TRAGIC DRAMA AND MODERN SOCIETY

Studies in the Social and Literary Theory of Drama from 1870 to the Present

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Introduction

There are three major events in the history of world drama. These are the emergence of classical tragedy in ancient Greece, the renaissance of the tragic form in sixteenth-century England and seventeenth-century France, and finally the more diffuse tragic drama of modern civilisation, written and performed in the period of industrial capitalism since 1880. The first two forms of tragic writing are universally acknowleged. But until recently, the last has hardly been acknowledged at all. Either modern drama is seen as part of a wider literary transformation of which tragedy is just one of a variety of forms, or else it is dissolved into the individual work of major playwrights and presented as a series of apt comparisons. Since the third major period of drama has just drawn to a close, however, its contours are becoming more apparent and can be judged in historical retrospect. The drama between 1880 and 1966 that we now call modern will in some future epoch no doubt be called by a more generic name. The terms which have been so far suggested, 'bourgeois' or 'naturalist' tragedy, are partial and misleading. The term I wish to use in their place, and shortly to justify, is 'tragedies of social alienation'. The very term suggests that traditional literary modes of interpretation are not sufficient for critical justification, and that presumption is right. Modern tragedy requires both literary and sociological analysis, looking not only at the immediate connections between drama and society but also at the intermediate ones, the connections between drama and social consciousness, and then in turn between varieties of social consciousness and the wider society.

To call drama 'tragic' is to posit the continued existence of a particular mode of writing over a period of two-and-a-half thousand years. It is to suggest both a linear development and a cyclical renaissance. Of course part of the continuity is provided by formal aesthetic rules attributed to Aristotle,[1] which demand a tragic hero with a distinctive weakness causing a reversal of personal fortune, a unity of time, place and action, a tragic climax purging the emotions of the audience, and a realisation by the fallen hero of the true horror of

his fate. At best they have presented a point of departure for the creation of a tragic vision, and in the third period of world-historical tragedy, conformity to these rules is markedly weaker than in previous periods. To circumvent the difficulties of this laxity, the general formula suggested by Raymond Williams seems the most appropriate. The essential tragic experience is that of irreparable human loss.[2] It is a loss felt and performed by actors on a theatrical stage and witnessed in turn by their audience, and usually infused by at least some Aristotelian elements.

The irreparable loss of tragedy is expressed in a variety of climactic events—murder, suicide, madness, disintegration—of either an individual or a group. Death, naturally, is a recurrent feature of tragedy but not a necessary one. It can be enough that the serious wounding of human sensibility cannot be healed. If that loss, and the failure to heal, are conveyed dramatically through the resources of the text and the stage, through the synchronised speech, movement and setting of the dramatic spectacle, then we possess that theatrical totality which is authentically tragic. To speak of this loss purely in itself, however, is not enough. For the loss points primarily to the consequences of the dramatic action, not what generates it in the first place. What does generate it is the predicament of human alienation, of which tragedy is the supreme literary expression. Each of the three major tragic modes contains its own distinctive historical expression of that alienation. The Greek mode is basically divine, the renaissance mode predominantly noble, while the modern mode is fundamentally social. (There is also the less important German middle-class tragedy of Schiller and Lessing providing the historical link between the 'noble' and the 'social' modes, and this we could perhaps call 'virtuous'.) How does social alienation in this context differ from its predecessors? The issues are complex but their understanding is vital, since the mode of alienation provides the necessary context for the dramatic expression of irreparable loss. If this context is not present in the text, the dramatic action portraying loss or suffering is exaggerated and lacks psychological credibility. This results in features which, as often as not, we recognise as melodrama. To understand these modes of alienation and how they work dramatically, some form of historical discursus is required.

