TRAGEDY AND TRAGIC ELEMENTS IN MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

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The word Tragedy comes from the Greek — TRAGŌIDIA, and is thus subdivided:

TRAGOS = goat
ŌIDE = ode, song

According to Aristotle, the origin of the tragedy is in Dionysus' rite, when the song was accompanied by the sacrifice of a goat, which might explain the origin of the name.

Although various dramatic games had been played before by different peoples, it is generally accepted that the origin of the tragedy is Greek, its peak having been reached in the 5th Century b.C. with Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

So, to Aristotle, tragedy springs from a ritual dedicated to Dionysus — god of wine and fertility. As many gods who represent the vital forces of nature, Dionysus dies in Autumn and is reborn in Spring. This explains the cheerful and comic aspects as well as the sad and tragic ones in the rites devoted to the god.

As Dionysus was the god of mask and, by extension, of the metamorphosis, this might explain the use of masks on the stage (Romeo wears a mask in the first scenes of Romeo and Juliet). In the performance of a tragedy on the stage, a few artists play many parts only by using different masks

at different times.

There are other schools of thought, however. William Ridgeway ascribes the birth of tragedy to mimic dances of masked actors in honour of dead heroes. Its origin would thus be a mournful ritual, not the cult of Dionysus.

The Greek tragedy undoubtedly pays homage to this god, whose altar stands in the middle of the orchestra — so much so that the Dionysian chorus remains as the ritualistic center of the cult. But, in the interchanges between the characters, the god is not the center, but the destiny of the Greek heroes is performed; their myths constitute the whole history of the nation.

Aristotle gives a definition of tragedy in his Poetics: "it is the imitation (MIMESIS) of a good action, which is complete and of a certain length , by means of language made pleasing for each part separately; it relies in its various elements not on narrative but on acting; through pity (ELEOS) and fear (PHOBOS) it achieves the purgation (CATHARSIS) of such emotions."

The tragedy aims at this catharsis of the audience: it must therefore have a beginning, a middle and an end and also present unity of action. The plot must have some verissimilitude in order to entangle the spectator in its action and finally lead him to the catharsis. The audience must feel an emotional identification with the hero, otherwise no catharsis will have been reached at the end.

Plato conceived MIMESIS to be a great danger because of this identification. The character's presented suffering

seems to be real, and the compassion and fear evoked in the spectator undermine the stoic attitude he should cultivate. Aristotle, on the other hand, thought that people release such pent up emotions like fear and pity by witnessing the spectacle of a tragic plot. They could then be relieved and purged of such strong emotions. The pleasure brought by catharsis is linked to the relish created by the equilibrium, after the audience's feeling of freedom from emotional excesses.

Racine proposed a conception of catharsis similar to the conception of its having a didatic-moralist function: "Exciting terror and pity, the tragedy purges and flavours such passions. That is, in raising them, it takes from these passions what is excessive and vicious, and leads them back to a state of moderation and conformity to reason."

In Aristotle's definition of tragedy we find the expression "good action". By that he means a noble action of heroes that belonged to the heroic age. In order to provoke eleos and phobos (pity and fear), the tragic plot must present heroes who go through and ordeal from a state of happiness to one of suffering, from good fortune to bad fortune. As Chaucer says is his Prologue to the Monk's Tale:

> Tragedie is to seyn a certayn storie,
> As olde bookes maken us memorie.
> Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
> And is yfallen out of heigh degree
> Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

But if the tragic hero were to be "outstanding in virtue and righteousness," the plot would be too shocking to evoke eleos and phobos, but would rather arouse indigation and cause people to question divine justice. So, the tragic hero must fall not because he is evil, but through some hamartia, or "tragic flaw," as the English call it. Hamartia is an intellectual ignorance rather than a serious moral fault; it may designate, in Butcher's words, an "error due to inadequate knowledge of particular circumstances" or an act that is "conscious and intentional, but not deliberate," for example, one "committed in anger or passion," or it may be a mere "defect in character."

The tragic flaw of the protagonist entails his tragic responsibility. The tragic hero must besides be someone who enjoys great reputation and fortune, like Macbeth, Oedipus, or Hamlet. Sometimes the punishment to the hero in his change of destiny — the peripeteia (in English: reversal) — is out of proportion with his crime, or flaw, which is a characteristic of the tragedy.

