THE CRITICAL PROBLEM OF MODERN DRAMATIC TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT

This is an examination of a number of American and British critical studies beginning with Joseph Wood Krutch's The Modern Temper (1929) and continuing on to selected works of the following four decades on the problem of the possibility and desirability of dramatic tragedy in the last 100 years. Four groups of critics are examined: one, those who take classical tragedy as the ideal form and claim that it has disappeared from the modern world in which values have disintegrated; two, those who argue that tragedy is still possible since modern values are not morally inferior to those of past ages; three, those who look for a generic metamorphosis of classical tragedy; and four, those who propose a distinctly modern tragedy, in particular Raymond Williams who offers a radical redefinition of tragedy. An attempt is made to subsume these critical tendencies under certain ideological currents and finally to suggest what the nature of modern tragedy might be.

RESUME

Cette thèse a pour but d'analyser une serie d'études critiques américaines et anglaises réalisées à partir de 1929 avec le texte de Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper, et qui se poursuivent jusqu'aux années soixante, et qui posent le problème suivant: la tragédie dramatique dans les cent dernières années est-elle possible et désirable? Quatre groupes de critiques sont examinées: premièrement, ceux qui considèrent la tragédie classique comme forme idéale et déclarent, qu'elle a disparu du monde moderne où les valeurs ont désintégrées. Deuxièmement, ceux qui maintiennent que la tragédie est toujours possible parce que les valeurs modernes ne sont pas inférieures moralement à celles des époques passées. Troisièmement, ceux qui posent le problème de la transformation du genre de la tragédie classique. Quatrièmement, ceux qui présentent une tragédie vraiment moderne, particulièrement Raymond Williams qui cherche une redéfinition radicale de la tragédie. La thèse essaie de faire correspondre ces tendences critiques aux certains courants idéologiques et finit par prendre position sur la nature possible de la tragédie moderne.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis proposes to examine a discussion the unity of which is based on the continuity of argumentation—indeed most often of mutual reference. In the final instance this means that the unity of the whole discussion is based on a continuous reading public of English-speaking people concerned with the problem of modern tragedy and on some coherent ideological traditions in the USA and UK.

There is, to my knowledge, no available systematic bibliography on the secondary literature in English about modern tragedy. Besides basic handbooks and surveys of drama and criticism, I had to rely on the bibliographical references which I found in the studies on tragedy when I first began to explore the topic. However, they all led to the same limited list of works, which I therefore take to be representative of the critical discussion (or at least of the scholarly and public perception of that discussion—which is for my purposes equivalent.) Apart from the 18th and 19th-century speculations on the then modern drama and then on domestic tragedy by such people as Diderot, Mercier, Beaumarchais, or Lessing, the 19th-century theoreticians from Hegel and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche and Bradley are often mentioned.

Historically, almost everybody refers overtly to Aristotle and covertly to Plato. Further, some critics

refer to the Renaissance and classicist discussions of Aristotle, from the Italians through Corneille, Racine, and their 18th-century followers to Goethe and Schiller.

But finally, the bulk of writing on the topic, especially in English, seems to begin with the fin-de-siècle and to intensify in the late 1920's and the next three decades, reappearing especially strongly in the 1960's. As a rule, the English language critics examined in this thesis refer to quite a few of their chronological predecessors, thus helping to bring about consistency and a sequential unity.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to deal at any length with pertinent writings on the problem in other languages, especially German and French, where there is a great number of contributions in the 20th century. My study limits itself to a select number of critics writing in English whose arguments have engendered the most fruitful debate. It purports to follow the views of these critics on the problem of the possibility and the desirability of dramatic tragedy in our time, taking this to mean roughly the last 100 years. In order to situate their views, a number of earlier critics will be summarily glanced at in the second part of this Introduction.

Chapter one will deal with the writings which, taking classical tragedy as the ideal form and value, discuss tragedy's disappearance from the world in which values have

disintegrated. The main representatives of this group are Joseph Wood Krutch, whose The Modern Temper (1929) gave the impetus to many of the following debates, Francis Fergusson in his influential The Idea of a Theater, and George Steiner, whose more sophisticated and historically conscious The Death of Tragedy was one of the first signals for a more fruitful discussion. In Chapter two I shall examine those critics who, while agreeing with the "classical" concept of tragedy, maintain that tragedy can exist in modern times. A number of these writers responded directly to Krutch's statement, i.e. Mark Harris in The Case For Tragedy, E.E. Stoll in a chapter of Shakespeare and Other Masters, John Gassner in a number of writings from 1954 to 1960, and Elder Olson in Tragedy and the Theory of Modern Drama. These writings, in opposition to the first group, insist on the existence of modern values. They also hint that the genre of tragedy takes on a slightly different form in each age. What this form is, how, when, and why it came about, is not yet fully explored. Chapter three will discuss writings concerned with different attempts to argue for a generic metamorphosis of classical tragedy. Karl S. Guthke's Modern Tragicomedy and J.L. Styan's The Dark Comedy maintain that comedy gradually took over the domain of tragedy to produce the hybrid genre of tragicomedy so prevalent in the modern drama. Lionel Abel's at one time influential Metatheatre claims

that tragedy was a peculiarly Greek phenomenon and that it was replaced by metatheatre in post-Hellenic times. These writings attempt to transcend or sidestep the direct transferral of value-judgments about our times to tragedy by the "conservatives" of Chapter one and the "liberals" of Chapter two. Finally, Chapter four will explore the views of those critics who discuss the historical necessity of a distinctly modern tragedy, a forward-looking tragedy that would not take as its model the no longer relevant classical and Renaissance forms. After a brief consideration of Herbert Muller's The Spirit of Tragedy which, while pleading for a distinctly modern tragedy, still ties it to a transcendental Fate, the radical redefinition of tragedy by Raymond Williams will be considered. The conclusion of the thesis attempts to summarize the discussion, to analyze the tendencies of each group of critics, to subsume them under certain ideological currents, and thus to suggest what the nature of the modern tragedy might be.

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In part V of The Republic,[1] a very early statement on mimesis and the dramatic arts, Plato warns against all forms of creative lying. He refuses the poets and other imitators admittance into his ideal state because, he says, they encourage irrationality and feed the passions rather than restrain them. It is to this ascetic censure of the dramatic arts, to this indictment on the grounds of their dangerous promoting of irrationality, that Aristotle's Poetics is, in part, an answer.

Aristotle defines tragedy as the imitation of a complete action of a certain magnitude dealing with the downfall of a worthy person,

> . . . a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or deprevity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous,—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.[2]

In answer to Plato he explains that though tragedy excites pity and fear, it purges men of these emotions when it achieves its "catharsis." This much-debated term according to some commentators refers to a moral purgation, a kind of cleansing through suffering, while according to others it carries no moral connotation, but has to do with the physical depletion of an excess humour, or what one might call a release of tensions.[3] Whether or not one

thinks of Aristotle's tragedy as moral, ultimately depends on one's definition of "catharsis."

In order for the tragic action to result in catharsis the catastrophe must strike close enough to home to enlist the audience's fear, yet must remain distanced enough for the audience to be able to enjoy it. The hero of the tragedy must be almost, but not quite, perfect, otherwise one cannot pity him; he must possess the "tragic flaw" that will be his undoing. The flaw will make him prey to mighty forces which are beyond his and the audience's understanding and are final and irreversible.

Central to the concept of tragedy is the notion of recognition, that moment in the play when the hero gains awareness, or insight into his situation. Without this element the suffering is pure waste; with it, it gains meaning.

In the light of Plato's discussion, Aristotle's statements attempt to rationalize and justify the seemingly irrational elements of tragedy by showing how fear, pity, and other passions it engenders help the spectator gain strength, confidence, reason.

The history of Aristotle's influence on dramatic practice and criticism—dating back to the Renaissance—is a history of continual attempts by writers of tragedy to break out of the tight mold imposed upon it partly by Aristotle and even more by the Aristotelians who often

did not read the original with care. Or, to put it differently, it is the story of the drama struggling to adapt itself to new social and historical realities and undergoing considerable changes in the process. Of special concern to poets and philosophers alike were: first, the question of tragedy's moral purpose, answered in the 17th century with "poetic justice," and second, the nature of the tragic hero. With the rise of the middle classes, the role of the theatre, and especially of aristocratic tragedy, had to be redefined. Diderot, Beaumarchais, and Mercier advocated the replacing of a jaded drama founded on constricting neo-classical rules by a threatre that would reflect the values of the bourgeoisie, portray its way of life, deal with its daily concerns. "Serious drama," midway between tragedy and comedy, replaced the old form which, it seemed, was now definitely on the decline.

The interest in tragedy, in particular Shakespearean tragedy, was revived in the Romantic era as leading philosophers returned to some of the questions raised by Aristotle, and a number of new and original theoretical approaches were undertaken. Hegel's theory of tragedy has been called the most original since Aristotle, the only one to contribute anything valuable to the study of the genre.[4] Like Aristotle before him, Hegel concentrates on the positive outcome of a potentially negative situation, on a higher harmony. What seems like fear, is actually courage;

what seems like disorder, is actually order. In Aristotle, fear had become a necessary element in the attainment of its opposite; similarly, in Hegel disorder is the crucial prerequisite for order. As a means to an end, disorder becomes a positive value; pure evil is banished from tragedy. (This is perhaps Hegel's most important contribution. Whether it is applicable to actual tragic drama is another question.)

According to Hegel, tragic suffering is a result of two forces both in themselves good, but each ignoring the right of the other. Tragedy resides in both these rights becoming a wrong because of their impingement on each other.

The two equally willful forces are reconciled by negating each other, and passing through suffering and disorder — but all for the sake of a final higher order, the synthesis. The blind fate of Aristotle becomes rationalized, moralized.

Tragedy is, then, a check against imbalance and chaos. The problem with modern tragedy is, says Hegel, that it emphasizes character too much; the hero becomes more individualized and personalized and not so much the expression of a particular excessive power.[5]

Unlike Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche do not dwell on the ethical aspects. For them fate, though now secularized, retains its classical essence as something above and beyond particular causes. Schopenhauer sees very little

joy in tragedy, for tragedy reflects the worthlessness of individual life:

> . . . the end of this highest poetical achievement is the representation of the terrible side of life. The unspeakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph of evil, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent. . . .[6]

Tragedy is the representation of the "strife of will with itself." The same will appears in us all, but its phenomena fight with and destroy each other. In the tragic hero the will appears most powerfully, but only to be finally renounced as he resigns and gives up the will to live. He dies purified by suffering, after his will to live is dead. Schopenhauer is almost cheerfully pessimistic:

> the demand for so-called poetical justice rests on an entire misconception of the nature of tragedy, and, indeed of the nature of the world itself . . .only the dull, optimistic, Protestant-rationalistic, or peculiarly Jewish view of life will make the demand for poetical justice, and find satisfaction in it. The true sense of tragedy is the deeper insight, that it is not his individual sins that the hero atones for but original sin, i.e., the crime of existence itself. . . .[7]

To say that Schopenhauer sees no order, no design in tragedy, is to interpret these concepts too narrowly: one can find a special if misanthropic order here.

Influenced to an extent by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche turned his pessimism into a positive vision in The Birth of Tragedy. He saved tragedy from Schopenhauer's absolute one-sidedness by showing that it is a blending of two opposite forces: the primitive, collective, and intoxicating Dionysian element and the rationalist, philosophical, and individualist Apollonian element. The dramatic vision is

> . . . a vision on the one hand completely of the nature of Apollonian dream-illusion . . . but on the other hand, . . . the objectification of a Dionysian condition, tending toward the shattering of the individual and his fusion with the original Oneness.[8]

The inevitable suffering and destruction of the hero are pleasing to the spectator because they assert the unity of life. In tragedy negation leads to affirmation, suffering leads to joy. Tragedy is dependent upon the balancing of these two opposing elements. However, according to Nietzsche tragedy is in essence unbounded, ecstatic, and irrational, and thus becomes something less than tragedy when the rational Apollonian element is allowed to predominate.

Even this very sketchy survey of some admittedly major theoreticians of tragedy reveals that there seems to be little consensus on what tragedy is and what is its purpose.

The death of tragedy has been the subject of countless discussions not only on drama, but also on the spirit of the times. This inquiry into critical considerations on the possibility of modern tragedy begins with the recognition of the fact that something in the nature of tragic drama has caused writers, philosophers, and critics to try and preserve it against all odds; clearly, tragedy holds a special fascination for a certain class of critics. The thesis will examine a number of prominent 20th-century arguments, and attempt, by following their strengths and weaknesses, to indicate some provisional conclusions on whether tragedy is possible in the modern age or whether it has been buried beyond hope of resurrection.

