almost static representation of the tragic fact. The struggle between Good and Evil is very simply symbolized in Prometheus and Zeus. Prometheus is the tender, moral side of life thrusting itself up like a tiny shoot through the crushing iron of nature’s soil. We find it also in the Oedipus Tyrannus. Sophocles is apt to seem the least tragic of the three tragedians, because he is not so direct in the way he relates the particular instance to the universal principle. Further, he covers in a single play what Aeschylus would need a trilogy for. Therefore his avowed expression of the tragic fact is confined to a single chorus.

\[ \text{iω γενεαὶ βροτῶν,} \\
\text{ό̣ς ύμᾶς ἵσα καὶ τὸ μη-} \\
\text{δὲν γώσας ἐναρίθμῳ.} \]
These and the succeeding lines come at the most intense point of the play. It is when the tragic fact suddenly bursts into the ordinary life of an ordinary man. But the tragic sequence does not end here; and no good tragedy leaves the audience at the point of uttermost anguish. The level of spiritual elevation at this point is not high, but rather very low. At the end it is raised and the emotional tension relaxed. The reappearance of Oedipus should have the effect of exaltation. At his re-entry he is a greater man than when we last saw him. In spite of the efficiency of Creon, he is in complete command of the situation. He has in his grasp something universal and transcendent; and he has left the others behind and scaled the mountain-tops. That is why he is content to put himself entirely in the hands of Creon. Incidentals do not matter to him; he lives in a world apart. The only link with the earth he has left is his children. This we may call the ‘post-tragic effect’, and corresponds to the rule of life that Good can only achieve its identity by self-immolation. It is most fully developed, perhaps, in Antony and Cleopatra, where the end is a triumph for the imperial lovers. ‘I am fire and air,’ says Cleopatra; and she can ‘mock the luck of Caesar’; and throughout the scene Antony is there to ‘quicken with kissing’ his royal Egypt as she dies.

To this tragic scheme Macbeth is an exception; and it will be dealt with later.

If the tragic hero is to have this heavenly exaltation, it is obvious that he must not be entirely vicious but must gain it through his pursuance of good or innocent sufferings. This is what Aristotle meant by the modification of his second point. The hero starts the tragic sequence, not by his vice or baseness,
but Ἀμαρτίαν τίνα. Whatever else Ἀμαρτία implies here, it
does not imply guilt in our modern sense. It is interpreted as
either ‘blunder’ or ‘flaw in the character’. Aristotle almost
certainly intended the former meaning, for the Greek mind
was dominated by the idea of ritual uncleanness. He had the
Oedipus in mind continually, and he was referring to the un-
willing parricide and incest. But the second has a good deal of
truth in it, inasmuch as it was adopted from a study of tragedies
rather than from a study of Aristotle. Aristotle has not omitted
it entirely; for it is implied in the first point.

The tragic hero must be a hero in the full sense of the word—
one who struggles and fights by a power of his own. If he
starts the tragic sequence by a blunder of his own, this frees
him from the full control of fate. Fate should be merely a
limiting power propounding a law of cause and effect. Then
the tragic hero may be a powerful individual, not a mere auto-
maton; and Fate will still keep her grim influence. Further,
if the blunder be done innocently, then we shall feel all the
greater sympathy for him.

This is also the reason for Aristotle’s first point. The tragic
hero must not be pre-eminent in virtue and righteousness; oth-
wise he would be too far removed from life. In fact he
would not be a man at all. There would not be the struggle of
good finding itself, because perfection of virtue or righteous-
ness would have no growth. It would be static and dead; or at
any rate quite beyond human sympathy.

But, while he must be great as an individual, he must not
be merely individual. The tragic hero is the artistic expression
of a universal principle. Therefore, though he must appeal to
each of us as a person, he must be wider than any one of us,
great enough to contain all humanity, great enough to be an
opponent of the universal principle. He therefore must go as
a king among men, actually as well as metaphorically. In a
simple age and an aristocratic society great men are really
great. They can easily be idealized by the common herd. And
so the tragic stage is filled with kings and queens, great generals
and councillors, heroes and demi-gods. When one man is as
good as another this is impossible. The stream of Greek
Tragedy ran dry when the lower classes gained an equal footing with the nobles in political life. French Tragedy flourished in the days of Le Roi Soleil. Demoralizing democracy, coupled with the picture stage, is the reason to-day also why the Tragic Muse has left our theatres. The truth of this can easily be seen by the attempts that have recently been made to create a new Tragedy, a Tragedy of all humanity, as in Street Scene, where the effect is depression, not exaltation. Then Aristotle was right in his third point as well.

