

## THE TRAGEDY OF FANATICISM.

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BY the tragedy of fanaticism I mean a stage-play in which a well-meaning hero makes havoc of his life because of his all too strenuous devotion to a conviction or a rule of conduct which he regards as supremely important. Observe that I lay some stress on the intellectual and altruistic character of the moving impulse. If the moving impulse is a selfish passion such as love, jealousy, vindictiveness, or lust of power, there is no tragedy of fanaticism. Shakespeare's Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Romeo, Richard the Third, all make havoc of their lives under the push of a ruling passion, but none of them is a fanatic. Brutus may seem to approach the type, but Brutus is essentially a sober man. He joins in murderous conspiracy and goes down at Philippi, but there is nothing fiercely intemperate, nothing madly quixotic in his conduct. One feels that he *might* have been successful. Such a man is hardly to be classed with the fanatics.

Of course no very sharp and rigid distinction can be made between that part of the tragic impulse which is intellectual and that part which is emotional or temperamental. The two blend more or less. We have found out that the human mind does not consist of air-tight compartments one of which can be labeled "volition," another "feeling," another "thought" etc. To change the figure, these various psychic operations grow from a common stem, and their branches are apt to intertwine. A personal smart may easily develop into a conviction that the world is going wrong; just as personal comfort makes for an optimistic let-things-alone philosophy. Being very much in love often fortifies a young man's assurance that the soul is immortal. A gnawing in the stomach is responsible for many a revolutionist. And so forth. Let it be duly recognized at the outset that we are going to deal with somewhat loose distinctions such as belong to the language of literature or of common life rather than to the language of very exact science.

In a contribution to *The Monist* (July 1914), entitled "Tragedy and the Enjoyment of It," I tried to account genetically for the modern associations of the word "tragedy," and to explain, among other things, how it came about that for Shakespeare and his contemporaries tragedy consisted mainly in the mimic representation of murder and its consequences. What is here pertinent to note is that in the entire tragic drama of the Renaissance the moving impulse is usually selfish or individualistic. The hero is actuated by one of the elemental instincts—love, jealousy, lust of power, or the like—and does not think very much about the larger or remoter consequences of his conduct. We find, to be sure, tragedies of patriotism and tragedies of martyrdom, in which the hero may seem to act or to endure in a spirit of pure devotion to a large idea. But patriotism is itself almost an elemental instinct—the survival in civilized man of the necessary tribal instinct of the primitive savage—while passive endurance of any kind is hardly drama at all. Furthermore, the martyr always regards his sufferings as the price he must pay for celestial joys. His conduct is a kind of sublimated selfishness looking to issues that are beyond the grave.

But when we come to the eighteenth century there is something new. Much as that century has been derided by romanticists of one kind or another, I am of those who regard it as on the whole the most important epoch in human annals. Prior to that time the leaders of thought had been able, in general, to think of nothing better for mankind than a return to something that had been. Their dream was always a *going back*—to Hebraism, to Hellenism, to primitive Christianity. The Renaissance itself, in its origin at least, was a *re-birth*—the recovery of a forgotten past. But the time had now come when the men of light and leading laid hold on the idea of progress and began to locate their Golden Age in the future. The idea was of course immensely fortified by Darwin and his successors, and it was not until late in the nineteenth century that its tremendous implications were fully and generally realized. But essentially the idea of evolution was a legacy of the eighteenth century. It was then that the cleavage began between those who look backward and inward, trusting to a past authority, and those who look forward and outward, trusting to the increase of knowledge. Under the new light it was no longer sufficient to have things as good as they had been before. Something far better was to be attained.

Thus progress became the supreme, the all-embracing, criterion. I would not have this word "progress" understood in any restricted

sense, whether intellectual, economic, religious, or esthetic. It was precisely one of the characteristics of eighteenth-century thinking that this new dream of man's perfectibility—of a glorious height to be reached in the long future by the symmetrical development of human nature—was somewhat vague and chimerical. Perhaps the dream was a little *too* iridescent. That does not matter, since it has proved so immensely potent. Let us think of it in a very large way as a dream of making the world a better place for better men and women to come.