Both Greek and Elizabethan tragedy are dramas about past epochs. Because of our closer historical proximity to the Elizabethans, we recognise this more clearly of Marlowe and Shakespeare than we do of Aeschylus and Sophocles. But as Jean Duvignaud has pointed out,

the tragic dramatists of the Greek city-states were equally concerned with reconstituting the history of their forefathers as tragic myth.[3] Prometheus and Io, and later Oedipus and Antigone, belong to an antiquity which fifth-century Greeks could recognise as part of a sacrificial struggle for their own collective identity. They are legendary figures. There are two additional similarities with Elizabethan tragedy. Both emerged during a period of imperial expansion which was militarily endangered. The shock of the Persian invasions was as great for the audiences of Aeschyclus as the threat of the Spanish armada was for Elizabethans attending the Globe theatre. In both cases a new empire-building polity was repulsing a threat to its very existence. The shattering historical contradiction was a decisive catalyst to the creation of tragic myth, and produced a second more general point of similarity. Historical tragedy in both periods exhibits a fascination for the past and, at the same time, an affirmation of modernity. The heroic values of the drama are often archaic, but its heroes, in temperament and sensibility, are indisputably contemporary. They belong to an age which had a sense of its own high level of civilised living and its equally ruthless political triumph.

In the second major phase of tragedy, the vantage-point of 'high' civilisation enables the audience to respond to the glory of their country's achievements and the horror of losing it. The tragic doom of legendary heroes provides a salutary point of reference. In Shakespeare the nature of the tragic hero is also of vital importance. The inner dilemmas of personality are juxtaposed with the external obligation to command power over men. The Shakespearean royal persona fuses the nobility of feudal rank with the individualistic sensibility characteristic of Renaissance man in revolt against the traditional social order. Subsequently in the Jacobean tragedy of Webster and Middleton that conflict is lost. The setting of the Italian city-state or Spanish court diminishes the sense of heroic nobility and the drama deals in sensational terms with dissolute sexuality and Machiavellian intrigue. The more direct focus on decadent contemporary obsessions destroys the aura of tragic nobility and replaces it with macabre amoralism. Civilisation is no longer seen at its zenith, but in terms of a disintegration of personality and political morality. The sense of loss, while still explicit, is correspondingly diminished. Racine, writing soon afterwards in the milieu of the French absolutist court, is clearly concerned with a similar kind of disintegration, but by returning to mythology and ancient history recreates the aura of a noble life which the Jacobeans had eroded. The great element of

contradiction in Racine's own life, and that of the high social circles within which he moved, was the contrast between the amoral opulence of the Royal court and the severe introversionist morality of Jansenism which he had absorbed during his stay at Port-Royal and which derived its social support from the *Noblesse de Robe*. The trauma of moving from Port-Royal to its cultural antitheses, the theatre and the Court, is expressed in a drama which Lucien Goldmann has termed a 'tragic refusal',[4] where the refusal of the world by the Racinian heroine is linked specifically to the refusal of temptation. The corresponding conflict refracts, at the level of personal passion and its denial, the wider historical conflict between the public patronage of royal absolutism and the private conscience of an emergent bourgeois individualism. While Racine's own conscience was Christian, that of his heroes was pagan.

In the modern period, historical tragedy is still written and is still of vital importance. But it is superseded by the tragic drama of contemporary life, and in turn historical tragedy at its best becomes drama of recent history, a history whose direct influence on the present is readily apparent. Often, as in O'Neill's later works, that historical tragedy is set in an earlier period of the playwright's own life, so that its historicity literally merges into the present. This creates a flow and a unity making the division between historical and contemporary seem artificial and unreal. The concern with recent history is the legacy of the changing social consciousness of the modern age, where the work of Marx and classical sociology has presented us with a new perspective on the transformation of social life and the genesis of those transformations. Men sought out the origins of their present condition in the events of the recent past and the spirit of this enquiry has been absorbed into the drama of the new age where some measure of historical accuracy in dramatic reconstruction replaces the previous traditions of legend and myth. To write directly of contemporary life itself, either in the novel or the play, was also a legacy of a changing consciousness. Novels employing the epic dimensions of narrative form were better equipped for this task than the more concentrated form of the drama, and indeed bequeathed as much to changes in social consciousness as they took from them. The tragic drama of contemporary life postdates the development of tragic realism in the novel, which begins with Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black*, and its scope is limited more by its form. Problems of dramatic form, as we shall see, create difficulties for the development of a tragic political drama, whereas the political novel is one of the basic forms of tragic realism.[5]

Because modern tragedy divides itself between the novel and the play, the third great period of tragic drama does not have the power or intensity of the earlier forms. Taken in conjunction with the novel, however, that artistic parity is restored.