Notes

[1] Plato, The Republic, trans. F.M. Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1975). The appeal of dramatic poetry to the emotions is discussed in Part V. - "The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry," pp. 333-341.

[2] Aristotle, "Poetics," in Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, S.H. Butcher, trans. and ed., (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902), pp. 46-47.

[3] The "catharsis controversy" is briefly discussed in F.L. Lucas's Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics, (London: Hogarth Press, 1949), pp. 23-26.

Lucas mentions Lessing's interpretation of "catharsis" as "purification," a kind of corrective that purifies men's emotions, as well as the opposing view that through "catharsis" pity and fear are purified as the spectator, viewing the suffering of others, becomes disinterested in his own suffering. Lucas dismisses both of these interpretations and contends that "catharsis" does not mean "purification," but rather "purgation." According to him, it is not that the passions are purged of impurities, but rather that men are purged of excessive emotions. In this interpretation "catharsis" becomes a medical metaphor and "Tragedy . . . simply a means of getting rid of repressions." (p. 25).

[4] A.C. Bradley, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," Hegel on Tragedy," Anne and Henry Paolucci, eds., (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 367.

[5] Hegel on Tragedy, esp. pp. 97-152.

[6] Arthur Schopenhauer, "The Platonic Idea: The Object of Art," in his The World as Will and Idea, trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp, vol. I. (London: Trübner, 1803), p. 326.

[7] Ibid., p. 328.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 56.

CHAPTER ONE

Tragedy Dying

In 1929 Joseph Wood Krutch argued in his book The Modern Temper, which had a great impact, that the apparent death of tragedy was one of the instances of the inferiority of the modern era. Though his book is obviously a portrait of an age rather than a discussion of tragedy, and though it is presented as a closed case, the basic argument encompasses much of the rationale one encounters in the subsequent studies of tragedy. It is therefore worth outlining here. Krutch argues that mankind gradually developed from a sense of security and unquestioning faith in the meaning of life to skepticism and insecurity. According to him, man in his rationality has failed to bring meaning and confidence into his life. The philosophers were never of much comfort or help.

Krutch begins his critique of the modern era by comparing the fate of mankind in the 20th century to the fate of the child who grows up and leaves innocence forever behind. Modern man

> . . . has exchanged the universe which his desires created, the universe made for man, for the universe of nature of which he is only a part. Like the child growing into manhood, he passes from a world which is fitted to him into a world for which he must fit himself.[1]

This will be Krutch's central metaphor throughout his illustration of contemporary man's sad state of affairs. Man in his infancy creates the world of poetry, mythology, and religion, a world of his imagination and desire, an illusive world to his liking; man in his maturity creates the monstrous world of bleak reality, the world of science and truth. From the unfortunate intrusion of truth into the world of fancy springs what Krutch calls the "modern temper":

> The structures which are variously known as mythology, religion, and philosophy, and which are alike in that each has its function the interpretation of experience in terms which have human values, have collapsed under the force of successive attacks and shown themselves utterly incapable of assimilating the new stores of experience which have been dumped upon the world. With increasing completeness science maps out the pattern of nature, but the latter has no relation to the pattern of human needs and feelings.[2]

Science has been responsible for the great demystification that has occurred in all fields of human endeavor, but man has had to pay a rather high price for this, Krutch laments. Science has managed to explain away our emotional lives, and what were previously realities — the existence of a soul, a will, God — have become illusions we nonetheless desperately cling to since our lives would be intolerably barren without them. Under the cold gaze of science,

previously absolute morality has become an arbitrary invention of man. Without absolute ethics to guide us, we have become frustrated and have come to grope after something tangible to believe in though we are only too well aware that emptiness surrounds us. Man must

> . . . rest content with the admission that though the universe which science deals with is the real universe, yet we do not and cannot have any but fleeting and imperfect contact with it; that the most important part of our lives—our sensations, emotions desires and aspirations—take place in a universe of illusions which science can attenuate or destroy, but which it is powerless to enrich.[3]

This then is the dolorous predicament of the "modern temper." Can man handle this newly acquired knowledge? This is the question Krutch asks throughout his book and one that he answers in the negative. Science is not suited for human consumption, Krutch seems to be saying, and his stance is decisively anti-intellectual.

With the help of science, man has destroyed most of his illusions and fallacies, and, alas, there is no turning back. This is the case with tragedy too. The tragic vision is based on a view of man we now know to be fallacious, and are therefore unable to recapture. This sublime art-form is the brainchild of man's imagination. It shows man struggling against forces above and beyond his understanding and control, being physically vanquished in-

the unequal struggle, but emerging ultimately the triumphant moral victor. Tragedy shows man willing to suffer for his ideas, enlightened and ennobled by the knowledge gained through this suffering. In order to produce a genuine tragedy, Krutch argues, an age must believe in man's worthiness, in his greatness. Our modern rational temper has made it impossible for us to believe not only in God, but also in man. Man is no longer the mystery he was; every aspect of his body, mind, and soul has been explored by science. And since no illusions remain about man, he can no longer be thought of as noble. Therefore

> . . . though we still apply, sometimes, the adjective "tragic" to one or another of those modern works of literature which describe human misery and which end more sadly even than they begin, the term is a misnomer since it is obvious that the works in question have nothing in common with classical examples of the genre and produce in the reader a sense of depression which is the exact opposite of the elation generated when the spirit of a Shakespeare rises joyously superior to the outward calamities which he recounts and celebrates the greatness of the human spirit whose travail he describes. Tragedies, in that only sense of the word which has any distinctive meaning, are no longer written. . . . It is the result of one of those enfeeblements of the human spirit . . . and a further illustration of that gradual weakening of man's confidence in his ability to impose upon the phenomenon of life an interpretation acceptable to his desires which is the subject of the whole of the present discussion.[4]

Before the advent of rationalism (Krutch does not tell the reader how, when or why this happened), the dramatist saw man as a noble creature: therefore he was able to represent his tragic hero as a man of high station, usually of aristocratic nobility. According to Krutch, the nobility of the tragic hero is symbolic, that is, it shows his inward majesty; thus his gradual democratization points to a diminishing belief in the greatness of man. The modern temper, with the help of scientists, has come to see man as commonplace and his emotions as petty. One would have to infer that this is why Ibsen, and all the more the lesser modern dramatists, are unable to represent their hero as anything more than an uninteresting, grey bourgeois—or worse yet, a mean member of the lower class. To this, it must be objected that it is true that we have come to think of "man" as an ordinary citizen, but that it is only Krutch's reactionary leap of logic which makes him conclude that therefore we have come to think of him as less noble. The fact that an ordinary man is worthy of, for example, Ibsen's serious drama (whether that is in fact tragedy will have to be determined later) goes to prove just the opposite: that people, even if they are no kings or princesses, are worthy of our attention, that the exposition of the "common man's" problems is a valid cause.

For all his talk of symbolic greatness, Krutch basically endorses Aristotle's equating of nobility and

greatness with social station. It is then difficult not to suspect that it is at least partly the low station and social insignificance of the protagonists of modern serious drama that irritates him. One could put up an interesting argument to the effect that Hamlet's tragedy is more significant than Oswald's (in The Ghosts) because it is also Denmark's tragedy. However, this is not Krutch's rationale for finding Oswald petty and insignificant. It is rather that he finds the exchanging of royalty for the "common man" and gods for disease, or filial piety for filial syphilis, a sign of an insignificant and meaningless world. Of course, the fact that he is not a prince in contact with gods does not make Oswald's suffering any less acute. Furthermore, anyone approaching The Ghosts and its symbolic meaning with the same seriousness Krutch applies to Shakespeare, will realize that that play too has its "Denmark" not only its anemic imitation of a Hamlet. It is simply that the new symbolic system does not appeal to Krutch.

Perhaps the single most important idea around which Krutch's discussion revolves is the notion of tragedy as the optimistic expression of a confident age, an age revelling in the celebration of its own greatness, an age satisfied with what it sees when it looks in the mirror. The unhappy ending in tragedy is a means to an end, the end being the restoring of order, the satisfaction that comes

from seeing the heroic exercise of the will. If Hamlet's life was sacrificed, his death was ultimately not depressing because it was for a noble cause, and in the end Denmark was cured of its rottenness. Today, Krutch affirms, there are no noble causes, no noble men. The modern age is inferior because people are incapable of the optimistic vision tragedy presupposes. The infancy of mankind yields myths and fables in which the good always triumphs over the evil. In the adolescent, no longer naive but still hopeful stage, man produces tragedy. And finally in full maturity, the modern temper prevents man from coming up with anything but gloomy images of his own insignificance.

According to Miguel de Unamuno's work The Tragic Sense of Life a people acquires that sense when it becomes aware of the gap between what it desires and what it actually achieves, and of the discrepancy between the actual material order of the world and a preferred ideal order; this special sense of life is opposed to rationalism and to the scientific spirit. It combines an acute awareness of one's dissatisfaction and an occasionally naïve faith that something can be done about it. Once the scientific spirit enters man's life, some of the discrepancies and gaps are explained and others accepted as truths. Thus man loses his quixotic tendencies and so, too, the "tragic sense of life."[5] Tragedy is the unintellectual manifestation of man's frustrations and at the same time

a cure for them. This is basically Krutch's view too, except that he downplays the frustrations of adolescent mankind and presents them as the typical attributes of modern man. Tragedy, for him, is not despair, but an escape from it, and its irrationality is preferable to modern man's rational inability to rise above his frustrations and gloom.

To modern man it can no longer be a comfort that he must undergo suffering in order to transcend and achieve order and harmony. He has lost the tragic faith. In tragedy

> We accept gladly the outward defeats which it describes for the sake of the inward victories which it reveals. . . .[6]
> Thus for the great ages tragedy is not an expression of despair but the means by which they saved themselves from it.[7]

Krutch is too blinded by his hatred of the modern era to see any positive value in people's unwillingness to accept suffering and preference to look for solutions. He does not realize that this tendency in the modern age might be a proof of people's optimism rather than of their pessimism. His own pessimism gets in the way and thus he does not consider the possibility that beside accepting defeat and comforting oneself with tragedy there just might be other ways to reveal inward victories — not to mention that one

might strive to achieve outward victories as well.

Whereas Krutch's ideal tragedy appeases (as according to Aristotle, tragedy should), an Ibsenian, or indeed a post-Ibsenian play, may arouse. In that sense it would be dangerous from the point of view of the status quo. (Plato probably would also have objected to it.) This may even be the source of Krutch's feeling that classical tragedy is optimistic and the modern play is pessimistic. One would have to agree with Krutch that an Ibsenian play disturbs, that there is an open quality about it everything "vulgarly" hangs out at the end, nothing is tucked in, nothing resolved. But is this a sign of man's loss of confidence in his own greatness? Or is it that the function of the arts, and with it of drama — including tragic drama — has changed? Unfortunately, Krutch, and others like him, do not recognize or accept this new function, or see it as valuable. In 1929 Krutch was as appalled by The Ghosts as audiences were almost half a century earlier.

Krutch is right in saying that we have lost our sub-human confidence in life, our naïve faith in the world and in man, but he forgets that we have gained a different kind of confidence, a knowledge of and sometimes certainty in a complex order less sophisticated ages did not even dream of. The problem with Krutch's analysis does not lie in his estimation of modern man as skeptical and at times despairing, but rather in his outline of the development

from absolute faith to absolute despair which refuses to see any positive values in the modern tendency to question rather than accept. His study is a reactionary piece of nostalgia, a bitter glance back to the God-fearing, non-scientific era when such now outdated notions as love or tragedy were still possible.

Like Krutch, Francis Fergusson in The Idea of a Theater (1949) views the situation from the vantage point of an imagined Sophoclean or Shakespearean "idea of a theater"—the common understanding of a people, a shared set of beliefs and values upon which the dramatist could build. Modern societies lack this unified vision and thus the drama they create necessarily falls short of the ideals of high tragedy:

> In spite of the intellectual and artistic triumphs of the modern writers, we cannot say what relation they have to the modern world. What relation is possible to a society with no actual focus of understanding, responsible power, common values?[8]

Fergusson's discussion rests on two basic statements: one, that a "central idea of a theater" is missing, and two, that social realism is too narrow for a satisfactory dramatic convention to be built on it. Though such giants

of modern drama as Ibsen and Chekhov took the challenge of placing their dramas in this resctrictive setting, the result was far from satisfactory. In other words it fell short of the ideal, i.e. the tragedy of Sophocles and Aristotle.

