

## TRAGEDY AND THE GOOD LIFE

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IN a recent issue of the London *Times Literary Supplement* there appeared a reference to St. Augustine and Emerson which ran something like this: "Augustine was a saint, Emerson was an American; previously separated by the centuries, they met in a library." A somewhat similar meeting took place, when Samuel Johnson and the Reverend Thomas Saunders, previously separated by the centuries, found themselves neighbors in my library. Johnson was there in the pages of Joseph Wood Krutch's recent critical biography of "the great moralist," and Chaplain Saunders found himself present through his stimulating article on "Religion and Tragedy" in the *DALHOUSIE REVIEW* for October, 1944. The fortuitous meeting of these two men, both interested in life, in morality, and in literature, has suggested the paragraphs that follow.

"Life," says Johnson, "is a pill which none of us can bear to swallow without gilding." Literature helps to gild it, and helps to save us from despair. Chaplain Saunders thinks this view of life "falls short." Despair, he says, does not characterize "those who undertake the really heroic part." To "bear affliction simply because there is nothing else to be done" is not to exhibit "the stuff of which tragic heroes are made." If one accepts this declaration as true, Shakespeare's *Lear* and Cordelia lack "the stuff of which tragic heroes are made"; for when the king and his daughter fall into the hands of their enemies, *Lear* exclaims:

Come, let's away to prison;  
We two alone will . . . pray, and sing, and tell  
Old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies.

Yet, in spite of this meek and—as Mr. Saunders would have us believe—unheroic acceptance of their painful lot, *Lear* and Cordelia have consistently convinced readers of their heroism; and Samuel Johnson is in little danger of contradiction when he declares "The Tragedy of *Lear* is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare." Johnson paid his personal tribute to the irresistible power of Shakespeare's imagination by confessing: "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again

the last scenes of the play until I undertook to revise them as an editor."

In his general remarks on *King Lear*, Johnson speaks of it as "a play in which the wicked prosper"; and many an editor has here interrupted the great lexicographer to remind him that the prosperity of the wicked in *Lear* is only temporary and that it comes to a violent and sudden end. But let us hear Johnson out: "A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life; but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse."

In this view Mr. Saunders would doubtless concur, for he quotes with approval (p.295) C. E. Vaughan's remark that "the region of the highest poetry is not the outward but the inward; . . . its noblest task is to idealize, not the lower, but the higher side of our nature;" and certainly the love of justice praised by Johnson belongs to "the higher side." In the discussion that accompanies his quoting of Vaughan, however, and in his remarks on the part that literature—"the highest poetry"—may play in developing men who love justice and who "undertake the really heroic part," Mr. Saunders makes certain statements which seem to me to invite examination. What he has to say about religion is here not under consideration; I am concerned only with the remarks on literature, particularly tragic literature.

### I

Let me begin by quoting a passage (p.293) in which Mr. Saunders is himself quoting: "'In pure tragedy,' says Reinhold Niebuhr, 'the suffering is self-inflicted. The hero does not transmute what happens to him, but initiates the suffering by his own act.' In other words, the tragic fact arises out of deliberate action, not blind chance."

Mr. Saunders is here contrasting two familiar types of tragedy. *Macbeth* is a good example of the kind of tragedy that "arises out of deliberate action," and *Romeo and Juliet* illustrates the kind that is dependent upon blind chance. And no reader will be disposed to quarrel with Mr. Saunders's judgment that tragedies like *Macbeth* are greater than tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet*. That is universally admitted. But it ought to be pointed out that there is still another kind of tragedy, where the suffering is *not* self-inflicted and yet is not caused by blind chance. Purposeful malignity does exist, and heroic souls

as well as Unknown Soldiers often suffer through forces beyond their control and beyond their just deserts. Desdemona suffers because of her loyalty to and love for Othello, and Othello himself is tragically blind to what we in the audience see, blind because of his unsuspecting trust in "honest" Iago.

In spite of Mr. Saunders's contention that "the tension in tragedy [is] dependent on the presupposition of an ordered (i.e., a reasonable and just) world," the fact remains that man throughout the centuries has experienced tragedy with such pain and anguish as have made it hard for him to be completely sure that he is living in a universe where justice and reason have any meaning. Tragedy was an old story on earth before The Preacher in the Old Testament sadly confessed: "I have seen a just man perish in his righteousness, and a wicked man prolong his life in his wickedness." In his perplexity Jeremiah cried: "O Lord, why do the wicked prosper? Why are men that act treacherously happy?" The recognition of this moral problem was not confined to the Hebrews; the Greeks too were aware of it. Theognis, as far back as the sixth century B.C., echoed Jeremiah's query: "Father Zeus, the evil-doer escapes punishment and another bears the misfortune afterwards . . . How can it be just that a man who has no part in unjust deeds should not fare justly?" No wonder Theognis cried, in a moment of despair: "The best thing for man is not to be born at all and never to see the light of the sun."