To identify the three modes of tragic alienation is not to construct rigid literary types. Within each mode is contained a struggle of opposites. To see human fate in classical tragedy as wholly governed by divine intervention would be a gross distortion. Within the pantheon of Greek mythology the Gods did have this ultimate power. But in Greek tragedy divine fate is more impersonal. The form of alienation here is close to that deciphered by Feuerbach and Marx in their writings on religion, where Gods are seen as endowed with human qualities alienated from their possessors and objectified as external attributes of superior beings. But this process of alienation only becomes a basis for tragic confrontation when fate is actually defied by the drama's hero. As Nietzsche recognised, the birth of tragedy derived in part from the Dionysian urge of man to create divinity through his own will. The tragic climax of the Greek drama comes when human willing confronts the limits of divine power, and so encounters its doom. But the limit is never recognised until the last moment and the action of the tragic hero becomes, consciously or otherwise, a revolt against divine necessity.

In Renaissance tragedy where the emphasis is transferred from the divine to the human, the internal struggle is, as we have already mentioned, between the resistant individualism of the tragic hero and the privileged position of his royal personage. His consequent fate is, as Duvignaud has noted, atypical.[6] He isolated himself by betraying his privileged role but also by exceeding it. The tragic grandeur of stepping beyond conventions and violating them is not determined by the rank itself but by the individual concern with self. It is a personalised violation. The atypicality here is a form of human alienation, but essentially a distanced one, where the audience witnesses, as in Shakespeare, the growing isolation of the rejected king, beyond the stature of ordinary mortals but no longer commanding authority over them. The theatrical impact of the fate of Lear, Richard II, or Macbeth becomes one of an estranged and doomed grandeur. The nobility, which starts off as an attribute of a fixed rank, becomes through the onset of tragic misfortune the quality of an individual person and is cast free from its social moorings. But precisely by virtue of establishing its individualised quality, it foreshadows its possessor's damnation.

The tragedy of social alienation which begins with Ibsen and ends on a less intense note with Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee and Günther Grass is altogether different from either of the previous two forms. It co-exists with a serious drama which lacks this alienation and expresses instead an ultimate vindication of the social order with which its protagonists are discontented. As often as not, both tragic and serious, or affirmative drama will come from the pen of the same dramatist. For this reason we must look initially not to the playwright but to the text. Often tragedy has appeared in contemporary criticism as an appendage to high moral seriousness in the novel or the play. The crucial generic differences have therefore to be repeatedly stressed, and stressed through examining the precise nature of social alienation in the modern tragedy.

The 'social' component of modern tragedy is no more overriding a feature than the 'divine' or the 'noble' are in its predecessors. The dilemma of the hero is as much psychological as social. John Rosmer or Ella Downey can exert as much fascination for psychoanalysis as Othello or Hamlet. But the context of alienation is indisputably social in a very important sense. The alienation occurs within a family household which is itself socially estranged and internally divided. While the inner conflicts within the household are personal and psychological, the wider terms of reference are social. The household as a collective unit mediates between the individual and the wider society and becomes the filter through which the wider relationship of estrangement operates. There is then, no historical movement from social to personal drama in modern tragedy, as Williams suggests,[7] but rather changes in theme where new forms of social mediation replace older ones as a means of expressing that alienation in theatrical performance.