Though he is much more appreciative of Ibsen and Chekhov than Krutch, Fergusson gives little chance to modern drama. Already his definition of modern realism as "photographic imitation of the human scene" is limited, to say the least. One of the major problems of realism, according to Fergusson, is that it insists on giving precise answers and coming up with solutions—all to the detriment of the potertially tragic form. Speaking of the Ghosts he says:

> At the end of the play the tragic rhythm of Mrs. Alving's quest is not so much completed as brutally truncated, in obedience to the requirements of the thesis and the thriller . . . from the point of view of Mrs. Alving's tragic quest as we have seen it develop through the rest of the play, . . . [the] conclusion concludes nothing: it is merely sensational.[9]

Fergusson is right in seeing none of the clean-cut resolutions here that one finds in Hellenic tragedy. This is of course also Krutch's complaint. However, the inconclusiveness of plays such as The Ghosts, feeding back into the audience's reality, can equally well be seen as

testifying to their richness rather than to their limitation. But for such a view one must stop looking back to ancient models.

The problem is that neither Krutch nor Fergusson makes a distinction between Hellenic and Renaissance tragedy. They use the two forms of the genre almost interchangeably to help them demonstrate the inferiority of modern drama, and this, I think, goes to discredit many of their arguments. Already in Renaissance tragedy, for example, the resolution is not as clear-cut as in ancient tragedy. For example, the order that is restored at the end of Hamlet (Fortinbras) is not the same order that was lost at the beginning (Hamlet's father.) Both Krutch and Fergusson ignore this important element.

Since the whole of Fergusson's (and to an extent Krutch's) argument rests on this notion of society with "common values," it might be useful to establish what exactly the phrase entails. Does Fergusson think that a fixed system of values is preferable to the modern plurality of values? He himself never puts the question in that way —he is simply disturbed by what he considers to be a chaotic situation. He more or less ignores the fact that the idea of an art-form for a particular élite or small segment of the population is nothing new, that in fact it is encoutered more often than a theatre for "everyone." Of course, there must be some common ground of understanding between the

playwright and his public, however small that public might be—otherwise it is absurd to speak of theatre. The fact that we still create art, and even have theatre, is proof that there must be groups who share sets of values. Even the existence of Broadway is based on a common understanding, as is the prevalence of cinema or television over theatre in a given society. It seems to me that Fergusson, under the pretext of discussing the existence of shared beliefs, is actually critically alluding to what he takes to be modern values and wincing in displeasure. Modern beliefs simply do not measure up to his estimation of what values should be.

Like Krutch, Fergusson draws morals from the regrettable condition of the theatre:

> And when the idea of a theater is inadequate or lacking, we are reduced to speculating about the plight of the whole culture. Unless the demoralizing power of modern industry is understood in some perspective, how can human life itself be seen as anything more than a by-product (marketable or unmarketable, proletarian or capitalist) of its developing machinery? Unless the cultural components of our melting-pot are recognized, evaluated, and understood in some sort of relationship—our religious, racial, and regional traditions and our actual habits of mind derived from applied science and practical politics, seen as mutually relevant—how can we hope for a public medium of communication more significant than that of our move-palaces, induction-centers, and camps for displaced persons?[10]

Too many clichés, too many assumptions and short circuited conclusions, not enough precise argumentation and factual information are to be found in studies of Krutch's and Fergusson's kind. And in most cases such studies do not begin approaching the analytical depth of The Modern Temper and The Idea of a Theater.

For this reason, George Steiner's The Death of Tragedy (1961) is very refreshing. Though he still works from the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, he does not shut out fertile discussion by assuming as an undiscussed and indisputable premise that modern theatre is inferior to its classical or Renaissance predecessors. His book chronicles, in a historical survey, the changing values of society as manifested in the development and decline of the tragic mode. Though there is in his analysis a good deal of value-judgment, it does not begin to approach Krutch's or Fergusson's axe-grinding partisanship. He examines the theatre from the point of view of the public and—proceeding from the economic factors influencing the rise and fall of a particular type of audience as well as the philosophical background of the age—the world-view that created and later killed the spirit of tragedy.

The democratization of the public in the 18th century was accompanied by a lowering of dramatic standards; melodrama became extremely popular. Furthermore:

> The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars plunged ordinary men into the stream of history. They laid them open to pressures of experience and feeling which had in earlier times been the dangerous prerogatives of princes, statesmen and professional soldiers. Once the great levies had marched and retreated across Europe, the ancient balance between private and public life had altered. An increasing part of private life now lay open to the claims of history. . . . The new "historical" man . . . came to the threatre with a newspaper in his pocket. In it might be facts more desperate and sentiments more provocative than many a dramatist would care to present. The audience had within itself no quality of silence, but a surfeit and tumult of emotion. . . . How was the playwright to satisfy it, to rival the drama of actual news? Only by crying even louder havoc, by writing melodrama.[11]

The new bourgeois audience asked to be entertained, and theatre now had to compete with other forms of leisure activities. The public was no longer touched by the sublimity of classical tragedy; its interest lay in realism. Thence the decline of the serious drama and the rise of the novel, the new art form of the rapidly growing middle class. Unlike tragedy, it dealt with the prosaic everyday world, the world the new public was most familiar with. Steiner

considers this turn from serious drama to the novel one of the most important occurences in the history of the imagination. Whether one agrees or not, one must admit that the nature of the theatre and drama in any age cannot be understood without reference to audience demand and to the other available sources of information and entertainment. A discussion of the role of the theatre in North America today without a mention of the importance of movies and television would remain meaningless. Creative energy has not, one hopes, disappeared; it has only been channeled into other forms of art or pseudo-art. A study of the death of tragedy with no reference to the fate of the theatre in general and of other literary forms must necessarily be shallow. Similarly, by not mentioning the importance of the novel from the 18th century on, critics like Krutch and Fergusson tell only half the story.

Steiner examines some of the major beliefs of Enlightenment and Romanticism in order to determine to what extent the spirit of the age was, or was not, tragic. Two elements are emphasized as essential to tragedy: <u>catastrophe</u>—tragedy always ends badly—and <u>irrationality</u>—it deals with mysterious forces.

> . . . any realistic notion of tragic drama must start from the fact of the catastrophe. Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational

> prudence. . . . Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means we may have serious drama, but not tragedy. More pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of Agamemnon; social psychiatry is no answer to Oedipus. But saner economic relations or better plumbing can resolve the grave crises in the dramas of Ibsen.[12]

Whereas in Krutch's The Modern Temper the irrationality of tragedy takes on an air of pleasant naïveté and innocence, in Steiner's study it becomes a dark, mysterious force that haunts man and is finally defeated in the Age of Reason. With this defeat tragedy dies. According to Steiner, as soon as man stops believing in the absolute, the inevitable, the predetermined, he can no longer create tragedy. Thus the age of Enlightenment, with the Rousseauist belief in the perfectibility of man, marks the beginnings of the death of tragedy. Born innocent, corrupted only by his environment, man is no longer responsible for his actions. This can make for morally flabby drama, as some have argued, but it can also, Steiner says, engender a drama of endless possibilities. Man's fate is no longer predetermined by incomprehensible forces, he is his own master. The almost overbearing optimism and self-confidence of the era leaves no room for the tragic idea of hopelessness, for the recognition that there is no way out. The Romantic temper always sees a way out, and in drama there will be a way out

till one gets to people such as Beckett who will show again the hopeless, the absolute, the illogical, and the absurd.

Unlike Krutch, Steiner sees the overt confidence in man as an obstacle to the tragic vision. It must be added that what Steiner talks about is a rationalizing confidence, the confidence of an age that is unwilling to accept for a fact the unavoidable universality of suffering. Krutch, on the other hand, calls for an irrational confidence, a confidence based on a lack of understanding, on blind faith. The former is an active confidence; the latter a passive one.

Another of Steiner's reasons for the Romantics' failure to revive tragic drama is their obsession with the self, once again the result of their brand of confidence. The narcissist tendencies of the Romantics are best expressed in lyric poetry and not in the public, necessarily more objective, genre of drama.

As Steiner shows, tragedy seems to go against the grain of the Romantic temper; and yet, strangely enough, the mind of the time is immensely attracted to tragedy, possibly to its sublime eloquence and to what the age interprets as the magnification of the tragic hero. We must still be romantics at heart, for these are the elements, I suspect, that many of our critics are attracted to in tragedy and because of which they cling to it so desperately.

Steiner devotes a generous portion of the book to the failure of modern dramatists to employ language suitable to the loftiness of tragedy. His assumption is that only verse is deserving enough:

> Verse is not only the special guardian of poetic truth against the critique of empiricism. It is the prime divider between the world of high tragedy and that of ordinary existence. Kings, prophets, and heroes speak in verse, thus showing that the exemplary personages in the commonwealth communicate in a manner nobler and more ancient than that reserved to common men. There is nothing democratic in the vision of tragedy. The royal and heroic characters whom the gods honor with their vengeance are set higher than we are in the chain of being, and their style of utterance must reflect this elevation. Common men are prosaic, and revolutionaries write their manifestoes in prose. Kings answer in verse.[13]

This is certainly true of Hellenic and Shakespearean tragedy, but the question to be asked is: is this the *sine qua non* of tragedy? Does all tragedy require an anti-democratic, élitist vision? Is there any reason why only princes may be considered tragic material? As to language, there seem to be also no good reasons why suffering, or a sense of the inevitable, could not be expressed through prose—if our modern temper does in fact reject verse.

One reason for the decline of tragedy that most critics mention is a "decline of the organic world view and its

attendant context of mythodological, symbolic, and ritual reference."[14] As was shown, Fergusson's whole study revolves around this idea, and Krutch must be taken as being concerned with the crumbling of values resulting from a similar decline. According to Steiner, the more successful of the modern serious playwrights—Ibsen, for example—developed a coherent mythology to fit the new vision of man and of his world; but on the whole, there has been a continuous splintering of values: a universal set of values, a clear meaning to concepts, a larger reference, a "common ground; a kind of preliminary pact of understanding . . . drawn up between . . . [the playwright] and his society"[15] are lacking.

> The idiosyncratic world image, without an orthodox or public fabric to support it, is kept in focus only by virtue of the poet's present talent. It does not take root in the common soil. . . . When the classic and Christian world order entered into decline the consequent void could not be filled by acts of private invention.[16]

And all this makes for an ailing drama, and the death of tragedy. Critics such as Krutch tell their readers that playwrights are no longer able to produce tragedies because the modern age is pessimistic, lacking in faith and confidence, and is too resigned. Others, such as Steiner and

to an extent Fergusson, inform them that tragedy is dead because the public is too optimistic, has too much confidence in man's perfectibility, and is not resigned enough. The only "facts" they all seem to agree on are that our age is (too) rational, and that it possesses no common basis of values and understanding. The latter is, as I have suggested, a somewhat dubious notion and one that needs to be explored in greater detail. As for the former, some critics see rationality as a bad omen (Krutch and Fergusson), while others view it impartially or even with enthusiasm (Steiner). Those who say that there is no tragedy because people are too optimistic, find tragedy to be an expression of pessimism — for them rationality leads to an optimistic vision and therefore is to be welcomed. Conversely, those who claim that there is no tragedy because people are too pessimistic, consider tragedy to be an expression of optimism — for them rationality results in a pessimistic outlook and thus its advent is to be lamented.

What is one to make of these contradictory statements beyond the trite reflection that critics are bound to disagree? Perhaps a provisional conclusion might be that the nature and existence of tragedy are contentious issues which cannot be resolved till one sees what the opponents — those who still believe in the existence of modern tragic drama— have to say.

Notes

[1] Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), p. 8.

[2] Ibid., p. 12.

[3] Ibid., p. 72.

[4] Ibid., pp. 118-119.

[5] Miguel de Unamuno, Tragic Sense of Life, trans. J.E. Crawford Flitch (New York: Dover Publications, 1954).

[6] Krutch, op. cit., p. 125.

[7] Ibid., p. 126.

[8] Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theater (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 65.

[9] Ibid., pp. 151-152.

[10] Ibid., pp. 226-227.

[11] George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 116-117.

[12] Ibid., p. 8.

[13] Ibid., pp. 241-242.

[14] Ibid., p. 292.

[15] Ibid., p. 320.

[16] Ibid., pp. 322-323.

CHAPTER TWO

Tragedy Continuing

This chapter presents the views of those critics who attempted to show — often in reaction to the preceding group, and sometimes independently— that tragedy is possible in the modern age.