How can it be just? There are a great many people in Europe just now who would like to know the answer to this question. This is the great "Why?" which has baffled man's thoughts from the very beginning of his attempts to find a moral order in the universe. And when that universe seems to fail to measure up to man's highest claims upon it, surely the tragedy is greater than when a solitary man, even though of heroic mold, fails, through some flaw or obsession or vice, to measure up to the highest claims his fellow human-beings would make upon him. *Macbeth* is a great tragedy, simply because Macbeth fails, with all the brilliant qualities with which Shakespeare endows him, to measure up to the highest moral standard. But is *King Lear* any the less tragic for presenting a world in which people like Macbeth prosper, or at least keep others, their betters, from prospering? Cordelia knew what sort of world she lived in:

We are not the first  
Who, with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst.

There was little moral order apparent in the world that Cordelia saw, but the critic will none the less have a hard time so defining the word "tragedy" as to exclude her sad story from the list of masterpieces. "*King Lear* has again and again been described as Shakespeare's greatest work, the best of his plays, the tragedy in which he exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers."<sup>1</sup>

The writers of *this* sort of tragedy have apparently thought that, if our souls can be purged—to use Aristotle's familiar metaphor—of evil thoughts and emotions by witnessing the failure of an individual like Macbeth, we might experience a similarly salutary purging of debilitating hopes and superstitious fears by witnessing the evidence of the failure of the Prime Mover himself. Macbeth's failure is a failure to create for himself a strong moral character; the divine failure (if we don't sound too much like James Thomson in calling it that!) is a failure to create a moral world in which men with consciences can live peaceably and happily. "Man is made for happiness," writes H. N. Spalding, "and everywhere he is unhappy."<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare and Sophocles and others who have courageously faced *this* sort of tragedy have been willing to dare to think, rashly and blasphemously, or foolishly and blindly, or heroically and resolutely—depending upon the point of view of the reader—that the fault may not be man's after all. Omar the tent-maker once wrote of forgiving God for this sorry scheme of things.

## II

To return to Mr. Saunders: Following up his statement that, in pure tragedy, the hero initiates his suffering by his own act, Mr. Saunders declares: "This makes a creation like Satan in *Paradise Lost* greater than any of Hardy's characters, whose fate is so much subject to chance . . . Hardy, great as he is, falls short . . . Despair robs his heroes and heroines of the grandeur of those who undertake the really heroic part. They bear affliction simply because there is nothing else to be done, which is not the stuff of which tragic heroes are made."

There are here two statements about Hardy's characters which will bear looking into: (1) that their fate "is so much subject to chance"; (2) that they bear affliction unheroically, "simply because there is nothing else to be done." Let me examine these points separately.

The fact that chance enters into the lives of Hardy's

1. A. C. Bradley: *Shakespearean Tragedy*. London, Macmillan, 1905; p. 243.  
2. *Civilization in East and West*, Oxford University Press, 1939 p. vii.

characters, even as it enters the lives of all men, cannot be denied; but its extent and significance have, I think, been greatly exaggerated because of Hardy's inability, as a general rule, to make chance mean good fortune. Novel-readers are able to swallow without complaint an astounding amount of luck, provided it be good luck; but when things go wrong for the hero, they are up in arms. Like Samuel Johnson, they cannot be easily persuaded that justice, i.e., the hero's good fortune, makes a novel worse. No one finds fault with Elizabeth-Jane's fate, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, on the ground that her lot was one of "unbroken tranquillity . . . in the adult stage of her life." But for many readers *Tess* becomes a bad novel, because Tess's lot was an unbroken series of misfortunes. Hardy once described himself as a man made articulate more easily by suffering than by joy; the misfortunes of man moved him greatly; and no honest critic will deny that Hardy has often heaped the measure of suffering for his characters full to overflowing. That was life as he had seen it, and those who find his representation a distorted one can be thankful that theirs has been a happier lot.