These changes are in turn related to change in the circumstances of literary genesis. The tragedy of social alienation, as it emerged in Europe, differed sociologically from previous tragedy in one very important aspect. Previous tragedians wrote and lived at the hub of a defined civilisation, its urban centre. The drama of fifth-century Athens, Elizabethan London, and the Paris of the Sun King were all similar by virtue of their centrality. When European tragedy emerges at the end of the nineteenth century, however, it presents us with a new phenomenon of *periphery*. This periphery operates in the life of the writer, the institutional development of the theatres first performing the work, and finally in the themes of the drama itself. The dialectic of centre and periphery, characterised by this centripetal process, is

linked to the development of capitalistic industrialisation in the major centres of European power. From 1880 onwards tragic drama originates with Ibsen and Strindberg in Scandinavia, is developed by Chekhov and Gorky in Russia and by Yeats, Synge and O'Casey in Ireland, then latterly by Lorca in southern Spain. The peripheral development presupposes an economic and cultural dependency, (and in the case of Ireland a colonial dependency) making this very rare cultural phenomenon a unique expression of the process of 'uneven development' rarely to be evidenced in any other artistic form. Tragic drama could not have sprung from the major epicentres of European capitalism at this time, nor chosen its tragic protagonists from the urban bourgeoisie of the major nations. For the tragedy of social alienation demanded at inception this geographical transfer to the periphery even if it later came to claim its audience from the civilised and prosperous urban bourgeoisie.

The central theme of the social mode of tragedy is alienation from bourgeois society. But that theme is not static, nor is the alienation a condition of 'being' which remains unchanged throughout the course of the drama. It entails a climactic confrontation between the dramatic personae and the cultural values of the bourgeois social order. We can refer to this climactic outcome as *tragic strife*, but it is important not to confuse it with Georg Lukács' notion of the central collision of the drama reflecting a wider historical struggle of social classes.[8] Tragic strife is not a summarisation of violent struggle although, thematically, elements of that struggle can be present, as in the work of Sean O'Casey. It is the more general dramatic resolution of social alienation, a movement present in the social fabric of the theme and equally in the sequential flow of the action itself. Within this flow the traditional Aristotelian elements are usually incorporated and given social resonance. The reversal of personal fortune becomes a key element in the dynamic process of estrangement, the self-recognition of tragic fate a liberating of social consciousness which comes too late to alter the experience of loss.

The alienation then is structural, but in its literary context differs markedly from the classical formulations of Hegel, Marx and Simmel. It is an estrangement from dominant cultural values rather than the relinquishment of productive powers which Marx saw as the alienated condition of the industrial worker under modern capitalism. But unlike the idealist dimensions of alienation outlined by Simmel, who speaks of an increasing estrangement of the individual from the objective magnitude of cultural products in the modern age, the

estrangement is socially located. It occurs within social classes or strata whose material interests diverge from the dominant ruling interests of the society. But the discontent of heroic individuals in such social milieux expresses itself dramatically as alienation from the values of a ruling hegemonic culture, with tragic consequences for the outcome of their own lives.

The connections between the structural and peripheral aspects of tragic alienation change in the course of the modern drama's development. In the movement of tragic drama from the Old World to the New, there is a decisive shift of emphasis towards the proletarian tragedy. This of course had already been established by Büchner, Gorky and O'Casey in Europe. But in the hands of O'Neill and later of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller it becomes the dominant feature of American tragedy, whereas in Europe it had been the subordinate one. At the same time American tragedy no longer has the same peripheral relationship to the culture of industrial capitalism as its European counterpart. The switch of emphasis from periphery back to the centre of urban industrial civilisation coincides with the switch of emphasis in the social expression of alienation. But that switch only becomes possible with related changes in dramatic form, changes which undermine the notion of a static and unchanging naturalism as the basic form of the period.

The naturalist techniques which developed during this period revolved around the box stage of the three-walled room. This setting created the illusion of a 'lifelike' representation of domestic environment, but did not in itself constitute a generic 'naturalist' theatre. Rather we must speak of a plurality of naturalist forms used predominantly though not exclusively in the performance of realist drama.[8] Such forms include not only setting but also dialogue and action, and there is no evidence that they have been used together with any real consistency. The early plays of O'Neill, for example, use naturalist dialogue in expressionist settings while the English theatre is notorious for drawing-room drama using limited naturalist scenic design and stylised artificial speech. Most modern drama, even that conventionally labelled 'naturalist', usually makes partial not exclusive use of naturalist forms, and often these are adopted in conjunction with techniques more appropriate to epic or expressionist drama. In modern tragedy the naturalist forms have been predominant but, significantly, in ways which involve either a subtle modification or a subversion of their conventions. In Ibsen especially, who is usually regarded as the naturalist playwright *par excellence*, this is an interior subversion directly connecting the form to the tragic expression.