In 1932 Mark Harris in The Case for Tragedy challenged the assertion made by Krutch and others[1] that tragedy is no longer possible because men have lost all sense of values. His study attempts to place each tragic period in its proper sociopolitical and cultural perspective; Harris is interested in discovering what he rather vaguely calls the "sociological" value of drama in order to illustrate that each period had its own type of tragedy to which it could relate, and to which consequent eras are not able to relate in quite the same way because they are prevented from doing so by "sociological" barriers. The conclusion is that our era, too, must have its own particular set of values and a body of drama to suit it. Harris draws a pattern of changing societies, cultures, and tragedies to show that the modern age, in not being able to fully penetrate the tragedies of the ancients, is not that different from previous eras. It is all a matter of natural development, but not necessarily the sort of decadence Krutch referred to.

In the chapter dealing with modern tragedy— "The Renascence of the Undistinguished"— Harris attacks Krutch's theory of tragedy, "a theory of imaginative reconciliation dependent on an heroic view of human nature."[2] First of all, the idea of reconciliation as native to Greek and Renaissance tragedy seems dubious to him:

> The essence of Mr. Krutch's idea of reconciliation is to be found, not in the classicism of the fifth century B.C., nor in the gigantism of Elizabethan tragic poetry, but in modern skepticism. . . . A conception of the universe as sufficiently hostile to warrant such a view would more probably belong to Mr. Krutch's time than to the ages of humanistic strength.[3]

It is certainly true that Krutch is too pessimistic but Harris's logic is questionable: though the Elizabethans had a kind of faith in mankind that people today lack and conversely, people today possess another kind of faith that they lacked— they were obviously aware that the world did not always function as they would have desired it to, and in this sense they might have been in need of reconciliation.

Taking his cues from Krutch, Harris discusses naturalism at some length, in particular its treatment of the protagonist:

> Naturalism is first of all indifferent to the concept of the noble protagonist. In many instances the actual position of the leading character or characters is low on the social scale. . . . The more important respect in which the

> naturalist hero departs from tradition is in the direction of character. He is no longer a lofty and powerful personality fatally flawed through enfeebled judgment or ancestral curse. He is rather the representative figure of democracy, sharing man's collective mediocrity and even his occasional degeneracy. In any case, he is significant through representation rather than through individualistic superiority.[4]

This is, of course, something Krutch was well aware of—it was the source of his dissatisfaction. Harris goes on to point out where the new protagonist's magnitude or tragic significance may lie. He is here referring to Hardy but this may just as well be applied to Ibsen, all the more since it is addressed to Krutch:

> Hardy saw man as exceedingly small when measured against the universe, but he also knew him to be capable of suffering, through his sentiency and aspirations. Such a creature is not for us too mean a sacrifice upon the altar of the tragic muse.[5]

Clearly, Krutch would disagree with this last statement because he is working with a definition that is considerably different from that of Harris and others who argue for the possibility of a modern tragedy. Though Harris at first questioned Krutch's notion of reconciliation, he now distinguishes between the old type of tragedy, the tragedy of reconciliation, and the new type, the post-Ibsenian tragedy of "suffering without hope," a "tragedy of the irreconcilable."[6] This com-

promise would hardly appeal to Krutch for whom there is no tragedy without reconciliation.

Harris's willingness to extend the definition of tragedy to include modern drama is typical of those who claim that tragedy is still possible. The fact that the classical definition must be stretched and viewed more liberally is proof that the old forms are not suited to the new way of thinking. It is in the reaction to this apparent impasse, that the critics' opinions diverge: some throw up their arms in despair,others look for a new definition of tragedy. In the case of the latter group there seems to be a tendency to further elaborate upon the observations of the traditionalists, to rationalize them, offer explanations, and hopefully to come to different, more positive, conclusions. Complete disagreement with Krutch and his group on all issues, a denial of all their assertions, is hard to find. It would seem that critics who think like Harris, while arguing with Krutch, Fergusson, etc., on a number of points, also agree with them on a list of other, often fundamental points.

Elmer Edgar Stoll devoted the chapter "Tragic Fallacy, So Called"— in his Shakespeare and Other Masters (1940)—to answering Krutch. Stoll's first contention is that Krutch confuses art with life. He is referring to Krutch's tendency to deduce facts about life from art, in particular to his

concluding that since our art no longer portrays heroes like those of the past, we cannot possibly think of man as heroic. Art is no document, argues Stoll, and so Krutch's reasoning from modern plays to modern society is unwarranted. Furthermore, Stoll rightly doubts that, for example, Shakespeare's tragedy was all that optimistic as Krutch finds. Nonetheless, he agrees wholeheartedly with Krutch that the main characters of Ibsenian drama are unappealing, and he tries to explain, without Krutch's brand of hostility, why this should be so: as a result of their newly gained knowledge about man playwrights have come to value realism too much to be able to represent man as absolutely good or absolutely evil. Granted, a certain naïveté and even a great deal of imagination have been lost, but:

> It is a different conception of the genre that is now prevailing, which has borne some good fruit and will, no doubt, bear better. It is not that . . . of a tragedy lifted above ordinary experience, on the wings of poesy high in air. The prevailing conception is that of tragedy "inhering in the nature of things rather than in the deeds of man", or in men's relation to their physical and social environment, rooted in the earth. Poverty and ugliness, humble and low life, hovels and disease are a part of it, and in the right hands . . . are sometimes made to yield situations which nevertheless elicit pity and terror, as a potentate deposed or wailing in a prison cannot now. . . . An anointed and sceptered monarch is another bit of tragic furniture, like

> fate, ghost, and villain, well stored away in the theatrical lumber-room; but are we spiritually or imaginatively much the poorer for that?[7]

The present discussion revolves around this basic question: Are we poorer for it? The answer a critic gives usually colors his view of tragedy, his attitude toward the modern protagonist, and it determines whether or not he will view tragedy simply as a genre that can undergo change, or also as a fixed value— that is, whether he will view the lack of an ideal tragedy as a sign of decadence in our modern age.

When Stoll agrees that modern dramatic heroes are less likeable than the classical tragic heroes he finds a reason for that (it is never clear whether reason equals justification) in the public's and playwright's demand for 1) realism, 2) psychological veracity, and 3) circumstantial probability. This insistence on realism, or truth, is something Krutch saw as one of the major shortcomings of our era; yet Stoll finds that in the best modern plays even that which is mean, low, and ugly adds something to the overall aesthetic effect.

Here it might be useful to mention briefly Aldous Huxley's essay "Tragedy and the Whole Truth."[8] Huxley sets tragedy up as diametrically opposed to a literature that encompasses the "whole truth." Tragedy deals with carefully selected extremes, with exalted one-sided personages; the banalities of everyday life and distracting details are not

included. By contrast, "whole truth" literature mixes the sublime and the ordinary, the tragic and the comic, it is the genre that prevails in modern literature because of its insistence on "realism." The position Huxley presented in his essay of 1931 has been rather common. Most of the critics discussed here have, to lesser or greater extent, felt that tragedy and realism were incompatible. This was quite often the case regardless of whether they considered modern drama petty, sordid, unimaginative, pessimistic, and irrelevant, or significant, imaginative, optimistic, and highly relevant. As shall become evident later, only occasionally has there been an attempt to suggest that realism might in fact lead to an enriched type of tragedy with a very specific contemporary significance. Whereas Krutch and Fergusson view the failure due to realism as more or less final and irreversible, Stoll never completely gives up his faith in tragedy. He asserts that man still has dignity and a set of values, though he never elaborates upon what these values might be. A liking for realism is about the only value Stoll assigns to modern society, but he does not say anything about the nature of this modern reality. Furthermore, Stoll is not totally convinced about the existence of tragedy today:

> In tragedy we are not reminded of the world about us except enough to be lost in its own. In our serious drama, in our literature generally, the world about us engrosses us, presses upon us;

> the tragic machinery, the superstitions and conventions, whereby it was kept afar, has broken down; and perhaps tragedy may never fit in with contemporary subjects— among the Greeks and Elizabethans themselves, as in the Oedipus and Hamlet, it was generally not meant to do so.[19]

The logic in this passage is so twisted that it needs some clarifying. Stoll begins by saying that tragedy reminds one just enough of one's own world so that one wants to be lost in the world of tragedy. (This is already rather dubious.) In other words, tragedy is a mode of escape from oppressive daily existence. Today playwrights are unable to bar the realities from drama— they no longer have the necessary superstition and imagination, the "tragic machinery" that is needed to create a drama of escape. So it would seem that tragedy is dead. The last statement I take to mean that contemporary realities are always incompatible with tragedy, they were meant to be so. This brings one back to Stoll's initial statement. The argument runs in a circle. What Stoll seems to be saying is that the tragic vision never dealt with reality. The implication is that the plays that deal with reality are not tragedies— playwrights have lost the ability to escape reality, to rise above it. This is not that different from Krutch's assertions. He, too, claimed that playwrights today insist too much on the sordid truth to be able to imaginatively soar above it.

Stoll complains about some critics' tendency to confuse

art and life; however, the very fact that the Greeks were satisfied with producing drama that was not a direct picture of their society, reflects upon their society. In other words, I would argue that art and life are much more related than Stoll would have one think. There may be truth in his statement that simply because modern playwrights represent men differently than in classic tragedies, does not mean that they or their audiences value him less; however, he gets himself into difficulties when he tries to prove that art does not refract life and tragedy does not deal with reality. It must be admitted that Krutch and Fergusson see the whole problem more clearly when they point out that when artists today insist that their art mirror life (rather than improve on it) this goes to show that they think of both art and life differently than artists in other ages did.

Stoll ends his discussion by saying that the tragic spirit is too important for man to surrender, and that in the modern era it can find an outlet in adaptations of "old familiar legendary stories, with their bold contrasts and sharp simplifications, their large masses and ample improbabilities"[10] — since after all, that is where the Greeks and Elizabethans got their inspiration. Ultimately, however, Stoll's arguments with their vague generalizations do not seem very convincing.

Elder Olson, in the last chapter of his Tragedy and the Theory of Drama (1961) discounts all the reasons usually given for the death of tragedy. The ordinary man, the man of low station, is just as suitable a subject for tragedy as a king, since "it is not the natural subject which makes tragedy or comedy, it is the conceived subject matter, the dramatic conception, and the kind of art which is exerted to realize it."[11] The fact that we are still attracted to the tragedies of the past, Olson argues, disproves the assertion that we have no sense of standards, no set of values. This, I would say, is faulty logic: even if one were totally cynical and lacked all morals, one could still find a certain kind of nostalgic pleasure in witnessing the art of a society with a very strictly defined moral code.

Olson acknowledges the richness and variety of modern drama and the obvious gains that have resulted from it, but he is not blind to the losses. He laments about the "language of the inarticulate," which is quite impotent to express subtle or profound thought, and about the tendency toward realism:

> As a program for new art, realism was undoubtedly fruitful . . . it extended the arts of fiction and drama. But it was never intended as, and cannot possibly serve as, a program for all art. Nevertheless, that is the role it is gradually coming to fill—quietly, unofficially, as a matter of assumption and custom rather than of rational

> decision. In this role it may become quite as tyrannical for the drama as the conventions it was devised to attack.[12]

Olson does not see much merit in the modern drama— in order to heighten the significance and the stature of the "ordinary man," it is prone to falling into sentimentality, morbidity or violence. And yet, he still feels that tragedy would be possible if only it did not portray the ordinary man in an ordinary manner. This can only happen if poet and dramatist will again coincide.

Unfortunately Olson does not say why they have not coincided in modern theatre, and how, beyond pure accident, that coincidence might be brought about.

The general lack of confidence in most critics who study the possibility of modern tragedy is well represented in John Gassner's protracted waverings on the subject.

In 1954 Gassner devoted a chapter in The Theatre in Our Times[13] to modern tragedy, focusing on what he called "tragic enlightenment" (a principle first considered by him in 1937.) In tragedies, purgation is not enough: the hero, and through him the audience, must reach a recognition, an understanding, otherwise the suffering will be futile. Gassner defines this enlightenment as 1) clear comprehension of forces involved in the struggle, 2) understanding of cause and effect, 3) judg-

ment of what we have witnessed, and 4) achievement of order within ourselves. The problem of modern would-be tragedy, Gassner says, is that it fails to achieve a combination of catharsis and enlightenment. The characters are unconvincing, often mere mouthpieces for the playwright's ideas, with low levels of emotion and intellect. The heroes of modern "tragedies" do not gain enlightenment because they are mentally and spritually impoverished. In this sense—he expressly concedes to Krutch—their lack of stature constitutes a problem even for the critic who favors the democratic representation of man. Equally the audience will find it impossible to gain enlightenment through such a hero.