The best way to prove that Aristotle was right is to notice what happens when an author disregards these points. First let us take The World of Light. Aldous Huxley has tried to build a tragedy out of an ordinary middle-class family. Like Elmer Rice in Street Scene he has no one outstanding hero. Among many interesting and skilfully drawn characters, he has one whose career, if more eventful than the others’, is typical of all. He shows us a man filled with the joy of living, a ‘life-worshipper’. He has no mental or emotional complexities. Everything to him is a source of pleasure. The world is a gymnasium where he can let off his high spirits. Through love of adventure he goes on an expedition to the South Pole. There he is accidentally blinded. It is through no blunder of his own, but merely the unreasoning blow of Fate. The loss of sight reduces him from the heights of an irrational happiness to the depths of an equally irrational melancholy. He is at length recalled to a humdrum content by the love of a woman who is willing to sympathize with his self-pity. This is utterly untragic. There is no conflict or emotional stress within the hero’s soul. Both in his former and latter state it is equally difficult to sympathize with him. He has no rise or fall: and consequently there is no exaltation. We are merely shown that life is futile.

A sharp contrast is to be found in Brand. Aldous Huxley shows us a very realistic character; Ibsen made an ideal character the centre of his play. Brand is inhumanly perfect. He follows in every detail his destructive God. Though he needs courage to follow, how much more pleasant he would be if he rebelled. He has no rise or fall. He starts perfect and he
remains so; and, though he is exalted at the end, it is not by the tragic transmutation, but the straight course by which he continuously advances. Great though Brand is, it does not give the tragic effect because the hero is cold and superhuman.

And now finally for Macbeth, which we called a notable exception. The tragic scheme, we said, was as follows. A man who is essentially good commits a blunder, for which he pays an unjustly severe penalty. The course of events so started crushes his aspirations towards good, and the ultimate result is a spiritual exaltation into a better good. In Macbeth, however, we see a weak man, as the result of an initial sin, falling deeper and deeper into vice until he is finally crushed by the hatred of his fellows. Macbeth in the last act is exalted; but it is not the heavenly exaltation that we expect in a tragedy. The reason is that Macbeth is not striving for good, but for material things; and life applies to all aspirations the same rule. Gradually through the play Macbeth kills his soul, until his whole being becomes centred on the physical world. He becomes pure animal by the breaking of his two last ties, the death of Lady Macbeth and the treachery of the fiends that have served him so well. To him, as to the beasts, the sanctity of life means nothing. He simply fights for his own preservation as any animal does. Towards the end of the play his thoughts turn more and more to the animal side of life, to the

rugged Russian bear,
The arm’d rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger.

And, when his enemies close in on him like a pack of wolves, he is given the only exaltation he can have, a physical exaltation where he surmounts fear, and fights his last battle as the King of the Forest should, crushing all thought of fear, fighting

1 For these and other remarks elsewhere on Shakespeare I am indebted to the conversation and writings (e.g. The Wheel of Fire, The Shakespearian Tempest, &c.) of Mr. Wilson Knight of Trinity College, Toronto; though these remarks must not necessarily be taken as representing his views or as being an adequate interpretation or corollary of them. I have no idea how far Mr. Knight would agree with what I have said here; though it was certainly he who inspired the thoughts.
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to live against the dooms of Heaven and Hell, a noble beast caught at last in the toils of man.

So far from disproving the tragic scheme, Macbeth asserts it in the physical world; and, balancing the tragedy of the spirit, shows us the dualism of life united by the tragic principle.

LUDUS ELEGIACUS (continued)

By L. E. EYRES

Crura viro virides viro infecere colubrae;
Propterea solitis viribus ille caret.

20. The farmer gets busy.
Area verratur; tergatur aranea aratro;
Nunc adolete aras; aret arandus ager.

His operis opus est libris: opera omnia Livi
Quaerunt: dives opum tu, precor, adfer opem.

22. A public nuisance.
Galba truci lituo conterret litora; litem
Intendam: Galbae littera tristis erit.

23. The King's Physician speaks.
Per latus exacto lato dolet ense Latinus:
Fer laticem; sordes vulnere taetra latet.

24. The gourmet.
Haec ovis est Ovidi: gallinae vescitur ovis:
Cum dabit ova gregi pastor, ovabit ovis.

25. The grass widower.
Cum mare cur Mario comite ad mare pergere certum est?
Lippa marita; oculis aura marina nocet.