Such a subversion, then, creates essential changes in the environmental framework of the drama, its dramatic space, which have crucial links with the major theme of alienation. The connection is part of the demarcation between serious and tragic drama, a demarcation often lost by critics in their desire to repudiate a fictitious dogma of 'naturalism' as a genre of synchronised theme and form most suitably adapted, sociologically speaking, to the performance of everyday bourgeois life. It is a critical tendency which posits a doubly false equation – naturalism equals bourgeois drama equals bourgeois life. By illuminating the dramatic space of tragic alienation, this shibboleth can be effectively destroyed. But it must be done in conjunction with a study of the fundamental themes of modern tragedy, most but not all of which have operated within the framework of literary realism. It is naturalism then which refers to form and realism which refers more generally to theme. In the case of the theatre, quite clearly, dramatic realism is going to differ quite considerably from the narrative realism of the novel. The book narrates a fictive world; the stage presents an illusory one. But the common thread of realism in both is what Erich Auerbach has called figural realism.[9] The dramatic persona and the literary character both have a tragic destiny which is socially realised. Far from being a poor relation of the realist novel, realist drama embodies this figural aspect in a different aesthetic form which is itself a unique achievement. In the coming chapters, we have to state precisely what that achievement is.

The internal transformation then of both form and theme are linked in crucial ways. Within this period we have to trace the connections between changes in dramatic space and particular thematic transformations of central importance such as the movement from aristocratic to proletarian modalities of alienation. Equally we have to place these changes in the context of central thematic continuities. One such vital continuity is the inegalitarian status of women in modern society, which works thematically in the plays of Ibsen and O'Neill, Chekhov, O'Casey and Williams, to complement the other modes of estrangement. The absence, outside Germany, of a tragic political drama is more than compensated for here by a tragic tradition creating a new female hero in the context of social alienation. When we move from Ibsen and Chekhov, through Synge and O'Casey, to O'Neill and Williams we can witness the creation of this unheralded tradition, and its relevance to the major thematic changes. In considering first of all one of the most substantial of all modern tragedians, Henrik Ibsen, that relevance becomes immediately apparent.

Contents

Part I

The Achievement of Henrik Ibsen

1 Ibsen's Norway

Ibsen's Norway was a predominantly agrarian society, sparsely populated and highly dependent on maritime trade. Insignificant in the arena of European power-politics during the first half of the nineteenth century it had become more progressive and more democratic than most other European countries. But its political situation was extremely paradoxical. In spite of its early democratic achievements, it remained culturally dependent on Denmark long after 1814 when Danish rule officially ceased. In addition it remained politically dependent on its neighbour, Sweden, through enforced union with the Swedish crown. This dual form of dependency coloured its peripheral position within Europe. But the Danish connection also created a division within the country itself. It was divided, linguistically speaking, between a written Danish serving as the official language of church and state, and spoken Norwegian dialects prevalent throughout the countryside. By the middle of the century, this had developed into a cleavage between *riksmal*, an independent reformed version of the official Danish incorporating a substantial Norwegian vocabulary, and the rural *landsmal*, the language of the countryside, giving the Norwegian peasantry a distinct cultural identity which often served as a basis for nationalist aspirations.

Well into the period of rapid industrialisation after 1884, these dual overlapping forms of the relationship between centre and periphery persisted, the one external, the other internal.[1] In the context of protestant Northern Europe, Norway had been a primitive agrarian country, noticeably sluggish in its assimilation of the new material comforts and inventions of an urbanised capitalist civilisation. And while its cities were small and primitive, the internal cleavage between city and countryside was nonetheless strong. This double dialectic, the internal and external, is a crucial key both to the processes by which Ibsen created his realist drama and to the major themes that drama expresses. Cultural isolation sets the parameters for his artistic career; his drama invokes major comparisons of civilisation and wilderness, of a fragile constricted urban existence and the constant proximity of