The failure to achieve enlightenment is not a strictly post-Ibsenian phenomenon:

> The decline started when the moralizing and sentimentalizing middle-class dramatists of the eighteenth century began to substitute noble or moral sentiment for tragic enlightenment. The decline was hastened by the romantic playwright who reduced enlightenment to a drum-roll of revolt or idealism. And the devaluation was completed, actually before the advent of distinctively modern drama, by Scribe, who put hokum into both historical costume and modern dress drama, and by his fellowers, the writers of the "well-made" (that is contrived) problem plays.[14]

Gassner rejects the reasons usually given for the decline of tragedy. Perhaps his most important contribution to the debate is a refusal to make the usual sharp distinction

between the supposedly "universal" values of classical and Renaissance tragedy and the "social" values of contemporary drama. He makes the useful point that what is often hailed as purely "universal" was at one time very contemporary, possibly even topical, and it was only with time that its strictly momentary relevance lost its meaning and it came to appear as universal. Lack of universality, then, is not what is amiss with modern tragedy, according to Gassner.

He takes The Ghosts as his example and shows that Mrs. Alving is practically but not tragically enlightened. What she learns in the course of the play has the "logic of sociology and medical science of a particular period,"[15] not of high tragedy. Practical enlightenment offers a precise thesis grounded in social reality.

> An alternative between tragedy and a thorough physical checkup suggests itself in The Ghosts, and this is a patently absurd notion to the tragic sense of life that views the reality of man, morality, and fate in an infinitely harder light.[16]

However, here we are, once again, back at the notion of the universal, absolute statement in old forms of tragedy, versus the social, relative or "practical" statement of modern serious drama. In the end even Gassner cannot escape the distinction.

Finally Gassner suggests that what is abundant in

modern theatre is "tragic non-tragedy," a play that has elements of tragedy but is ultimately non-tragic, because of its reliance on social and/or psychological explication:

> In so far as the world-view is omitted, diminished or obfuscated by modern realism, sociology, or psychological science, modern drama cannot at best rise higher than "low tragedy." The characters of the drama may struggle intensely, but their stakes and the author's gambit in treating them are likely to be limited. They may suffer acutely, but they are unlikely to somehow involve the universe in their anguish.[17]

In 1957, Gassner again took up the problem in "The Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy"[18] and began with a discussion of critical literature, which he usefully presented as a contest between the "liberals" (those who claimed that tragedy was possible) and the "traditionalists" (those who said that tragedy was dead.) According to Gassner, the latter were usually guilty of "genetic fallacy" — that is, the idea that something must remain the same throughout its existence, that it cannot undergo change, and of the restrictive argument of a community of values. They adhered rigidly to Aristotle's definition of tragedy, which in their hands became a yardstick for measuring all consequent drama.

Gassner dismisses the traditionalists' list of modern drama's characteristics supposedly incompatible with tragedy and outlines the opposing and not so frequently maintained

view that tragedy, rather than rejecting modern values, should attempt to enter the modern consciousness.

He recognizes the numerous problems modern tragedy faces and is willing to agree on many points, at least partially, with the traditionalists: its characters do indeed lack "tragic stature," a mental and spiritual magnitude. The plays are topical rather than universal (Gassner finally concedes) and they are depressing. What is more, often there is a note of "false tragicality" which has led many to believe that they were dealing with genuine tragedy rather than with a drama borrowing certain elements from tragedy in a disjointed manner while lacking the accompanying tragic sense. Returning to his distinction between "high" and "low" tragedy Gassner this time goes beyond the argument by suggesting that:

> We may also arrive at the conclusion that there is really no compelling reason for the modern stage to <u>strain</u> toward tragedy. There are other ways of responding to the human condition.[19]

He opts for comedy and <u>drame</u> (i.e. serious non-tragic drama) and for the impure genres, "amalgamations of grave and comic writing,"[20] and seems to be less and less sure of the possibility and now even of the necessity of tragedy.

In "New Tragic Perspectives?"[21] (1960) Gassner again takes direct issue with Krutch's notion of "tragic fallacy." First of all, man's study of sciences, his greater under-

standing of nature, and the resulting confidence have not destroyed values such as love or morality. Nor is human dignity dependent upon any illusions of man's greatness, Gassner argues. He criticizes the tendency to turn tragedy into a value, rather than a genre, by equating superior quality with tragedy, and calls for a new definition of tragedy that would take its inspiration from the modern era rather than shun it and look back to the allegedly more glorious past.

The new sciences of psychology and sociology could enrich tragic drama.

> Combined with the greater courage demanded of men deprived of comforting ignorance, the increase in men's awareness of themselves should make tragic art more possible, rather than less.[22]

Theoretically speaking then, tragedy should be possible today more than ever. As to the problem of drama dealing too much with remediable social problems:

> So long as the individual is not dwarfed by social analysis or transformed into the puppet of social forces, theme in social drama is in little danger of being reduced to thesis. So long as theme is not whittled down to thesis, there is little danger of the characters being reduced to puppets. The real impediments to writing of social drama on levels higher than those attained by the problem-play or thesis drama are want of talent and want of imaginative intelligence.[23]

The problem seems to be, Gassner says, that in their social plays playwrights never get beyond being indignant about social injustice, they do not get beyond the immediate issue to larger questions. This complaint is not that different from the traditionalists' complaint about modern tragedy lacking universality, and indeed, Gassner's development seems to be toward the traditionalists:

> Another difficulty has been the tendency in thesis drama, if not in all social drama, to regard error and suffering as wholly eradicable by legislation or by a formal change of opinion, custom, or education. Playwrights have tended to disregard human nature itself as an obstacle to reform and to ignore nonsociological factors in human destiny, including those ironic and irrational elements that abound in the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, and Racine.[24]

Tragedy deals with the impossibilities of life; social drama usually offers possibilities.

And yet Gassner challenges those critics who would have it that modern realism has destroyed tragedy. Verisimilitude does not have to be antitragic, answers Gassner. Meanness and evil are not something peculiar to modern drama — Renaissance tragedy also had its own ignobilities. To the critics blinded by the glory of past ages, meanness is synonymous with the modern era and is usually just another word for the democratic vision of contemporary times.

Finally, in the address "The Dramatic Vision,"[25] delivered in 1960, Gassner reviewed his ideas, retracted some of his views, revised others, but basically never left his position that tragedy should be, at least on the theoretical level, possible. On the other hand, in this article he is harsher on the hero of modern tragedy than ever before and has the following to say about modern realism:

> The low-grade realism that prevails on our stage whittles down the dramatic stature of the individual until he becomes too trifling or banal to exhibit humanity on some appreciable elevation of mind and spirit.[26]

He closes with the remark that, though the prospects for high tragedy do not seem to be better than they were a few decades ago, the "tragic vision" is not entirely unavailable."[27] What is more, the nature of tragedy is not fixed.

It must be said that, while the "traditionalist" criticism proclaiming the death of tragedy was—in spite of inner contradiction — on the whole stated with a great deal of conviction, the "liberal" studies expounding the existence of modern tragedy are hardly persuasive. Where the proponents of the decline of tragedy are firm and state their case adamantly, their opponents tend to waver and even partially give in. Try as they may, they usually

return to the problem of the restrictive nature of realism, the meanness of the hero, and the inarticulateness of the prose. Though they expand the definition of tragedy, they are often unable to convince themselves that modern drama is worthy of being designated as tragic, but at the same time they desperately cling to the notion that tragedy is still alive.

Perhaps the reason that their pleas are less than convincing is that their definition of tragedy, while more elastic than that of Krutch or Fergusson, is still not radically enough changed, it still leans too heavily on Aristotelian tenets, on past examples, and depends on making too many fruitless comparisons. A need for an entirely new definition has been hinted at in these studies, but not satisfactorily articulated.

Notes

[1] Harris proposes to answer the New Humanists, in particular Prosser Hall Frye in Romance and Tragedy and Alan Reynolds Thompson in The Anatomy of Drama — in which one chapter is devoted to the problem of modern tragedy —, as well as Krutch in The Modern Temper.
The New Humanist arguments against the existence of modern tragedy closely resemble those of Krutch — therefore, they are not discussed in this thesis.

[2] Mark Harris, The Case for Tragedy (N.Y., London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1932), p. 133.

[3] Ibid., pp. 134-135.

[4] Ibid., pp. 171-172.

[5] Ibid., p. 167.

[6] Ibid., p. 166.

[7] Elmer Edgar Stoll, "The Tragic Fallacy, So Called," in his Shakespeare and other Masters (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), pp. 400-401. (This study appeared before in the University of Toronto Quarterly)

[8] Aldous Huxley, "Tragedy and the Whole Truth," Virginia Quarterly Review (1931), pp. 176-185.

[9] Stoll, op. cit., p. 413.

[10] Ibid., p. 413.

[11] Elder Olson, Tragedy and the Theory of Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961), p. 255.

[12] Ibid., p. 247.

[13] John Gassner, "Tragedy in the Modern Theatre," in his The Theatre in Our Times (New York: Crown, 1954), pp. 51-74.

[14] Ibid., p. 66.

[15] Ibid., p. 68.

[16] Ibid., p. 68.

[17] Ibid., p. 70.

[18] John Gassner, "The Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy," Tulane Drama Review Vol. 1, No. 3 (June 1957), pp. 3-14; rpt. in Tragedy: Vision and Form, ed. Robert W. Corrigan, (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), pp. 405-417.

[19] Ibid., p. 416.

[20] Ibid., p. 416.

[21] John Gassner, "New Tragic Perspectives?" in his Theatre at the Crossroads (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 51-65.

[22] Ibid., p. 57.

[23] Ibid., p. 57.

[24] Ibid., p. 59.

[25] John Gassner, "The Dramatic Vision" (first delivered in 1960 as an address, then printed in Impromptu, [1961]); rpt. in his Dramatic Soundings (New York: Crown, 1968), pp. 109-119.

[26] Ibid., p. 116.

[27] Ibid., p. 119.

CHAPTER THREE

Tragedy Metamorphosized into Another Genre

The critics examined in the preceding chapters felt either that tragedy had died and no drama of any value had replaced this superior genre, or that tragedy was alive, though not always well. A further group of critics finds in the modern theatre alternatives of sufficient value to classical tragedy.

Their most common opinion has been that playwrights have abandoned the strict neo-classical separation of genres and introduced elements of comedy into tragedy or elements of tragedy into comedy—and thus "tragicomedy" came into being.

Karl S. Guthke in Modern Tragicomedy (1966) presents the argument for tragicomedy as the distinctly "modern," post-Enlightenment phenomenon:

> In our own time, the "death of tragedy" has all but become a household phrase . . . one wonders how it happens that even now so many plays are sent out into the world proudly bearing the time-honored title of "tragedy." The point is, of course, that only . . . that tragedy which presupposes an essentially unshakable metaphysical world order instituted by the supreme powers variously called god, gods, fate, providence, or the like [has disappeared]. . . . As a result, man is

> no longer seen in his relation to God or some metaphysical realm which invests him with dignity but, rather, as a victim of his psychic determination and social condition. . . . In other words, the theological dimension of tragedy is lost; the dramatic god is dead; man as purely psychic and social being no longer commands the reverence he used to command sub specie aeterni.[1]

By the same token comedy, the "sister genre," also seems lost. Like tragedy, it is not possible in a world without absolute values, without a common understanding. But, paradoxically enough, a genre growing out of a blending of the two, according to Guthke, is and has been possible.

Guthke briefly traces the history and development of tragicomedy from its supposed origins in a facetious utterance of Plautus to its adaptation in modern times as the quintessential contemporary genre. There are four criteria, he says, for distinguishing between tragedy and comedy, and therefore four guidelines for defining tragicomedy. These are: 1) the mingling of dramatis personae from all stations of life; 2) a mixture of styles proper to tragedy and to comedy: using comic language to deal with tragic subject-matter, and vice versa; 3) the mixture of comic and serious incidents; and 4) the happy ending of a serious and potentially tragic play. We can, I think, conclude that tragicomedy comes about when a play is neither sufficiently tragic (because comic elements keep intruding) nor sufficient-

ly comic (because it is in parts too tragic.) The main logical problem thus becomes that the insistence on Aristotelian differentiation between the two diametrically opposed dramatic genres, is accompanied with an attempt at fusing them when they no longer seem to function in the pure form. The theory begins with an acceptance of strict distinction between tragedy and comedy, and ends by denying it. Somewhat confusingly, the existence of a tragicomedy is dependent on both the Aristotelian separation of styles and the negation of this separation.