The hero possesses HYBRIS, or arrogance. Pride, when out of proportion, harms the "measure," or universal equilibrium, or inter-relation between human action and universal forces, between micro and macrocosm. Anagnōris is a process through which the hero goes: it is the recognition, or realization of his flaw or of the other forces acting around him.

Hegel, the German philosopher, believes that the spectator's spiritual response to the function of tragedy of

eliciting pity and fear (according to Aristotle) is very important, because the spectator is not touched by suffering alone, but by suffering derived from a conflict.

This conflict arises from man's ethical behaviour and beliefs, which rule man's relationships within the bonds of the family and the state: relationships of parent and child, brother and sister, husband and wife, citizen and state, citizen and citizen. These ethical beliefs sustain personal love, honour, ideals of religion, science or social welfare. Each of these powers is good and righteous, for they are equally justified and there is no essential conflict between them. The kind of conflict that brings about tragic actions, according to Hegel, arises when two individuals start making claims each on behalf of one of two different powers, dividing the ethical substance and disturbing the harmony.

In a tragic conflict there must be a collision between men who are committed to high positive values, and their clash is inevitable, unavoidable. It is not the destruction, however, that elicits pity and fear, but the division of the ethical substance and the suffering it entails. Death alone does not make a tragedy. Death is only sad; for it to become tragic there have to be various essential moments: conscious action, a complete adoption of important values against powerful resistances, either internal or external, conflict, etc. Death, to be tragic, must imply a sacrifice of the gift of life; death as an aim to triumph over the world and life is not tragic. Plato's ideas imply that the life one leaves behind is not particularly important, since the world is

only a semblance to the true reality: So, one must leave this world without pain, to pass into a higher, divine level. Death is only tragic when one values it deeply, but has to renounce it for the sake of a cause one values higher than life itself. Antigone's conflict is tragic: she loves life but deems it necessary to give her brother a dignified burial, even if it means death for her; giving up life is a sacrifice; however, she must renounce it to stand for what she believes is more important still. Jean Anouilh's Antigone cries out in a hymn to life:

> "Go on living! Who was it that was always the first out of bed because she loved the touch of the cold morning air on her bare skin? Who was always the last to bed because nothing than infinite weariness could wean her from the lingering night? Who wept when she was little because there were too many grasses in the meadow, too many creatures in the field, for her to know and touch them all?"

Death, coming upon such lust for life, as a result of conflict between different ethical values, IS tragic.

Of the three units related to tragedy — action, time and space — Aristotle insists only on action. "Tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, in not exceeding the time of a revolution of the sun, or at least only slightly." Sometimes it takes longer, then we have the abstraction of it. Tragedies take the significant points in time, which are put together, disregarding the in-betweens. Through this idea a

new conclusion was arrived at: time concentration implies space concentration — action should take place in the same premises.

Shakespeare's tragedies differ from the classic Greek model insomuch as they go through long periods of time and through various spaces — the unity swerves from the action to the hero. We notice that in the Elizabethan playhouse the stage is projected into the audience — it surrounds the stage. Most of the action takes place in the main stage, in the middle of the audience. There is no scenery, or very little. For example, the play is usually acted in the afternoon, so the illusion of night must be created by words. (Romeo: "Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow,...") There is no way of closing down the stage; everything is created through the medium of words; so the tragedy is a verbal universe.

The chorus is a distinct characteristic of the tragedy even in ancient times. The chorus separates the action in various "episodes" with dialogues, while it sings in rich and metrified verses. It has a quantity of functions, besides being the centre of the ritual: it represents the polis, the collective, which amplifies the action beyond the individual conflict. The heroes of Aristocratic origin live their drama publicly, before all the people. And, as the polis represents universal order, the chorus broadens the drama in a cosmic scale.

The chorus is like the public opinion: it contemplates, objectivates, generalizes, comments, interprets and evaluates,

positively or negatively, the dramatic action of the characters. Sometimes it is the mouthpiece of the author. Nevertheless, insomuch as the chorus tends to be the voice of tradition, the author does not necessarily have to identify himself with it.

In T.S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral we can detach various elements of tragedy, although we will at the end of this work arrive at the conclusion that the play is not a tragedy.