But now from this new point of view the most interesting question in the ethical sphere was that of the individual's relation to the social order. Does my conduct make for the general good or not? Is the social order itself good or bad? If any of it is bad, what is to be done about it? Shall I conform and temporize, or shall I fight? Shall I follow my instincts and passions? Shall I follow tradition? Shall I pin my faith to some theory, as for example a theory of the state of nature? Shall I attack the standards of my immediate environment—for instance neighborhood morality or church tradition—in the interest of liberty and enlightenment for mankind at large? If I do, may I involve others in the painful consequences of my quarrel with society?

Such were some of the questions forced to the front by the evolutionary idea—problems born of man's short-sightedness. For if we only *knew* whether a given line of conduct would or would not in the long run make for the good of mankind, we should have an infallible rule of action; and he who should set himself in opposition to it would be simply a criminal whose downfall, in real life or on the stage, would impress us like the killing of an escaped tiger or the death of a dangerous malefactor. *But we do not know.* What we do know is that the results of a man's action are often sadly out of tune with his intentions. The bad man accomplishes good, the Devil turns out to have been all the while a servant of the Lord. And, alas, the noblest effort may bear a crop of evil in its train. A humble carpenter's son in Judea devotes three years of his life to going about among the poor, healing their diseases, comforting them in their troubles, admonishing them to resist not evil, and teaching them precious spiritual truth. And then, after a lapse of sixteen centuries, Germany is drenched with blood for thirty years, cities and villages are burnt, women and children are murdered by wholesale—and all under the supposed banner of that gentle mystic of Nazareth. Is there any thought more tragically solemn for the modern man than the frequent contrast between

the seed that is sown and the harvest that is garnered? How infinitely pregnant are the lines of Goethe in his magnificent poem "Ilmenau":

"Wer kennt sich selbst? Wer weiss, was er vermag?  
 Hat nie der Mutige Verwegnes unternommen?  
 Und was du tust, weiss erst der andre Tag,  
 War es zum Schaden oder Frommen."

Thus the way was prepared for a variety of tragedy in which the tragic pathos should not depend entirely on the old idea of poetic justice—that is, the meting out of death to him who had caused death—but in part at least on the disparity between well-meant effort and calamitous results. The drama, however, can not represent the long lapse of time necessary in real life for the complete working out of consequences. If we are to be truly impressed in the theater with the disparity between effort and achievement, then fate must, so to speak, get in its work at once, and its havoc be made visible on the spot.

The general basis of a tragedy of fanaticism would be, then, something like this: A man of noble nature who means well by his fellow-men, but is endowed with an impetuous temper, strong convictions, and an intense narrow vision capable of seeing only in a straight line ahead, makes havoc of life for himself and others and leaves us with a heightened feeling for the mysterious tangle of human destiny which makes it possible for such a man to go thus fatally wrong. Of course fanaticism may enter into a play in other ways without constituting what I call a tragedy of fanaticism. It may be represented, for example, as an object of detestation. Such is the case with Voltaire's play to which he gave the title of "Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet." His hero is a fanatic, but at the same time a conscious impostor, engaged in deceiving the world.

"Il faut m'aider à tromper l'univers,"

says Mahomet; and again,

"Ou véritable ou faux, mon culte est nécessaire."

The gist of Voltaire's plot is this: On his return to Mecca Mahomet has among his devoted adherents a pair of lovers, Séide and Palmire, who are in reality brother and sister, having been stolen from their father Zopire in infancy and brought up near the prophet in ignorance of their relationship. Mahomet is in love with the girl, and he also wishes to get rid of Zopire, the old sheik

of Mecca, who is an obstacle in his path. So he commands Séide to kill the old man, declaring that such is the will of heaven. Séide does the murder reluctantly and finds out too late that he has slain his own father. When the truth is disclosed Palmire commits suicide. Mahomet is left triumphant in Mecca, no nemesis overtaking him except his disappointment at not getting the girl. Such a play hardly does the work of tragedy at all, because its hero is both a monster and a fraud. He arouses no sympathy whatever—only a certain pity for his dupes and their victim.