In The Dark Comedy (1961) J.L. Styan also discusses the development of modern tragicomedy, but he calls it "dark comedy" to emphasize the prevalence of the comic tone and manner. The starting point of his argument is the same as Guthke's, and his assumptions about the modern times are reminiscent of those of Krutch, Fergusson, Steiner, Gassner, and others:

> Our present-day mongrel conventions, interbred with the spirit of naturalism, can better do other things [i.e., other than tragedy], and do not encourage the exclusive consistency of purpose we ask of tragedy. Twentieth century currents of contradictory thought and the mood of audiences do not permit it; the laws of tragedy belong to a world which is religious in its affirmation of human greatness. . . . In an age when tragedy is submerged in moral indifference, we may expect a kind of tragicomedy to come into its own.[2]

Tragicomedy, then, is tragedy modified by realism and by the comic elements that realism often brings along, as well as by the inability of the modern playwright to create a pure form. This alleged inability is a result of the prevailing "moral indifference," we are told by Styan—as by a host of other critics before him.

The theory of Guthke and Styan, which takes the traditional definition of tragedy for granted, is ultimately a poor compromise that evades the real issue of whether or not tragedy is possible. The conclusions that Krutch and other traditionalists come to at least grow naturally out of their initial assumptions. They do not necessitate the contortionist logic of the more liberal critics—whether they be like Gassner who tries to fit the new drama into the old form or like Guthke who shelves the problem by having a hybrid form rise out of the ashes of the now defunct form.

Another, much more original, though not necessarily more convincing, view of the development that tragedy underwent is to be found in Lionel Abel's Metatheatre (1963).[3] According to Abel, all serious drama from Hamlet on has undergone a metamorphosis corresponding to the new vision of man, and as a result can no longer be called tragedy. His hypothesis is that as man—and also the tragic hero—became self-conscious, it was impossible for the protagonist in a

serious drama to act in a tragic manner. The hero of late Renaissance drama was no longer the blind man moved by mysterious forces that he had been in classical tragedy; he became fully conscious of his own actions and existence, and this at times prevented him from acting directly and with determination. For Abel the quintessential modern hero is Hamlet, who is continually dramatizing himself and others, watching himself think, and is therefore unable to act. This consciously theatrical theatre is a radical departure from classical tragedy where the hero stumbles to his death in the dark, and therefore it deserves a new name—Abel calls it metatheatre. His guidelines for distinguishing a "metaplay" from a tragedy are as follows:

Tragedy	Metaplay
- sense of reality of the world	- world as projection of human consciousness
- glorifies structure of world	- glorifies unwillingness of imagination to regard any image of world as ultimate
- shows vulnerability of man's existence; fate as absolute	- shows human existence as dream-like; fate can be overcome
- tries to mediate between world and man	- no world except that created by human striving, human imagination
- ultimate order	- order as something improvised by men

Unlike tragedy, such metatheatre is a work of imagination that does not try to disguise the fact that it is a work of the imagination. Tragedy deals with reality, with life as it is; metatheatre deals with man's fancy and probes all possibilities—nothing is final or absolute for it. Except for Ibsen and the whole school of 19th and 20th-century realists and naturalists, all western drama from Shakespeare on (and including many of his plays) has been metatheatre.

Abel's argument may be original, but its fundaments are dubious and require some probing into. First, though he does not satisfactorily define tragedy, the implication is that since—in spite of what the critics, playwrights, and philosophers have been telling us—Christian or Western drama is not tragic, only Greek drama is tragedy. Abel's tragedy is orthodoxly Aristotelian: he does not admit the bulk of Renaissance drama into the tragic realm, and when he does, it is only as failed tragedy. By calling drama "metatheatre," Abel in fact equates Greek tragedy with "theatre," the original level, and Renaissance and post-Renaissance drama with an art form that transcends it by moving beyond the concerns of "tragedy" or "theatre." Second, he dismisses the bulk of drama between Shakespeare (if not the Greeks) and modern self-conscious theatre, especially 19th-century naturalism as misguided in its attempt to create tragedy when the contemporary world-view demanded metatheatre.

Thus in Abel we once again have a basically ahistorical critic, who judges everything starting from one absolute and can conceive of new forms only in reference, or in reaction, to the original, basic form taken out of a historical framework into a purely formalistic realm.

The hypothesis about the self-consciousness of the hero engendering theatre that does not deal with reality but with fantasy and dream is again based on a total separation of reality and imagination, rationality and self-awareness. Are self-examination or self-consciousness exclusively conjoined to dreamlike relativism? Further, when and why exactly did the dramatic hero become so self-conscious? These are questions Abel never even attempts to answer.

Something of the Krutchean argument is to be found here in the statement that rationality, awareness of one's condition, led to the death of tragedy. This part of Abel's thesis is still acceptable; but the part where blindness and an almost instinctual behaviour are related to tragedy and to realistic representation, to "theatre," while rationality is related to the lack of tragedy and to drama of the imagination, to "metatheatre," does not carry conviction. Ultimately, Metatheatre does not say much about tragedy and the modern times; it cannot say much about it because its definition of tragedy is so narrow.

Notes

[1] Karl S. Guthke, Modern Tragicomedy (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 97-98.

[2] J.L. Styan, The Dark Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 39-40.

[3] Lionel Abel, Metatheatre (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), passim.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tragedy Redefined

One of the major problems with the theories discussed in earlier chapters is that the critics never venture far enough from Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Some do not even define tragedy: they take it for granted that there is tacit agreement on the nature of this genre.

Herbert Muller, in The Spirit of Tragedy (1956), was one of the first to see modern tragedy in a new light. In particular, he saw some possibilities for drama becoming enriched by what has time and time again been criticised as restrictive realism:

> It is my thesis that the realism which is the obvious source of the limitations of modern tragedy is also the chief source of its strength. . . . The responsible modern writer cannot escape the radical and continuous change that the political, industrial, and scientific revolutions have brought about. He cannot blink the new knowledge about the nature and history of man of the universe, cannot evade the terms of life in a mass society.[1]

Muller is not disturbed by this state of affairs and reminds the reader that periods of tragedy were brief; they were the rare exceptions, rather than the rule. He responds to Fergusson's complaint about the lack of common values today

by pointing out that a "common" understanding is usually not as universal as Fergusson would have one think. In fact, "the rise of an élite is the norm in the history of literature";[2] even Dante's Divine Comedy was dependent upon the shared values of an élite, not of the whole community. He answers Krutch by pointing out that man's loss of faith may make him more self-important than before and may lead to optimism rather than to pessimism.

Muller indicates that drama as well as being "universal" must at the same time have a relation to the contemporary problems, must reflect actual conditions in order to be vital:

> The most obvious tragedy of our time is that millions of people have been helpless victims of still more terrible historic fatalities, in economic depressions and world wars.[3]

Thus he admits into the realm of tragedy experiences that the previous critics have tried to shut out. The problem is that he does not take the next logical step and attempt to revise the Aristotelian definition of tragedy. It seems to me that without this crucial step it is impossible to speak of a new tragedy, just as it is difficult to understand Renaissance tragedy solely with the Aristotelian definition in mind. The Hellenic definition shows the hero defeated by Fate, and though critics during the past four centuries

have pointed out that the hero must also be the cause of his own undoing—that something in his character must drive him to his downfall—, most of them have ultimately accepted the Aristotelian emphasis on Fate. And yet for these critics the main obstacle in considering modern drama as tragic has been the playwrights' refusal to view Fate as blind or the human condition as absolute and unchangeable and their tendency to look for explanations, solutions, alternatives. This epoch-making shift in serious drama calls for a suitable definition.

The proper alternative, it is becoming more and more clear, is to re-define tragedy as the chronicling of a significant, indeed symbolically "noble" protagonist defeated by contingent, but in a given nexus of precise circumstances unavoidable forces within history. In this way even the alterable can be tragic—in fact it is supremely tragic that it is alterable and yet still unaltered. The fact that the avoidable is often, for various reasons, not avoided, that it persists and is the cause of repeated suffering, is as tragic as anything Aeschylus or Shakespeare knew.

The critic that represents this sophisticated alternative is Raymond Williams.

Raymond Williams first outlined his ideas on modern tragedy and speculated on what constitutes the tragic elements

in "Dialogue on Tragedy" (1962).[4] He expanded upon these ideas at book length in his Modern Tragedy (1966). He acknowledges there a debt to, among others, Fergusson and Steiner, but his analysis of the problem differs markedly from that of any other critic heretofore discussed.

Williams is concerned with the "extraordinarily powerful attachment to an absolute meaning of tragedy"[5] which has prevented critics from seeing tragedy in a historical light. He argues that their definition of what tragedy was in any given period is usually filtered through their modern ideas and traditions, so that they end up attributing quite anachronistic characteristics to tragedies of previous ages. As different from them, Williams is interested not in measuring modern drama against older forms but rather in liberating it from the limiting subsumption under what is thought of as an unchanging tradition of tragic drama. He finds that the tendency to select a particular age as having the ideal tragedy, and measure all subsequent drama against it, is debilitating.

Williams emphasizes the changes rather than the stability, the flexibility rather than the rigidity of the tragic form. He outlines the changes undergone by the concept of the tragic downfall and concentrates particularly on the typical Neo-classical accent on formal dignity and decorum. This redistribution of accents shifted critical concern from

the tragic hero and content to the tragic response and form, and it is responsible for the emphasis of a number of modern critics on the necessity of a high style and the unsuitability of "low" subject matter. At this point, rank became important for purely stylistic reasons rather than for its politically representative implications, and tragedy was discussed from the point of view of the effect it was to have on the audience. This, according to Williams, was a

> . . . radical displacement of interest. Its lack of involvement with an action, its limitation of participation to the registering and balancing of emotions, are characteristic marks of a culture which, having separated the tragic hero by isolation of dignity and rank, comes inevitably to see the spectator as a detached and generalised consumer of feelings. . . .[6]

Williams emphasizes the change tragedy has continually been undergoing in response to the changing times. In spite of this, some critics insist on outlining a continuous tradition of tragic literature, with a hiatus here and there, but with no change in the genre. In particular, this entails the identification of Greek and Elizabethan tragedy as the same tradition. A first reason of such critics for dwelling on the continuity of tragedy is to emphasize the sense of <u>order</u> as the essence of tragedy in both the Greek and Elizabethan forms; a second and different reason is a concept of humanism which assimilates, in such theoretical specula-

tions, Romantic to Elizabethan tragedy—the Elizabethan tragedy being the fulcrum in both cases. Williams summarizes, I think, rather usefully what the critics I have discussed have been doing—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously and simply following a critical tradition. He implies that their speculations and their insistence on a mostly homogenous continuity have ended in an impasse by shrouding the whole issue in a veil of mystery.

Furthermore, Williams points out, their definitions of tragedy depended upon a conception of a static human nature and on "habitual moral and social codes which, while in fact particular, were taken as absolute."[7] Critics were then led to reject modern tragedy because it no longer conformed to the codes they took for absolute values.

Williams disagrees with the constantly echoed idea that tragedy is dependent upon a stability of beliefs. Critics often cite the Elizabethan and Jacobean age as the example of a society with stable beliefs and with a common understanding, but strangely enough, says Williams, they ignore the fact of mounting tensions in this period of history. He then proceeds to an entirely different view of the matter: societies with really stable beliefs produced no tragedy, nor did those in which the old beliefs had fully collapsed. Rather:

> . . . [tragedy's] most common historical setting is the period preceding the substantial breakdown and transformation of an important culture. Its condition is the real tension between old and new: between received beliefs, embodied in institutions and responses, and newly and vividly experienced contradictions and possibilities.[8]

Thus, in order for tragedy to come about the old beliefs must still be significantly present, yet questioned and challenged by experience. The resulting intensified suffering and resolving of disorder is in fact what makes for tragedy.

Accordingly, Williams has no difficulties in envisaging the existence of modern tragedy. However, his notion about what tragedy is, differs radically from the notions of the critics discussed earlier. He dwells on the importance of understanding a continually changing history and on the illogicality of the idea of an unchanging, absolute tradition.