The chorus is an outstanding tragic element, foretelling what is going to happen and commenting on what has already happened. The chorus of the Women of Canterbury separates the action and acts as evaluators of the events. In the beginning their speech is explanatory of circumstances.There is an expectancy on the part of the chorus as to future events. They wait; they are passive.

Their second speech, after the appearance of the tempters, shows fear at what they feel is inevitably going to happen to the Archbishop and consequently to the people. At the beginning of the second act, waiting is mingled with fear, to be followed by the chorus' acceptance of the inevitable.

The last pronouncement of the chorus comes when the Archbishop is being murdered; we can clearly feel the hopelessness in their words; the horror of the deed which is being performed and their cry for the cleansing of souls.

All the while, acting as commentators or spokesmen

for the people, the chorus is representative of the polis. It starts and ends the play,acting as the centre, the voice of tradition, the universal order.

The ancient tragedy was destined to be performed in the sacred temple of Dionysus, as part of a public religious service. In Murder in the Cathedral we feel the whole of the drama is also like a religious service being performed, the action of the play all being enacted inside the Cathedral, which brings to the play another element of tragedy. One other factor is having the same actors performing the roles Tempters and Knights,just like in ancient tragedies the actors used masks to represent more than one character.

But the most important element of tragedy to be considered in the play is the study of the character Thomas a Becket. Is he or is he not a tragic hero?

Here we have the hero undergoing a fall from good to bad fortune, and this fall can be ascribed to a flaw in his character: his pride. His pride can be interpreted in either of two ways: the pride of righteousness, of choosing what is the right road to tread; or the pride of becoming a martyr. The latter seems to be the pride Becket possesses. We can even feel in his words of the sermon that he is foretelling the event of a new death and the birth of a new martyr. His sermon is a renewal of the Passion of Christ and he harps on the subject of glory and martyrdom, referring to Christ but also reminding the congregation that other martyrs may come. He even says:

> A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.[1]

The second part of this speech may well be his endeavour to answer the fourth Tempter, who is the instrument which shows us that Thomas has this kind of pride. The fourth Tempter is the only one who has any meaning to Thomas. He is like a mirror: he challenges Thomas with his pride and makes him own to it. As Fraser says:

> The real action of the play lies not in the violent killing of the archbishop at the end but in his confrontation of various temptations, of which the most serious is this temptation to accept his martyrdom for the wrong reason; not out of Christian humility and obedience and the need to bear witness, but out of spiritual pride.[2]

So, in the sermon, what Thomas is really saying to the audience is that the murder they are just about to see committed by the Knights is a matter of religious

significance. When they see him die they must remember his death is in the pattern of all the deaths that have been suffered in the cause of Christianity since the Crucifixion itself. His death should be recognized as a symbol of other things than the mere decease of Thomas, a colourful archbishop of Canterbury, one of the things being "blood": blood that Christ shed that we might be saved. Christ's death inevitably means any Christian's life is dedicated to Him and that the supreme confirmation of this dedication lies in giving up his life to Him.

Thomas is in a way, in his sermon, inviting the audience to look at the Cross on the altar as they see him die and in so doing identify the two deaths. Then, if Thomas has the pride of martyrdom, his acts lead to the belief that he considers his death as an occasion to triumph over the visible world and life, and reach through it that higher, divine level where Saints dwell. So, the reckoning is: NO, Thomas is not a tragic hero. He is not renouncing life, he is only using it to achieve higher levels of being.

As for the Knights, they illustrate Hegel's theory of conflict in tragedy: they did what they thought was their duty, they stood for their ethical beliefs. Their speeches after the killing remind us of Mark Anthony's speech, in Shakespeare's play, after he has killed Julius Caesar: both try to persuade the people of their righteousness, and of their reasons for killing.

Despite the presence of so many elements of tragedy in the play, the conclusion arrived at is that Murder in the

Cathedral is more a passion-play than a tragedy, the true drama is interior: the crucial moment being when the most dangerous tempter uses Thomas' own words to lure him into temptation. Thomas is the area where a crisis occurs rather than a living person. The chorus has a richer theatrical impact than the character of the archbishop himself.

NOTES

[1]T.S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 53.

[2]G.S. Fraser , The Modern Writer and his World (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 213.

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