Again, there are plays in which fanaticism, instead of being the mainspring of the action, is the sinister power against which the hero dashes himself to death. Such, for example, is Gutzkow's "Uriel Acosta." A high-minded Jewish free-thinker of Amsterdam in the time of Spinoza, Acosta incurs the bitter hatred of the bigoted Jews of his *entourage*. They intrigue against him. Compelled to choose between his liberalism and the woman that he loves, he first recants his heterodoxy in the synagogue; then, when he hears that the young woman has been given to another man after all, he recants his recantation, hurls defiance at the bigots and dies by his own hand. This I should call a tragedy, not of fanaticism, but of liberalism.

The real tragedy of fanaticism, as I have tried to disengage it, begins with Schiller's "Robbers." The bandit chief Karl Moor was conceived by Schiller as a "sublime criminal," his sublimity consisting in his large-heartedness and his emotional susceptibility. Moor is essentially a friend of man, who runs amuck at society for its own good. He really believes, for a while at least, that he is doing a noble work. It is, to be sure, a private wrong—his being cast off by his father—which moves him to become a captain of outlaws; but the private wrong is after all only the spark which fires the combustible material that has long been gathering in his mind in the shape of a passionate conviction that society has all gone wrong in pusillanimity, meanness and injustice. So he undertakes to right things with gun and sword and torch; to punish the bad, reward the good, correct the inequalities of fortune and do justice between man and man. Such a wild scheme of social betterment no doubt seems rather boyish, but there is no need to dwell on that familiar criticism. With all its extravagance, there is something wonderfully vital about Schiller's first play, so that Tolstoy was justified in reckoning it among the really significant modern dramas. What Karl Moor undertakes to do is very like what the Terrorists of France essayed a few years later in the

streets of Paris. It is the revolutionary idea gone mad, and we have learned that matters are not really to be mended in that way—dynamiters and militant suffragettes to the contrary notwithstanding.

But note in the "Robbers" a new variety of tragic pathos. In the end the robber chief comes to see that he has botched his work all along. At the outset he was the credulous victim of a miserable intrigue. He had no case against society, but only a case against his villainous brother. He has scattered death and misery and terror in his path, and no good has come of his efforts; the righteous gods whom he thought to aid have rejected his assistance. So he gives himself up to justice and thereby, as Schiller phrases it, "returns to the track of the law." But this end does not impress us like that of an ordinary malefactor, or like that of a Macbeth corrupted by the lust of power. We get the idea of a good man gone terribly wrong through short-sightedness and miscalculation,—the idea, in short, of a sublime madman.

If this were a treatise, instead of a short article, I should pass in review a number of other plays involving a more or less fanatical assault on the social order. It would be interesting to see how the idea has been worked out at different epochs by playwrights of differing temper and nationality. We should hardly find it a favorite type of tragedy, but we *should* find that, ever since the Revolution, the conflict of the individual with the social order bulks large in the history of the drama. It is, however, the theme of more comedies and tragi-comedies than of tragedies. Why is this? Partly, I presume, because the fanatic is not intrinsically a pleasant type to work with. It is hard to excite sympathy for him. Ever since the days of Don Quixote the too vehement champion of an idea, even if we are willing to admit the idea as good in the abstract, is more apt to impress us with his folly than with the beauty of his idealism. And just in proportion as his fanaticism has an intellectual basis and grows out of a stern conviction that he is right against the world and that the eternal powers are on his side, are we the more prone to withhold our sympathy. This is perhaps because the modern man has discovered that life is too complex to be reduced to a formula. We distrust the man of one idea. We live by ideals; but we demand that the ideal shall creep before it walks, and shall walk before it rides over us rough-shod. In art as in life we tolerate the slave of an emotion more readily than the slave of a formula.