An honest inspection of the Wessex Novels will, however, disclose the fact that there is often a closer relationship between character and fate than is recognized in the oft-repeated charge that in Hardy all things happen by chance. Gabriel Oak, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, suffers a terrible and wholly undeserved misfortune, when his entire flock of sheep is destroyed; but certainly his good fortune at the end of the story is as much the result of his sterling character as of chance. Similarly, Troy's death is meritoriously, if melodramatically, contrived. In *The Return of the Native* chance plays its part, but Clym is finally dismissed to such happiness as life afforded him, because of the genuine nobility of his character, whereas Eustacia's tragic fate is even more closely related to her character. She hated what Clym loved—the heath. It was as much a part of her character to dislike her situation on Egdon Heath as it was of Satan's to dislike his situation, as Lucifer, in heaven; and if Mr. Saunders is willing to recognize in Satan a great creation of "pure tragedy" because his sufferings arise out of his own deliberate actions, it is not clear why Eustacia is not equally entitled to his praise, since her sufferings followed her own deliberate actions, and out of equally selfish motives.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy makes this point even clearer. "Most probably luck had little to do with it," he writes. "Character is Fate," said Novalis. And on the title-

page of this novel Hardy declares that the story of Michael Henchard is the "story of a man of character." It is Henchard's character, far more than any chance that befell him, that accounts for his tragedy. In *The Woodlanders*—all too little read, even by Hardy's admirers—Giles Winterborne dies a tragic death, brought about (it is true) by his own deliberate actions, but not because of anything evil in them or in him. Winterborne is the only hero whom Hardy allows to die for love; "greater love hath no man—"

When we turn to the painful tragedies of Tess and of Jude, we are dealing with characters whose fates do not so much lose grandeur because of the part played by chance, as they are vitiated by our suspicion of propaganda on Hardy's part in their presentation. We feel the reformer's zeal in *Tess* and *Jude*, and we do this even in advance of our peering into Hardy's journal and there reading the corroboration of our suspicion: In this "There is something the world ought to be shown, and I am the one to show it to them."<sup>3</sup> That reformer's "ought" spoils the tragedy for some readers. It is not clear, however, why we should condemn Hardy's desire to influence our social conduct—a laudable desire, even if not an artistic one—at the same time that we praise Milton for *his* announced intention to influence our thinking—our mental conduct—which, in turn, has an inevitable effect upon our social conduct.

To bring this point to a conclusion: we can agree with Mr. Saunders that "a creation like Satan in *Paradise Lost* [is] greater than any of Hardy's characters," but our agreement is not based on the reason he gives, that "their fate is so much subject to chance." It is because of the greater scope and significance of the Miltonic epic. The tragedy of Lucifer is all-embracing, it involves "all our woe," and Jude's tragedy does not.

The second statement, that Hardy's characters bear affliction unheroically, "simply because there is nothing else to be done," demands even closer examination. It is true that, of Michael Henchard, Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy remarks: "Misery taught him nothing more than defiant endurance of it." But note that "defiant"! Gabriel Oak's manly acceptance of his loss and his resourcefulness in rising above this buffeting of fate is far from being a mere mute bearing of affliction. Clym Yeobright distinctly avows his desire to go beyond mere endurance of misfortune. "I want," he said, "to do some worthy thing before I die . . . Can any man deserving the name waste his time in flashy business, when he sees half the

3. *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*, New York, Macmillan, 1928; p. 272.

world going to ruin for want of somebody to buckle to and teach them how to breast the misery they are born to?" Clym may have been unequal to the demands of this high desire, but surely it was a heroic rôle he wished to play. And since when have fortitude and equanimity been eliminated from the list of qualities appropriate to a tragic hero? In the days when Horace's *Odes* were studied, schoolboys used to learn "*Aequam memento rebus in arduis servare mentem*",—a passage which old Robert Burton probably had in mind when he wrote the advice: "What can't be cured must be endured." If it cannot be helped, or amended, make the best of it.<sup>4</sup> Marty South, in *The Woodlanders*, never learned to read Horace and probably never heard of Burton, but life taught her the same lesson. She is the real heroine of the novel, and her self-sacrifice, constancy, and loyalty give this story a quality found nowhere else in the Wessex series. If Hardy provides her with "nothing else to be done", it is because that was the way he saw life treating many a Marty South in real life. She was, in this respect, like Jude waiting for someone to come along. "Somebody might have come along . . . who . . . might have cheered him. But nobody did come, because nobody does." Even so, Jude's conduct cannot truthfully be described as a mere bearing of affliction. Nor was Tess's. If their stories were merely stories of suffering and nothing more, they would not have the claim upon our attention which they do have, after the passage of half a century. Hardy has endowed both these unfortunates with qualities of character that ennoble the race; and we can take pride in the fact that the universe, faulty though it seems to be, can none the less produce, among humble, ordinary people, two such creatures as Tess and Jude, just as Shakespeare's universe which produced such monsters as Goneril and Regan did also produce Cordelia.

### III

Let us pass to a further statement by Mr. Saunders. "Not only is . . . tragedy dependent on the presumption of an ordered world, but . . . [also of] an ultimate hope . . . Tragedy . . . is undoubtedly concerned with . . . the meaning of the universe . . . and Sophocles, despite an occasional protest, clings to the idea that somehow the good have their divine helpers."