Central to Williams's argument is his objection against the modern separation of tragic suffering from "mere suffering," and indeed from accident. (His seminal article in the New Left Review unfolds from the motorcycle death of a friend of the discussants and a debate on whether this "accident" is in fact a tragedy.) When certain actions and types of suffering are no longer designated as "tragic," there develops a concept of the superiority of certain kinds of suffering over others. Furthermore,

> . . . events which are not seen as tragic are deep in the pattern of our own culture: war, famine, work, traffic, politics. To see no ethical content or human agency in such events, or to say that we cannot connect them with general meanings, and especially with permanent and universal meanings, is to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy which no rhetoric or tragedy can finally hide.[9]

The suitability of suffering was traditionally determined by the identity of the hero—a notion rarely questioned in the past ages. Even the rebellion of middle-class culture in the 18th century against the neo-classical guidelines for the tragic protagonist, says Williams, only asked that tragic suitability and dignity be extended to include the new class, rather than that this whole élitist idea be done away with. While the categories were extended, the tragic experience often became limited:

> There was then both gain and loss: the suffering of a man of no rank could be more seriously and more directly regarded, but equally, in the stress on the fate of an individual, the general and public character of tragedy was lost. Eventually . . . new definitions of general and public interest were embodied in new kinds of tragedy. But, meanwhile, the idea of a tragic order had to coexist with the loss of any such actual order. What happened, at the level of theory, was then the abstraction of order, and its mystification.[10]

Williams also objects to the critical emphasis on death as the main staple of tragedy and on evil as irreparable.

After all, in most tragedies life continues after the death of the hero. In fact, this is what makes tragedy uplifting and—in some of them—restores, or at least suggests, an order of sorts. However, in individualistic tragedy the death of the hero ends the action. Thus the hero becomes the most important element in tragedy, and the modern critic very often treats this very particular understanding of the tragic experience as a universal one.

Williams rejects the commonly held opinion that tragedy, unlike realism, should deal with what is transcendent, irreparable, and absolute. Instead, he calls for new guidelines for modern tragedy. Tragedy should reflect contemporary historical, social, and political conflicts, it should not avoid "ordinary" suffering; it has already evaded it and ignored contemporary reality much too often, both in the practice of tragic theatre and in dramatic criticism. Critics have managed and still manage to separate tragedy from the societies which are their actual context. But modern tragedy in particular cannot exist without reference to contemporary crises. The separation that has been frequently made between the immediate historical problems of society and the ahistorical, supposedly deeper and universal problems of man, not only makes no sense but (he implies) is also harmful to one's view of tragedy, one's view of men in the modern world and its representation in art. In this

search for the meaning of modern tragedy:

> We are not looking for a new universal meaning of tragedy. We are looking for the structure of tragedy in our culture.[11]

A very important contribution by Williams to the whole discussion under examination is the relationship he sets up between revolution and tragedy, that is between the struggle to change one's environment and the expression of this struggle in dramatic arts. The frequent separation of social and tragic thinking, William argues, has been responsible for the ahistorical interpretation of tragedy as well as for the a-tragical interpretation of history. The latter especially is an entirely new notion in this discussion and is indicative of Williams's concern with dramatic and literary forms in permanent interaction with the nature of historical and political experience. He proceeds to give the astute diagnosis that it is not only the ahistorical critics that have been responsible for the stultifying dichotomy between tragedy and revolution, but also, and importantly, the most socially conscious writers that have often rejected tragedy as fatalistic, barbaric, irrational, and as perpetrating the very ideas they were out to destroy.

It is time, Williams concludes, to acknowledge the modern version of suffering, to see tragic possibilities in the representation of social and political realities impinging

on people. Revolutions, the processes of change, grow out of suffering and are accompanied by suffering, and as such are tragic. Viewed in this way, a modern tragedy, related to the modern "structure of feeling," is possible.

In the second part of the book, Williams outlines the development of "liberal tragedy" from its origin in bourgeois drama to what he considers its final stalemate in the post-World-War-Two era.

Throughout this discussion, the driving force is his assertion that the greatest crisis in the literature under the influence of liberal ideology is the gradual separation of private cause and social order. The emphasis on class rather than rank in bourgeois tragedy and the widening gap between private sympathy for the individual's suffering and public order were accompanied by a "loss of dimension and reference":

> Bourgeois tragedy has been blamed for being too social, for excluding the universal reference of Renaissance and humanist tragedy. Another way of putting the matter is that it is not social enough, for with its private ethic of pity and sympathy it could not negotiate the real contradictions of its own time, between human desire and the now social limits set on it.[12]

In Ibsen's tragedy, and in liberal tragedy in general, the conflict was between the individual hero and the hostile traditional society that threatened his individuality, and

restricted his desires. In Ibsen, the false society appears in the form of the lie which the characters live and which finally destroys them. Self-fulfilment is the ultimate goal of the liberal hero and it is in the assertion of the right to self-fulfilment that he is finally defeated:

> What happens, again and again in Ibsen, is that the hero defines an opposing world, full of lies and compromises and dead positions, only to find, as he struggles against it, that as a man he belongs to this world, and has its destructive inheritance in himself. Ibsen turned this way and that, looking for a way out of this tragic deadlock, but normally he returned to it. . . .[13]

The final tragedy of this position is the tragedy of the divided self, the self against-self. This last phase of liberalism, with "the self-enclosed, guilty and isolated world; the time of man his own victim,"[14] constitutes its breakdown. There is no way out of this recognition, William asserts, within the liberal consciousness, that is, as long as desire is seen as individual with no relation to the desires of other individuals and to the social order. In this interpretation, liberal tragedy ends in its own deadlock, in the realization of the separateness and isolation of the suffering individual.

A further development of liberal tragedy Williams calls "private tragedy." It begins with the deadlock of liberal tragedy, that is, with bare, isolated man, and presents the

struggle between the isolated individuals. In this view man's fate and his relationships are inherently tragic, because men are all individuals with no connections to each other and therefore any attempt at a connection must necessarily end in disaster:

> This is not a tragedy of man and of the universe, or of man and society. It is a tragedy that has got into the blood-stream: the final and lonely tragedy that is beyond relationships and is in the living process itself. [15]

In other words, the condition presented in this kind of drama—often, in fact, autobiographical—is presumed to be general and absolute.

Thus Williams traces the deterioration of "liberal tragedy" from what was a genuine concern for the individual's rights and liberty (though from the beginning misdirected, because aimed against society as such) to a complete isolation of the individual in his own private suffering. "The deepest crisis in modern literature is the division of experience into social and personal categories," [16] William argues, and tragedy has been particularly affected by this division:

> The turning away from the social dimension is also, and inevitably, a turning away from persons. It is an attempt to create the individual person without any relationships. All those elements of personality which lie in relationship—not only the

> formal relationship of the family, but between any persons and especially between a man and a woman—are ultimately suppressed in the name of personal fulfilment. . . . Yet when we arrive at that final division between society and individual, we must know that an assertion of belief in either is irrelevant. What has actually happened is a loss of belief in both, and this is our way of saying a loss of belief in the whole experience of life, as men and women can live it. This is certainly the deepest and most characteristic form of tragedy in our century.[17]

The complete rejection of "realistic" verisimilitude in at least one major current of modern drama has led to a further stalemate, Williams argues. In this development it was not only that the individual was set up against society as such, but his alienation was followed by a complete withdrawal from reality into the world of illusion and fantasy. In playwrights such as Pirandello, Ionesco, and Pinter, for example, the common reality becomes an illusion, communication between individuals impossible, even the existence of the self is no longer certain. This then is the final crisis of individualism, surpassing even the deadlock of liberal tragedy. Williams, however, lifts one play out of this tradition—Beckett's Waiting for Godot—as transcending the inherent impasse. The world represented there is almost wholly static, but the main originality of the play, he argues, is its faith in personal relationships: the two

tramps stay together under pressure, there is a compassion in their degradation, a friendship which comes from common suffering and thus an "old and deep tragic rhythm is recovered."[18]

Williams suggests then, that even in the stalemate of liberal tragedy there is a possible way out, but this can only come through the recognition of common humanity, shared suffering, and—by implication—the understanding of men in their relation to fellow men, to society as a whole.

Finally, in the chapter on Brecht, Williams introduces a different kind of modern tragedy—the modern serious drama of tragic society, as opposed to the classical drama of the tragic universe and the individualistic drama of the tragic hero. He thus reopens the possibility that tragedy could again grow believable for those who believed that tragedy mystifies social relationships by sticking to the long outdated view of man as directly and exclusively related to the universe and its forces and therefore thought of it as primitive, dark, barbaric, and doomed to extinction. In Williams's rehabilitation, a new type of tragedy remains useful to the anti-fatalistic modern dramatist and modern audience, and the concept and tradition of the genre do not have to be totally discarded. Even in a playwright such as Brecht, Williams finds tragic elements. Though he entitles the chapter on Brecht "A Rejection of Tragedy," he ends by

analysing the Brechtian tragic experience. And it must be added that Brecht himself admitted, in his guise of the Philosopher in The Messingkauf Dialogues, that tragedy can be reinterpreted to suit our needs:

> THE PHILOSOPHER: The ancients thought that the object of tragedy was to rouse pity and terror. That could still be a desirable object, if pity were taken to mean pity for people and terror terror of people, and if serious theatre accordingly tried to help eliminate those circumstances which make people fear and pity one another. For man's fate has become man himself.[19]

In fact, the very terms that Aristotle used can serve a radically modern, non-deterministic purpose. The process of demystification is also a purgation of sorts: if people come to understand their condition, to see that it is, indeed, alterable—they will be purged of fear and terror.

This kind of modern tragedy deals with the unjust and unnecessary suffering of individuals in their relationship to society. Classical and Renaissance tragedy also dealt with unjust suffering: though critics in subsequent ages have thought of the suffering as necessary, it is questionable just to what extent the ancients really thought so. Similarly, though critics such as Williams argue that tragedy must show suffering as avoidable, man's condition as alterable, evil as reparable, they also see a degree of necessity in the suffering. Even from a historical and sociopolitical

point of view struggle is accompanied by suffering, a certain amount of which was—at least in the long run—"necessary" or historically unavoidable. However, even if it all were avoidable and alterable in principle or in the long run, that would not hold for the present condition—and this fact is tragic. The situation of Brecht's Mother Courage, for example, is not transcendentally fated, but in fact a large and extremely ponderous framework would have to be altered before her condition could change. Furthermore, though this framework seems beyond her control, she too contributes to its perpetuation: in the Brechtian parabolic drama she <u>is</u> the business of war. And the tragedy of her situation is in the fact that she does not realize, and never learns, that she is part and parcel of the framework controlling her. It is this new awareness which was not present in the older forms of the genre that modern tragedy can offer. There is still suffering in the modern version, but there is also—at least in the audience if not in the protagonist(s)—the awareness that whatever situation is being represented is not eternal.

From the point of view of the discussion in this thesis, the most important contribution Williams makes is to rid tragedy of the rigidity and absoluteness assigned to it by the conservatives and thus open the way for new interpretations. When tragedy is being seen as not having changed in

the past, it cannot be seen as changing in the present—and vice versa. Williams outlines the changes that tragedy underwent and relates them to each historical epoch. Similarly, then, modern drama must be related to our epoch; and our epoch has had its share of tragedy with its wars, its revolutions, its mass killings, its political and personal disillusionments. The fact that in spite of the modern awareness that human condition in any age is not absolute and that men are the fate of other men, there is suffering, the fact that the alterable does not alter or is altered very slowly, or altered in a painful process which costs many lives, is in itself quite sufficient basis for tragedy.

Williams refuses to classify some kinds of suffering as unimportant and some as genuinely tragic: all suffering can be thought of as tragic. This, in a way, is the most sensitive and radically egalitarian view of tragedy that has been encountered in this discussion, and one that puts forward a strong case for genuine tragedy not having to be aristocratic.

Notes

[1] Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 246.

[2] Ibid., p. 247.

[3] Ibid., p. 260.

[4] Raymond Williams, "Dialogue on Tragedy," The New Left Review, Nos. 13-14 (1962), pp. 22-35.

[5] Raymond Williams, Modern Tragedy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 19.

[6] Ibid., p. 27.

[7] Ibid., p. 31.

[8] Ibid., p. 54.

[9] Ibid., p. 49.

[10] Ibid., p. 50.

[11] Ibid., p. 62.

[12] Ibid., p. 94.

[13] Ibid., p. 98.

[14] Ibid., p. 100.

[15] Ibid., p. 114.

[16] Ibid., p. 121.

[17] Ibid., p. 138.

[18] Ibid., p. 155.

[19] Bertolt Brecht, The Messingkauf Dialogues, trans. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), p. 31.

CONCLUSION

Most of the critics discussed in this debate are strongly concerned with drawing consequences for society from the state of the theatre (even though they do not resort to the kind of historical and political terminology that Williams does). Their arguments in most cases are essentially of a social, ethical, and political nature. Moreover, the statements of the two basic groups of critics discussed in my Chapters one and two can be subsumed, as Gassner suggested, under the ideological debate between traditionalists (conservatives) and liberals. Thus the whole discussion on the possibility of modern tragedy ultimately revolves around the problem of order versus freedom.