All this means that the fanatic is not readily available for

tragedy, and that to make him palatable requires a dramatist of peculiar endowment. Young Schiller had this endowment in abundant measure. His *Fiesco* is a chip from the same block as *Karl Moor*, and his *Posa* is the prince of fanatics—the very *n*th power of sublime altruism divorced from common sense. Goethe, on the other hand, had no affinity for the type under consideration. In general, tragedy was not his affair, and when he did essay it his favorite type of hero was the sentimental weakling who is done to death not by any bold dream of human betterment, but by his own lack of will and stamina.

In the work of the Romantic School—I speak now more particularly of Germany, where I am most at home—the fanatic plays no rôle of any importance. Reading "*Almansor*" one surmises that Heine might have done something with him, but Heine early quit the drama, and his two plays are nothing but milestones in the career of a lyric poet. For Kleist and Grillparzer the type seems to have had no interest. In the more recent German drama the fanatic shows his head here and there, but his great modern exponent is Henrik Ibsen.

There was something in Ibsen's blood which disposed him to the close study and delineation of the fanatic temper. Like Schiller he took a great criminal for his first hero, idealizing *Catiline* as a would-be saviour of Roman society. In his later plays the ever recurring theme is some strenuous ideal demand in conflict with the established forms of life. He has given us a considerable number of characters who are more or less infected with the bacillus of fanaticism. In the later plays the idea works out variously, always with results calamitous if not technically tragic. But it is in the earlier "*Brand*" that we have Ibsen's greatest achievement in the line under consideration. Let us glance at "*Brand*" by way of conclusion.

An aspiring priest of many amiable qualities has convinced himself that society's corroding disease is half-heartedness, the spirit of compromise, being a little of this and a little of that, but nothing long and in earnest. He has made up his mind that for his single self he will stand fast and hew straight to the line of duty all the time. He carries out this program of life. Winning the gentle *Agnes* away from her artist lover *Einar*, he marries her and makes her the willing partner of his narrow ascetic life. He refuses to shrive his old mother and to comfort her on her death-bed because she resists his ideal demand of "all or nothing." His child succumbs to the cold and hardship of the wretched house in which

he insists on living for the pursuit of his calling. His beloved wife pines away and dies. He is left alone, but still he persists. His strenuous demands bring him into conflict with his parish. The people stone him. He retreats up the mountain-side in half-insane bewilderment, and there is overwhelmed by an avalanche, while a mysterious voice proclaims above the desolation that God is a God of love.

I had often read "Brand" and admired it as literature before it fell to my lot to see it on the stage in the National Theater at Christiania. Not until then were its marvelous dramatic power and its terrible tragic pathos fully borne in upon me. The conclusion is perhaps a little cryptic. Ibsen's exact meaning is debatable and has been much debated. That, however, is of little moment, for what great tragedy is there of which the same would not be more or less true? Enough that we are left with a heightened feeling for the mystery of life and a vivid sense of the possible disparity between well-meant endeavor and its earthly consequences. The play seems to say that there is an over-ruling, ineluctable and inscrutable power manifesting itself in the complex order of our lives; that to this order belong not only our convictions and rules of conduct, but also our instincts, passions, affections, and even what we call the weakness and vulgarity of human nature; and that, when a shortsighted man, conceiving himself as the infallible organ and agent of that power, undertakes to carry out an inflexible rule of conduct, he may be expected to do evil instead of good and himself to end in disaster. This I judge to be the most important new phase of the old Aristotelian *katharsis*, just as I find that the dramatic possibilities of the type we have been considering are more effectively realized in "Brand" than in any other recent play with which I am acquainted. It is our greatest recent tragedy of fanaticism.