Those words "somehow the good" sound more like Tennyson than like Sophocles! The nobility of Antigone is certainly

4. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, II, 3, 3.

not to be found in her cherishing "an ultimate hope", but in her preference of death over a life of ignominious betrayal of her own highest moral convictions. It was clear to her that one way of life is better than another. That is why we call her good. But Sophocles has her die. "Antigone could have lived, if the poet had wished her to live", as William Chase Greene has recently reminded us.<sup>5</sup> "She died because the poet intended her to die . . . The flaws in her character cannot be said to justify her terrible end." Part of the purpose of Sophocles in writing this tragedy was to bring us face to face with one of the great moral enigmas of life. Mr. Saunders's view that Sophocles "clings to the idea" that good folk like Antigone "have their divine helpers" flies in the face of the tragic fact that no divine help reaches Antigone. She is without divine aid, unless by "divine" one means nothing more than the highest inner moral conviction. Yet it is exactly this *human* moral insight which forced the Greeks, like the Hebrews, to accuse, rather than to applaud, those heavenly powers who, instead of helping, refrained from helping. Tennyson's description of them is well known. His Greek Lotos-Eaters knew how "careless of mankind" the gods are, and how, at the sight of praying hands, "they smile in secret". Divine helpers? Nay,—

—they smile, they find a music centred in a doleful song  
Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong,  
Like a tale of little meaning tho' the words are strong,  
Chanted from an ill-used race of men . . .

And when the gods do help, they seem to help the wrong side. "How hast thou favored this arrogant crew, in love with violence!" Menelaus upbraids Zeus in the *Iliad*.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hardy tried, in *Tess*, to hide his scorn for such a divinity by speaking "in Aeschylean phrase" of "the President of the Immortals"; but the neat-herd in the *Odyssey* wasted no civility on him: "Zeus, you are the deadliest of all gods . . . you make no allowances for the men you have created, but tangle them in . . . sad and sorry pains."<sup>7</sup>

Experience thus leaves man unsure. He would *like* to act on the "presumption of an ordered world", but the realities of life interfere. Yet this uncertainty has not deprived man, at any time since the dawn of literature, of the ability to conceive of cosmic tragedy. And if, in witnessing (or reading) a tragedy like *Macbeth*, we can experience an Aristotelian catharsis, certainly it ought to be equally possible and similarly beneficial

5. *Motira*: Harvard University Press, 1944; p. 147.

6. William Cullen Bryant's translation of the *Iliad*, XIII, 631.

7. T. E. Lawrence's translation of the *Odyssey*, XX, 201.



for us to deal with that more daring type of tragedy in which even the existence of a moral order is questioned. Literature of this sort never wins praise from the churchman, and it is commonly denounced by attaching to it the label "pessimism"; but, as Dean Arnold Whitridge has remarked in his *Study of Pessimism*: "There is a tonic quality about such pessimism to which optimism rarely attains . . . Somehow the great pessimists contrive to make us feel that, in spite of [their belief in] an indifferent world and a malignant deity, one way of life is better than another."<sup>8</sup> And again: "Pessimism implies a moral courage that has never yet been fully recognized."<sup>9</sup>

Tragedies written in this "pessimistic" spirit not only imply moral courage, but also have a better claim to being called "pure tragedies" than has the type indicated by Mr. Saunders. For in them, with no "ultimate hope", with no reliance upon "divine helpers", man must take his stand solely on his own moral reasoning; and he must *act* on it, no matter what happens. A. E. Housman knew that

So here are things to think on  
That ought to make me brave,  
As I strap on for fighting  
My sword that will not save.

A man girded with such a sword will, like Socrates, experience injustice rather than do it. If it is true, as Samuel Johnson says, that one of the functions of literature is to enable us better to endure life, then tragedies of the "purest", the most starkly pessimistic sort may put that steel into our characters which is needed to strengthen our moral fibre. They may thus contribute to our ability to live the good life. "That book is good", declared Emerson, "which puts me in a working mood." From the point of view of this sort of Emersonian utilitarianism, that tragedy is greatest which best fits us to face life's worst. And this is exactly what Shakespeare in *King Lear*, and Thomas Hardy in the Wessex tragedies, tried to enable us to do. As Hardy put it: "If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst." My own conviction is that many readers will learn of the still sad music of humanity, and will learn to hear its music as well as to feel its sadness, more readily from Hardy's novels than from Milton's epic; for Hardy's humble characters have more to teach than Milton's Satan about how to live lives of patient fortitude, doing good deeds in spite of uncertainty about any ultimate hope.

8. *The American Scholar* (10: 161 and 166); New York, Spring issue, 1941.

9. *Last Poems*, 1922; No. 11.