The origin of controversy in such political, clearly defined terms dates back to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution with its notions of liberty and equality, and the reaction against it in the conservative answer of hierarchical order and preservation of the old system.

The source of the conservative hostility to change and innovation is a respect for the past because of the sense of historical continuity and guidance it offers and because the preservation of its values is seen as ensuring the organic wholeness of society, which is needed if society

is to survive. Preservation of a hierarchical order, with little change or mobility, was the conservatives' main aim; it was motivated by fear of the emerging power of the impatient lower classes. While there are, of course, variations on the conservative ideology in the 20th century, order is still the overriding concern of this group, and distrust of man's rational abilities one of its basic characteristics.

The adherence to a very strict set of traditional values and the suspicion of the "common man" which characterize the first group of critics discussed is typical of the conservative ideology. These critics' outlook is clearly traditionalist, backward-looking, élitist, aristocratic — in short, one that favours an established (usually past) and fixed hierarchical order in all domains. They view the modern plurality of values and ideological decentralization as evidence of chaos and look to times of allegedly absolute beliefs for inspiration.

What are the implications of this view for tragedy? Only plays which glorify the rigid order the conservatives cherish, which do not make a hero out of ordinary man, deserve what becomes the almost honorific title of "tragedy." Plays dealing with what to them are unworthy values — usually liberal values — such as democracy, skepticism, reform, and so on — invariably fall short of the tragic ideal. The plays of Ibsen, with their call for reform and their recognition of the traditional society as the source

of all evil and the ghosts of the past as the main burden stifling man, are necessarily offensive to the conservative critics. The very past and traditions they value, the order they try to preserve, are being questioned and attacked in these plays.

Tragedy, the conservative critics maintain, must end with the restoration of order — of a hierarchical system of values that endows the hero's death with meaning. To die for dubious reform is neither noble nor uplifting for the audience, nor is it worthy of tragedy's inherent dignity.

The notion of order is maintained at the price of a mystifying disregard for human suffering — that is, the suffering of the common man. These critics frequently argue that what is wrong with modern drama is that it looks for solutions, questioning the necessity of suffering rather than accepting it as inevitable and as the very source of the tragic sense of life. Tragedy and social explanation are incompatible; tragedy deals with the eternal problems of Man and that is precisely where its "universality," its superiority over other forms of literature lies, they stress. It is only natural that the conservative critics would shun the modern search for explanation and call for reform— they endanger the continuity of the order. However, while on the one hand these critics complain about modern drama's tendency to offer solutions, on the other they are disturbed

by its lack of resolution. In each case, however, it is the lack of fixed and hierarchic order that perturbs them. Both the quest for solutions and the lack of resolution are indicative of the open-endedness of modern drama, of the changeability of the order it presents, and this is, of course, not acceptable to the conservative critic.

Rather than reaffirming the old, accepted values and trying to appease the audience's suffering, the modern dramatist whom the conservatives criticize agitates, provokes, and doubts or even attacks the existing order. By exploring the nature of the suffering the modern playwright demystifies; the conservative critics, on the other hand, display a strong preference for leaving the suffering unexplained, for preserving the order at all costs.

The liberal ideology is theoretically in direct opposition to this: it is characterized by faith in the perfectibility of man and human progress, and by emphasis on reforming traditional institutions. The main thrust behind the beliefs is the supremacy of the individual and the need to liberate him from the tyranny of society. If the individual is given the freedom to pursue his interests, the well-being of the social whole will automatically be enhanced. Thus order comes about naturally if only the individual is given free rein. The basic liberal outlook is optimistic: if the traditional society is hostile to the individual's needs and restrictive to his desires, then

its institutions must be reformed in order to enable the individual to fulfill himself.

The liberal critics discussed in this thesis usually begin by disagreeing with the conservatives. Their battle-cry is democratization, social improvement and representation of the ordinary citizen and his problems in a serious light in the drama. However, in most cases they also proceed to acknowledge and lament the result of the diminishing status of the tragic hero. The liberal critics as a rule proceed in a see-saw fashion. They attempt to vindicate their actual society from the censure brought against it by the conservatives, to show that it has values worthy of being compared with those of previous ages; but ultimately the need for hierarchic order overrides the call for democratic freedom and makes for the lack of conviction in their argumentation. They end up agreeing with the conservatives, in spite of themselves, that the modern hero is mean and uninteresting, that modern realism is constrictive, and even that there has not been much modern drama that deserves to be called tragic. Finally they attempt to get out of this bind by suggesting that the fault lies with lack of talent. Why this alleged lack of talent came about is seldom explained.

The liberal critics' constant wavering and their ultimate lack of success should be sufficient indication that if they begin with basically similar assumptions on

the necessity of a hierarchic social order as the conservatives—despite their arguments about the need for democracy and reform—then they must logically come to the same conclusion: i.e., that tragedy is not possible. The liberal critics seem to be afraid of following their argument to its logical conclusion: the drama that takes into consideration the radical implications of their own ideals finally does not appeal to them.

In the light of the foregoing, a critic such as Steiner, though his conclusion—that tragedy is dead—is the same as that of the conservative critics, is in some ways significantly different. First, he is the only one in their group to offer a historical argument. Second, unlike the others, he seems to prefer the rationality of modern drama to the irrational and mysterious forces that governed the action in ancient and partially in Renaissance tragedy; even more significantly, he demonstrates the place in history of both the irrational, ritualistic drama, and the socially conscious, rational modern theatre. Unlike the orthodox conservatives, he does not uncritically look back to the past, he explains it; unlike the liberal critics he does not shun the conclusion the evidence points to. Nonetheless, he is probably still best categorized with my first group in that he does not draw the conclusions inherent in his method because he is working with the same definition of tragedy as the conservatives are.

Steiner's study is a useful indication of the necessity for historical explanation. In this sense, it throws a critical light on both the conservatives and the liberals: on the former by putting the past ages into a historical perspective which they repeatedly fail to do; on the latter, by showing that if one respects and understands the historical evidence, it becomes impossible to fit a conservative definition of tragedy into liberal illusions about modern society.

In sum, either one believes, in a conservative manner, that the old hierarchical, rigid order must be maintained or restored—in which case the bulk of modern democratic drama is unacceptable; or one believes in democracy, equal opportunity for all, individualism, and what follows—and then one must not rely on the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, which is obviously the product of an age whose values are incompatible with those advertised by the liberals.

What are the reasons for the inability or unwillingness to abandon the Aristotelian interpretation of tragedy noted through most of this thesis? The first reason is most probably inertia and conformism. It is always easier to take as one's starting point some well-established, generally accepted and respected definition than to begin with assumptions which the public might reject from the onset; choosing a safe tradition provides a strong presumption that the arguments will be accepted. Second,

the ancient definition of tragedy clearly appeals to the sensibility that seeks a hierarchical order and tradition. Though the rigidity of the Aristotelian guidelines is often pointed out, one should not forget their vagueness, the room for interpretation inherent in them. What is a "worthy" person? What is a "complete" action? What are "pity" and "fear," what is meant by "purgation?" While most critics in the period and place under examination cling to the Aristotelian definition, there seems to be no consensus as to the precise nature of that definition. What is more, in some cases these contemporary critics cling to the interpretation that the followers of Aristotle have created during the intervening centuries. Thus even those who demonstratively use the Aristotelian definition and openly judge drama by it, rarely admit that this definition itself is no absolute since controversy still rages about Aristotle's real meaning.

The third group of critics discussed (Abel and those who subscribe to the tragicomedy theory, with their basically formalistic or technical analyses) seems to stand at a tangent to this whole controversy. These critics evade the traditionalist censure of the sudden decadence by pointing to a gradual development, a metamorphosis whose seeds were contained in tragedy from the very beginning. Though their open-mindedness toward new values might classify them as liberals, they in fact recognize, in a

conservative manner, the lack of order and the death of tragedy, and look for alternative solutions. Like both of these groups, they too rely on hierarchical order for their explanation of the continuing tradition of tragicomedy and (in the case of Abel) metatheatre. The homogeneity of tradition is restored in these theories and the specific problem of modern tragedy denied. However, just as the liberals — though in a formally more sophisticated-sounding manner — they want to have it both ways: even the names they give to the new genre render the "tragedy debate" obsolete and are an indication of this. As I pointed out earlier in the discussion of these critics, the whole notion of tragicomedy is based on taking certain illogical liberties with very traditional and clearly defined concepts. In particular, Abel's thesis is so unconvincing that it indicates a certain specifically post-World-War-Two thirst for originality at any cost. His attempt to outline a continuous post-Hellenic tradition of metatheatre and to sever it from the less sophisticated theatre of the Greeks is also an answer to the conservative apprehension of lack of order and tradition. As for tragicomedy, it too answers the need, in the mind of these critics, for a continuing tradition by ignoring the historical development of tragedy.

To this conflict between freedom and order Williams brings the basically socialist concern with exploring the

nature of men in their relationship to society and to the movements of history.

By showing the stalemate of liberal tragedy, Williams is in fact pointing to a stalemate in the liberal world. Williams's answer to this impasse in literature and to what he views as the most unfortunate consequence of a decadent liberalism — the separation of private and public life — is the engagement of drama in specifically contemporary issues, particularly his brand of struggle to change one's condition. Brecht's drama, a possible way out of the dead end in the theatre, is shown as fulfilling this need. Williams calls not only for social awareness in serious drama, but also, in a humanist Marxist way, for the recognition of a tragic suffering in the modern struggle to change one's environment.

Williams rejects the rigid hierarchical order of the conservatives on the grounds that it is unegalitarian and oppressive for the ordinary individual. But he also realizes that absolute freedom, the unmediated supremacy of the individual without regard to his connection with other individuals and to society as a whole, issues, at least in the dramatic expression of this ideology, in the inevitable stalemate of liberal tragedy, and ultimately in the denial of not only the role of society but of the individual's humanity as well. Therefore, Williams replaces, in a synthesizing manner, the traditional, vertical

order of the conservatives and the egotistic, unordered individualism of the liberals with an egalitarian, horizontal order, that is consonant with individual freedom as guaranteed by and interacting with that society as a whole.

Is modern dramatic tragedy, then, possible today? Certainly not if one accepts the nostalgic statements of Krutch, writing at a time of disillusion and conservatism in the United States, and of other moralizing criticism in the USA and the UK that is ultimately more a censure of the contemporary world than a scholarly discussion of a genre. Looking at its own times through dark glasses, this criticism has a vested interest in seeing a rosy picture back in the past. Unable to recapture this rosy past, it then returns to triumphantly herald the arrival of a cold, cynical, unhappy age in which <u>even</u> tragedy — that sign that all is well with the world — is lost. Insisting that the only change in the world is its growing increasingly more unbearable in comparison to an absolute ideal, it similarly views tragedy in relation to an ideal and absolute form, so that each subsequent departure from this form is understood as an aberration or a sign of decadence. In that view tragedy becomes impossible. Nor does modern tragedy seem feasible if one maintains with Fergusson, in a vein similar to that of Krutch, that an "idea of the theater" has been lost with the unfortunate modern loss of values.

The liberal critics take some first steps toward the direction of a specifically modern dramatic criticism of tragedy, a criticism that would recognize certain not necessarily only unworthy factors in contemporary life such as democratization of the last two centuries, increased welfare, and so on. However, as I tried to point out, they also illustrate the impossibility of forming a genuinely useful definition and theory of modern tragedy without abandoning, or at least radically re-examining, the Aristotelian tenets. The uncritical clinging to the Aristotelian definition is a serious obstacle which these critics were not able or willing to overcome. Moreover, some of them did not transcend the conservatives' a-historical analysis of the dramatic tradition and their definition of order. Therefore, ultimately their arguments fail to convince. As for the third group of critics, their starting point, based on essentially conservative assumptions, was the impossibility of a modern tragedy. Their analysis of the situation, however, managed to evade— as it was probably meant to —the central issues.

Raymond Williams, with his demystifying historical analysis of the dramatic tradition, has opened new possibilities for understanding tragedy. In fact he has, through a discussion of change and development, provided a sense of continuity —something neither the conservatives with their rigid adherence to the past and disregard for the present nor the liberals with their compromising and

wavering have succeeded in doing. Paradoxically, it is his Marxist humanism and radical egalitarianism that managed to at least indicate how a respect for tradition and a respect for democratization can coexist.

Finally, then: why tragedy at all? I hope the answer has already been hinted at: while there is serious suffering and injustice, there has to be some expression of it in the arts. The moment it begins to be expressed, the first step, however tiny, is being taken: to begin with toward its understanding, and eventually—one hopes—toward its partial or total elimination. This, surely, is a worthy cause.

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